

MENNONITES, CHILDREN AND COMMUNION

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Mennonites, Children and Communion

by

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This research thesis on Mennonites, Children and Communion has been authored by one who is deeply rooted in the tradition, faith and life, and practical theology of the North American Mennonite community. The research approach is interdisciplinary and has concentrated on the separate topics of children and communion in the early Anabaptist era, on studies of the topic of children's spirituality and faith development, and on reflections on children and communion in the Mennonite Church within the last fifty years. This last area of study has also been informed by responses to the topic of children and communion in the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference of Churches, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the United Church of Canada.

The statement this thesis is defending is that *Mennonite children need concrete, ritualized faith-expressing and faith-nurturing experiences during communion that honour the Mennonite denomination's core convictions about communion, baptism and membership*. Research and reflection, using a praxis approach, has led the author to recommend differentiated participation in communion, not only for children, but for all faith novices who are not yet ready to make a mature and non-coerced commitment to Jesus and his body, the church, as the center of their lives.

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To my Beloved Children

CHAPTER 1

Thesis Introduction

“If we tug at the strands of the Lord’s Supper, lots of other threads become undone as well.”¹

A. Introduction

Will the reflections and recommendations of this thesis threaten to undo other core threads of the Christian faith as understood by North American Mennonites? The possibility that they could do so has impressed itself deeply on me as I have researched, reflected and articulated theologies of childhood and communion for this project. From the outset, I have committed myself to making recommendations that do not unravel the fabric of Mennonite faith. This is somewhat challenging, for “unlike other denominations which practice the inclusion of children by virtue of their baptism as infants, the Mennonite church does not have a baptismal theology which warrants such action.”² We differ from many denominations in the way we understand the close interrelationship between baptism, membership and communion. Honouring this *braid* of Mennonite core beliefs does not remove the need to articulate a theology of childhood which can be used to adapt our theology of communion, but it is essential to developing a truly Mennonite response to children’s place at the communion table. It is my hope that the theologies articulated in this thesis will be capable of leading the church to an improved practice which integrates children, while keeping Jesus’ open invitation in a healthy dialectical tension with his challenge to radical discipleship.

¹ C. Arnold Snyder, “The Lord’s Supper in the Mennonite Tradition,” in Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership, (Wpg., MB: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 79-87, 86. Thomas G. Long, A Guide for Parents: God’s Family at the Table, Atlanta GA, General Assembly Mission Board, PCUSA, 1981, 4, expresses a similar sentiment for his Presbyterian context when he writes, “*When we touch the strand of the Lord’s Supper, the whole web of the church’s life and worship vibrates.*”

² John D. Rempel, The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Phillips. (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), 225.

B. The Current North American Mennonite Context

While Mennonites claim to be biblical rather than doctrinal in their orientation, in our communion practice, “the theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper has been safeguarded much more by the conservative influence of ritual than by theological exposition.”³ Mennonites have safeguarded deeply held beliefs through our practices, in lives of discipleship, and in our worship. Now that we are becoming an increasingly global church, in which many cultures and cultural practices are being accepted, we are becoming more deliberate about articulating our *core convictions*.⁴ Perhaps this is so that we can be more flexible in recognizing the practices that reflect other cultures without losing our core beliefs. The culture of childhood, as North Americans understand it, is

³ Rempel, 224.

⁴ Mennonites have a long tradition of congregational discernment on matters of belief and shy away from doctrinal statements formulated and upheld by a church hierarchy. However, in 2003 the Mennonite World Conference Faith and Life Council, meeting in Zimbabwe, adopted the following set of seven core convictions, which it circulated to national churches for consideration. They were adopted by Mennonite World Conference General Council in Pasadena, California (USA) March 15, 2006. Available from <http://www.mwc-mm.org/MWC/Councils/2006SharedConvictionsENG.pdf>.

Mennonite World Conference, A Community of Anabaptist-related Churches, Shared Convictions

By the grace of God, we seek to live and proclaim the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. As part of the one body of Christ at all times and places, we hold the following to be central to our belief and practice:

1. God is known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator who seeks to restore fallen humanity by calling a people to be faithful in fellowship, worship, service and witness.
2. Jesus is the Son of God. Through his life and teachings, his cross and resurrection, he showed us how to be faithful disciples, redeemed the world, and offers eternal life.
3. As a church, we are a community of those whom God’s Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and follow Christ in life.
4. As a faith community, we accept the Bible as our authority for faith and life, interpreting it together under Holy Spirit guidance, in the light of Jesus Christ to discern God’s will for our obedience.
5. The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice, and share our possessions with those in need.
6. We gather regularly to worship, *to celebrate the Lord’s Supper*, and to hear the Word of God *in a spirit of mutual accountability*.
7. As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God’s grace by serving others, caring for creation, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

In these convictions we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modeled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ. We seek to walk in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we confidently await Christ’s return and the final fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

just one example of the diversity within which we seek to be faithful. These *core convictions* include voluntary, accountable, church membership, adult baptism and the corresponding belief in the innocence of children before they reach the age of accountability as well as our more highly profiled beliefs in peace and non-violence.⁵

1. A Changing Culture of Worship

The worship culture of our North American congregations is also changing. One indicator of this change is the wide divergence in the ways we respond to children and other unbaptized people in worship services that celebrate communion.⁶ If our convictions about communion have been protected by a traditionally conservative approach to its ritual practice, as John Rempel asserts, then it is no wonder that the topic is one of concern in the North American Mennonite Church. The earliest reference to this as a topic for bi-national attention was as a resolution for discussion, but not for a vote, at the Triennial Delegate Conference of General Conference Mennonite Church in North America in Fresno, California in 1971.⁷ Recently, it received attention in the 2006 Pastors' Week courses at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, in Elkhart, Indiana. Voices that favor a communion table that is open for children are more numerous than they were in 1971, but voices that call for the addition of midweek, evening communion services in which committed, baptized, adult members would renew their baptismal vows

⁵ General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General Board, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 72-73.

⁶ Canadian Mennonite, (Waterloo: Mennonite Publishing Service) 8:12 (24 June 2004), 4-15. This special issue of denominational periodical, the Canadian Mennonite, featured reports and reflections from Mennonite congregations on the broader topic of Communion. Canadian Mennonite, 8:12 (24 June 2004), 4-15.

⁷ Donald Steelberg, in an unpublished paper, presented at a consultation on Baptism and Communion at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1995, writes, "On January 29, 1971 it was proposed as the subject of a resolution for the Fresno Triennial Conference of that year, and in accordance with that procedure was offered as an item of discussion in the MENNONITE, and tested with another congregation, First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio."

are also part of the dialogue on this important matter.⁸

2. Ecumenical Contact

The social and religious location of North American Mennonites has changed from that of fairly separate, ethnically homogeneous, mainly rural religious communities into socially and ecumenically integrated, mainly urban and increasingly diverse congregations. Both rural and urban congregations now increasingly dialogue and cooperate with other Christian denominations. This may be a major reason that many Mennonite congregations are now involving children in the celebration of communion in various ways. Informal conversations with pastors suggest that it is common for parents to lobby a pastor to include children in communion, especially in cases where one parent originally comes from a denomination which does so.

3. The Need for a New Position on Children and Communion

During the communion service at the Mennonite Church Canada Annual Assembly in 2004, the sixty children who had participated in the children's assembly were included in many parts of the of the communion service. They helped bring the story of the feeding of the 5000 to life. They had helped to bake the bread as part of their daily program. In the service itself, they held the baskets of bread for the adults. But, when it came to receiving the bread, only those who believed and were baptized were explicitly invited to partake. I noticed a sense of confusion among those children that I could see from my seat. One mother, with her jaw firmly set, walked to the distribution point with her child in tow, determined that her child would also receive the bread and juice in this service. My heart ached, my spirit groaned, and I knew that the Mennonite

⁸ Eleanor Kreider, "Re: Children, Mennonites and Communion," 19 November 2005, personal email, (19 November 2005).

Church needed to discern, articulate and claim a more common understanding of the place of children within the body of Christ. That understanding needed to nurture and help them enact their faith, rather than confuse or discourage them.

The statement this thesis is defending is that *Mennonite children need concrete, ritualized, faith-expressing and faith-nurturing experiences during communion that honour the Mennonite denomination's core convictions about communion, baptism and membership*. Only by holding these core convictions in dialogical tension with the faith needs of children can a practical theology of children and communion be developed and embraced for this denomination. Because the unmet faith needs of children are propelling this research, a separate chapter will be devoted to it in the section on the theology of childhood. It is my hope that the theoretical and theological research of this thesis can contribute to needed congregational resources for Mennonites that can help the church include children more fully as part of the worshiping, communing body of Christ.

Many Mennonite congregations dedicate children in infancy, and use litanies that have similarities to litanies used in child baptismal services in other denominations. They consider their children *saved* until they reach the age of accountability⁹ and understand that children are “to be loved, disciplined, taught and respected in the home and in the church. Children are also to honor their parents, obeying them in the Lord.”¹⁰ Children have not historically participated in communion or taken up any other rights and responsibilities of membership until they confessed their faith through baptism as youth

⁹ A full discussion of this view of a child’s soteriological status, referred to as *complex innocence*, occurs in chapter three of this thesis.

¹⁰ General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General Board, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 72-73.

or adults.¹¹ While we have recommended a ritual for dedicating our infants that is appropriate for our believers church stance, we have not developed a parallel ritual that is appropriate for acknowledging children's relationship with God for our communion practice, though many congregations are shifting their communion rituals in this direction. Worthy participation in communion has been taken seriously in the history of this denomination.

Until recently, people prepared for communion with formal periods of self-examination and reconciliation between members. In the communion service itself, members often recommitted themselves to their baptismal vows of being in right relationship with God and their faith community through a foot washing ritual.¹² They remembered Christ's sacrifice and thanked for God's gifts of grace and salvation as they received the bread and the wine, which was distributed in small portions so all could eat and drink at once, as the gathered body of Christ. Communion has traditionally been celebrated two to four times a year as a solemn, adult, Sunday evening service.

Through most of Mennonite history, children's faith was nurtured in the home, though Sunday school was embraced in the last century. Worship life was adult-oriented and often instructional, with little attention given to symbols or visual adornment. The worship service was quite plain and centered on the sermon, though it was adorned by four-part hymn singing.

North American Mennonites are becoming ecumenically open and active and this

¹¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 11, 47, *Baptism* states: "Baptism is for those who are of the age of accountability and who freely request baptism on the basis of their response to Jesus Christ in faith."

¹² *Confession of Faith*, article 13, *Foot Washing*, includes this description of the status of foot washing: "Among our congregations, some practice foot washing, while others have discontinued the practice or have never observed it. Congregations are encouraged to practice foot washing when it is a meaningful symbol of service and love for each other."

is having a major impact on the way we worship. The denomination, Mennonite Church Canada, moved from observer to active membership status in both the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the Canadian Council of Churches in 2004. Ecumenical activity and reflection is leading Mennonites toward a renewed appreciation of responsive litanies, the use of published prayers and of visual symbols in worship. Eleanor Kreider, Adjunct Professor of Worship and Mission at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana, served as a missionary in London's ecumenical and post-Christian context for many years, and hopes that weekly communion will "restore its place at the heart of our worship."¹³ It is becoming more common for Mennonites to celebrate communion as part of the morning worship, sometimes as often as once a month. A 1997 survey indicated that 23% of our churches include children and unbaptized youth in their celebration of communion and 52% include non-baptized adults.¹⁴ An informal workshop survey at the 2006 Pastor's week indicated that the level of inclusion for children has increased significantly since then.¹⁵

4. New Resources for Understanding Children's Faith

The growth of faith in children, as we know and understand it today, has been impacted greatly by the work of James Fowler, who was influenced by the practical theology of John Westerhoff and the developmental theories of psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Eric Erikson. In addition, Maria Cavaletti, a Roman Catholic catechetist of young children, who based her work on the pedagogy of Maria Montessori, and Jerome Berryman, who adapted Cavaletti's work for a Protestant context

¹³ Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997), 47.

¹⁴ Conference of Mennonites in Canada, Resources Commission, *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership*, (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 102-103.

¹⁵ In the congregations of the 48 workshop participants, 40 offered some level of participation to all who desired it.

with young children, have added to his contributions. Together, they have laid a solid foundation for more current studies in the spirituality of children. Their work has been built upon by current specialists such as Judith Gundry-Volf, David Hay and Rebecca Nye, Joyce Ann Mercer, Bonnie Miller McLemore, Catherine Stonehouse, and Karen Marie Yust.

These educators, practical theologians, and sociologists have provided this generation with valuable resources for understanding the faith of children that earlier generations lacked. As a result of their work, churches across the denominational spectrum have begun to acknowledge the faith and spirituality of children in significant ways.

In mainline denominations, this has included officially welcoming them in the Eucharist and a variety of efforts to integrate children into congregational worship. Arguments for their full participation in the Eucharist, however, generally hinged on their baptized membership in the body of Christ,¹⁶ an argument which does not apply in the Mennonite situation with its believers baptism.

¹⁶ “Statement on Sacramental Practices,” (Winnipeg: Division for Parish Life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), 1991, 6.9, 6.10, includes these practical principles regarding participants: “The Lord’s Supper is God’s meal for the baptized. Admission to the Supper is by Christ’s invitation, offered through the church to the baptized. As persons move to congregations where practices differ regarding age for first Communion, care needs to be taken that the difference in practice is resolved in a manner which promotes growth in faith and discipleship for all who are concerned.” The most recent “Summary of United Church Beliefs,” however, does not include a reference to baptism as a prerequisite. It states:

Communion: Communion is a symbolic meal that is open to everyone. It’s a reminder of Jesus’ last supper with his followers and continues as a sign of God’s enduring love.

Inclusiveness: Jesus welcomed everyone, whether they were poor, rich, or just getting by; ill or healthy; self-made or educated; popular or a loner; secure or full of doubts. The United Church of Canada prides itself on welcoming everyone the way Jesus did, regardless of age, race, class, gender, orientation, or physical ability.

Children: The church works hard to appreciate people of all ages, from grandparents to newborns. Children aren’t viewed as adults-in-waiting, nor are they on display for the amusement of the adults. They’re full and welcome participants at the heart of each congregation, bringing ideas and unique talents that can inspire the entire church. Available from: <http://www.united-church.ca/ucc/summary.shtm#4>

To arrive at greater clarity about the complex of the issue concerning children and communion within the Mennonite denomination it is important to distinguish between the faith formatting and expressing aspects of the communion ritual and the re-covenanting of mature believers during communion. Mennonites have linked their understanding of faith to a mature understanding of beliefs and a commitment to living in accordance with those beliefs. As Mennonites come to recognize the faith of children they will need to nuance their understanding of faith as confessed and practiced belief. Understanding the differences between faith and belief is important for understanding and appreciating the faith of young children. According to James W. Fowler,

Faith is deeper than belief. We hope our beliefs are congruent with and expressive of our faith. But faith is deeper and involves unconscious motivations as well as those that we can make conscious in our belief and in our action. I make the assumption that... as human beings we have evolved with the capacity and the need for faith from the beginning.”¹⁷

Specialists in spirituality, like Jerome Berryman, lobby passionately for children as spiritual beings and warn us that “undervaluing the existential experience of children can be very destructive for their spiritual growth.”¹⁸ Research and reflection in this area, that included ecumenical dialogue with other Christian traditions and the writer’s North American Mennonite perspective, has produced a theology of childhood and, from that theological base, developed a theology of communion that includes children and other faith novices. However, while articulated during a process of research, these theologies have been slowly developing in the writer’s experiences as a mother, grandmother,

¹⁷ James W. Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 100.

¹⁸ Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*, (San Francisco and New York: Harper, 1991), 137.

teacher in a Mennonite elementary school and lay leader in the church, and as the director of Christian Education and Nurture for Mennonite Church Canada since 2002.

5. Toward Theologies of Childhood and Communion for the Believer's Church

This thesis topic requires that a Mennonite theology of childhood undergird a reformulated theology of communion that articulates the unique, but welcome and nurturing place, of children in a believers church, in which most of the children in communion services have not been baptized. Because of the unique dilemma believers baptism poses for integrating children in communion, the research for the theology of communion concentrated on theologians from within the Mennonite denomination, though theological and practical resources for integrating children in communion from Mennonite Brethren, Lutheran and United churches were read with great interest and provided a valuable resource for developing recommendations for improved practice.

C. Methodology

The methodology of the paper will be based upon a praxis approach, and will loosely follow the process of theological reflection recommended by Irma Fast Dueck, Professor of Practical Theology at Canadian Mennonite University, to her students.¹⁹ Fast Dueck writes:

Theology may be understood as a dialogical reflective process correlating (the) experience of our social location (Context), interpretations of the founding Christian Event (Tradition) and the lived commitment of faith in action (spirituality and ethics).²⁰

This paper will also use a praxis approach to practical theology through: (1) attending to the data of the situation, (2) analyzing the situation in order to identify the

¹⁹ Fast Dueck's approach is based on Thomas Groom's definition of *praxis* methodology.

²⁰ Irma Fast Dueck, "Some Notes on Core Theological Reflection," (Class handout for "Practicing Theology" course at Canadian Mennonite University, Winter 2001).

core issues at work, (3) seeking to understand and interpret the situation theologically, and finally (4) judging and evaluating the situation for deeper levels of awareness and improved practice.²¹ While these approaches weave their way through each chapter and form an inner rather than outer structure, they give strength and define the character of this academic endeavor. In the final chapter, however the judging and evaluating for deeper awareness culminates in recommendations for improved practice.

1. Attending to the Data of the Situation

A great deal of data has been researched to develop the two theologies that form the foundations for recommendations made in this thesis. Recent interpretations of historical data on the early Anabaptist's views of both children and communion were researched alongside of recent articles on the topic of communion in Mennonite publications. This data includes personal emails and unpublished essays from respected Mennonite Pastors and theologians, published reflections such as James Brenneman's story about inclusive communion practice at Pasadena Mennonite Church in Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation²² and in the denominational magazine, Canadian Mennonite. By researching both the founding tradition and current reflections a context begins to emerge for understanding the complexities of the current situation with regard to children and communion in Mennonite Church congregations. Current beliefs about communion, baptism and membership, and children, as they are articulated in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) will be presented. This will help to highlight the contradictions between current practice and

²¹ Fast Dueck.

²² James E. Brenneman, "Missional Practice: A Pasadena Mennonite Church Story," Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation, ed. by James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky and Charles E. Van Engen, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 158-168.

beliefs and foster a dialogical process.

In addition to this denominational focus, the paper will include a conversation with the broader ecclesiastical context, within which the Mennonite Church denomination is located. Identifying core issues that are at work within our denominational context will help clarify our position within the ecumenical spectrum and what a faithful response to the trend of opening up the Lord's Table to unbaptized children might look like for the Mennonite Church with its core distinctives.

2. Analysis of Current Situation to Identify the Core Issues at Work

This analysis will be conducted by engaging the major contributions of Christian Education specialists who are currently influencing Mennonite practice and reflection. Jerome Berryman, James Fowler, Klaus Issler, Marlin Jeschke, Joyce Anne Mercer, Bonnie Miller McLemore, Eleanor Snyder, Catherine Stonehouse and her colleagues, and Karen Marie Yust, have influenced recent and present Mennonite curricula and worship resources for children. There are also others who are providing additional insight into the new interdisciplinary area of study known as Children's Spirituality. Children's spirituality studies, in which only a few of the participants have a believers church orientation, provide helpful insights for Mennonites that can help them discern how best to adapt their communion practices. Recent denominational policy statements and resources from several other denominations serve as another a resource for developing recommendations for improved practice in the Mennonite context. Resources from the mainline protestant denominations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), with its formal and ritualized responsive liturgy, and the United Church in Canada (UCC), with a more informally structured liturgy, have been engaged. Reasons for

selecting these denominations to represent mainline²³ Protestants go beyond an interest in their liturgical structure and openness to children in communion. Lutherans are in active official dialogue with Mennonites and are reexamining earlier statements in which they described Anabaptists and Mennonites as heretics.²⁴ Mennonites intersect closely with the United Church in Canada in many rural locations as well as in theological studies through Canadian Mennonite University and the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Theology. Both Lutheran and United Church denominations have developed impressive resources for teaching children and their parents about open communion. The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren (MB) has developed equally impressive resources for this topic. As a sister denomination in the Believers' Church tradition, which has aligned itself closely with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, their congregational resources are of particular interest for the way they have addressed issues that are specific to the Believers Church family of denominations.

3. Understanding and Interpreting the Situation Theologically

An understanding of the situation requires that we pay attention to the Anabaptist-

²³ I am using the term *mainline* in the manner of Joyce Ann Mercer in her book Welcoming Children: except that I am writing within a Canadian context while hers is the United States. She states" "I am using the term *mainline* in this book to represent those Christian denominational groups and churches historically situated in the United States within the liberal theological tradition in which engagement with society rather than separation from it as a central theological and social value." Endnotes, Chapter 1, #2, 265.

²⁴ The 07.08.2005 Mennonite World Conference News Release: "Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission Begins Work on Condemnations of Anabaptists" states: At the national level, Lutheran-Mennonite dialogues have already been conducted in France (1981-1984), in Germany (1989-1992) and in the USA (2001-2004). These dialogues also considered the condemnations of Anabaptists in Lutheran confessions. Commission members from the Mennonite and Lutheran sides presented and interpreted the reports of the national dialogues which were discussed in detail. The outcomes of these dialogues constitute an important resource for the present, international commission. A systematic inventory of the content of the national reports will remain a working document for the commission. At the end of its work, which will take at least three years, the commission hopes that an official declaration concerning the condemnations can be made by the authoritative bodies of the two world communions.

Mennonite tradition and the current data from the area of Children's Spirituality, which is not possible when either of these neglected. Therefore, considerable attention will be directed to the Anabaptist foundations of this denomination, in terms of their early teachings and practice regarding both the Lord's Supper and children. This paper examines what a representative selection of Anabaptist leaders believed about communion and about children, as researched by the current Mennonite and Church of the Brethren historical theologians, Marjan Blok, Helmut Isaak, Donald Durnbaugh, Thomas Finger, Keith Graber-Miller, Eleanor Koch-Snyder, John Rempel, Arnold Snyder, and Sjouke Voolstra. It will not be possible to review five centuries of church tradition and history, but reviewing this Anabaptist base will be helpful for understanding and interpreting the emerging tensions between current Mennonite theology and practice as social pressures and understandings of children's spirituality and faith development prompt changes in communion practice. The contributions of additional Mennonite theologians and worship specialists June Alliman Yoder, Gerald Gerbrandt, Eleanor Kreider, Mesach Kristya, Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough, Tom Yoder Neufeld, and Gordon Zerbe, will be engaged in the current dialogue about the role of children in communion to develop and articulate a Mennonite communion theology that has a place for non baptized believers and children of faith. I distinguish between belief and faith in children, to indicate that children have faith long before their cognitive abilities mature to a level that makes them capable of belief.

Finally, the paper will interpret the implications of these new theologies for improved communion practice. Even though the Mennonite church's children are part of the family of God and therefore *already and not-yet* members in the church, much as this

Mennonite denomination lives *already and not-yet* in the reign of God, there are ways of honouring Mennonite core convictions about children, communion and broader Mennonite ecclesiology, so that, as “we tug at the threads of the Supper, lots of other threads [will not] come undone”²⁵ but the fabric of this denominational member of Christ’s body here on earth will be strengthened rather than weakened or unraveled.

4. Judging and Evaluating the Situation for Deeper Awareness and Improved Practice

The desire for deeper awareness and improved practice is at the heart of this work. By reviewing and coming to a deeper understanding of tradition, our current context and the broader theology of children that is being articulated by others, it will be possible to articulate Mennonite theology of children and communion that incorporates children’s appropriate participation for this particular Believers’ Church tradition and to make recommendations for improved practice. In the focus on improved practice, different aspects of the service of word and table will be considered, because most communion services are now conducted in the Sunday morning congregational setting. Seasons of the church year will be explored for their potential contributions toward a fuller celebration of communion for all who are on a journey with Jesus in the Mennonite Church in North America.

²⁵ C. A. Snyder, 86.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

A. Introduction

The topic of Mennonites, children and communion requires an interdisciplinary approach. This review of literature will deal with four areas: church history, faith development/ spirituality theories, a study of the current situation within this denomination and a brief look at position papers and congregational resources for children and communion in three other denominations. The review of literature is organized chronologically and begins by reviewing sources that pay attention to the historical roots of this topic. These sources help the reader understand the attitudes and biblical interpretation of leaders in the early Anabaptist movement in regards to the two topics of children and communion. The Anabaptist vision of the church remains foundational for the Mennonite Church as a distinct Christian denomination.

B. Sources on the Early Anabaptists

John Rempel's The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism²⁶ provides a thorough exploration of the three Anabaptist Leaders who wrote intensively about the topic of the Lord's Supper. Rempel is particularly interested in the influence of their Christology on their interpretation of this sacrament. While the three leaders he focuses on are not totally representative for the broader understandings of Anabaptists in their regions, they do come from the three areas the Anabaptist Movement began in; Switzerland, South

²⁶ John D. Rempel, The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Phillips, (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Press), 1992.

Germany (Tirol) and the Netherlands (Frisia).²⁷ Rempel compares and contrasts them to each other as well as to the broader historical religious background and the emerging Reformation context.

For an understanding of the communion theology of Menno Simons, the Anabaptist leader after whom this denomination has been named, the *Festschrift* collection of Essays, edited by Gerald R. Brunk,²⁸ is helpful. The following three essays in this collection provided commentary on Menno's communion theology and ecclesiology. "Themes in the Early Theology of Menno Simons,"²⁹ examines Menno's basic assumption that there must be an equal level of worthiness between the participants and those who officiate at communion, they must all be without 'spot or blemish'. "Menno's Vision of the Anticipation of the Kingdom of God,"³⁰ provides important commentary on Menno's views regarding the individual and communal nature of this event. Marjan Blok's essay, "Discipleship in Menno Simon's *Dat Fundament*,"³¹ provides a broader historical context, and specific information on the practices of confession and penance in the Middle Ages and that included children, thereby providing some historical context for Menno's emphasis of placing penance after a believer's baptism.

Arnold Snyder, a Mennonite historian, provides valuable insight and reflection on

²⁷ Hans-Juergen Goertz, Foreword, John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Phillips*. (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), 15.

²⁸ Gerald R. Brunk, *Menno Simons: A Reappraisal: Essays in Honour of Irvin B. Horst on the 450th Anniversary of the Fundamentboek*, (Harrisonburg, VI, Eastern Mennonite College), 1992.

²⁹ Sjouke Voolstra, "Themes in the Early Theology of Menno Simons," Brunk, 37-55.

³⁰ Helmut Isaak, "Menno's Vision of the Anticipation of the Kingdom of God," Brunk, 57-82.

³¹ Marjan Blok, "Discipleship in Menno Simon's *Dat Fundament*," Brunk, 105 – 129.

these Early Anabaptist views in his Anabaptist History and Theology.³² Snyder places the anti-sacramentalism of the Anabaptists into its historical context and highlights the ways in which they tried to maintain the divine/human link in their practice of the Lord's Supper. He also contrasts their context with ours, with our new appreciation for sacramentalism and the power of ritual in the faith practices of our setting. A. Snyder is also providing access to another resource from Anabaptism. He has just completed translating the single existing copy of Simple Confession,³³ and is currently preparing it for publication. This 350 page Anabaptist document includes a specific reference to, and a descriptor for child dedication services.

Donald Durnbaugh's essay, "Believers Church Perspectives on the Lord's Supper,"³⁴ provides critical appreciation for John Rempel's expertise on the early Anabaptists from a sister denomination's perspective (Church of the Brethren). He highlights the Anabaptist values of community, unity, integrity and accountability to church discipline. What is most helpful for this thesis are his citations of two major Anabaptist leaders in which they critiqued the inconsistency of access that children had to baptism and communion in the Magisterial Reformation.

Thomas N. Finger's: A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology,³⁵ provides a clear view of Hubmaier's teaching on repentance and stresses the high esteem and central role that the Lord's Supper had for the Anabaptists. Finger also has a helpful, but brief, section on children in the church, which includes biblical and historical views and makes

³² C. Arnold Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition, (Kitchener: Pandora), 1997.

³³ C. Arnold Snyder, trans. Simple Confessions, (Kitchener, ON, Pandora Press, to be released in 2007).

³⁴ Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Believers Church Perspectives on the Lord's Supper," Dale R. Stoffer, ed. The Lord's Supper: Believer's Church Perspectives, (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1997), 63-78.

³⁵ Thomas N. Finger, A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 2004.

constructive recommendations for the church's current understanding of children.

More detailed information on the Anabaptist leaders' views of children are found in the following three sources. Eleanor Koch Snyder's doctoral dissertation³⁶ provides an extensive survey of Anabaptist leaders' attitudes toward children. In addition, Koch Snyder's work provides a good review of more current attitudes and offers a current theology of childhood. Keith Graber Miller's essay, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance,"³⁷ provides a concentrated study and interpretation of Menno's views; views that have had a major impact on Mennonite views of childhood for most of our history. His articulation of Menno's views on the complex innocence of children was particularly helpful for my study. Hillel Schwartz, a graduate student at Yale University in the seventies, contributed a rare and excellent essay on the role of children in Anabaptism, "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children."³⁸ This essay provides a detailed treatment of children in Anabaptism, and covers relevant topics such as education and faith development.

More familial Anabaptist views of children were gleaned from accounts of a mother and a father who responded to their children as they were imprisoned for their faith. Profiles of Anabaptist Women³⁹ provided the fascinating account of David Joris'

³⁶ Eleanor Koch Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration," D. Min diss. (Toronto School of Theology), 1999.

³⁷ Keith Graber Miller's essay, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance, and Parental Vigilance: 'The Child' in the Work of Menno Simons" in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia Bunge, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2001.

³⁸ Hillel Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children," Mennonite Quarterly Review, vol. XLVII, April, 1973: 102 -114

³⁹ C. Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht, ed., Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press), 1996.

advice regarding his children, and Thieleman J. Van Braght's Martyrs Mirror⁴⁰ was consulted for the theologically rich testimony of Soentgen Van Der Houde to her children before her execution.

C. Sources on Faith Development and Children's Spirituality

Developmental psychology is a broad field that has been studied and interpreted extensively by Christian educators. Since my interest in their contributions to this topic is for its relevance to the faith nurture potential of communion for children, I will restrict myself to studying the works of Christian education specialists who have built on their contributions. Their work will be studied for their insights regarding the impact of worship rituals on the faith development in children.

To understand how concepts of faith development have evolved in our recent past, this paper will first of all review James Fowler's foundational descriptions of Stages of Faith,⁴¹ as revised in Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church.⁴² Although his description of the developmental and cognitive aspects of faith have received some criticism in recent years, Fowler's work remains foundational and cognitive assent is a critical part of the traditional Mennonite understanding of qualifying as a participant in communion. Secondly, the manner in which Fowler balances faith development with conversion reflects the traditional Mennonite understanding of preparation for baptism and communion.

As a fairly current (1998) interpreter of Fowler and the stages of faith, Catherine

⁴⁰ Thieleman J. Van Braght, trans. Joseph F. Sohm, Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Fifteen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom From the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660, ninth edition, (Scottsdale: Herald Press), 1972.

⁴¹ James Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human development and the Quest for Meaning, (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1981).

⁴² James Fowler, Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith Consciousness in the Public Church (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

Stonehouse's Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith⁴³ is of value as well. Her commentary on the growth of faith as a combination of development and conversion, in which adult baptism can signify a significant stage of choosing God as the centre of one's life, is compatible with the thoughts of the Mennonite Educator, Marlin Jeschke, who wrote Believers' Baptism for Children of the Church for the North American Mennonite constituency over a decade earlier. Stonehouse also comments on the importance of participation in the rituals of the church for a child's growth in faith at the different maturational stages. Since communion is one of these ritual practices, her general commentary on rituals provides a helpful perspective for this thesis focus on children and communion.

Stonehouse has contributed to a newer resource as part of a team with Scottie May, Beth Posterski and Linda Cannell that revisits Fowler from a more current perspective in Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community.⁴⁴ This book reflects the extensive research, collaboration and practical experience of these well seasoned educators and professors of Christian education and Formation at Wheaton College, Tyndale University, Asbury Theological seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Children Matter provides a broad view with an extensive summary of the field of ministry with children. It contributes the voice of leaders in this field from the more evangelical protestant tradition, thus broadening the 'current commentary' dialogue beyond that of Christian feminists from mainline denominations who have written on the topic of Children and faith in recent years.

⁴³ Catherine Stonehouse, Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

⁴⁴ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse and Linda Cannell, Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

Marlin Jeschke, a Professor of Christian Education in a Mennonite Church College, in Believers Baptism for Children of the Church,⁴⁵ provides a study on the topic of baptism and children in the Mennonite church which parallels this study on communion in many ways. Because Jeschke's work was written for a Mennonite readership it provides a valuable and unique perspective and provides some foundational concepts for a Mennonite theology of children.

Jerome Berryman's Godly Play⁴⁶ provides an alternative approach to the use of ritual and ways of worshiping with children that are inspired by the Italian educators Maria Montessori and Sophia Cavaletti. The teaching and preparation for Eucharist participation through children's segregated but regular celebration of 'the Feast' as one example of *Godly play* provides a creative alternative approach for the "suggestions for improved practice" section of this thesis. Berryman's recent essay "Mature Spirituality,"⁴⁷ is important for the concise theology of childhood he develops by analyzing the gospel references to children and for his analyses of the enduring human trait of playing *hide-and-seek*.

Cavaletti's Religious Potential of the Child⁴⁸ provides convincing evidence for the deep reality of the spiritual life of children from a Catholic practitioner's perspective. Her observations of the nature of children's spiritual expression, gathered over decades of practice in many contexts are most insightful. Her description of a self selected children's canon that includes the Last Supper and specific parables is also of value for

⁴⁵ Marlin Jeschke, Believer's Baptism for Children of the Church (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983).

⁴⁶ Jerome Berryman, Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education, New York: Harper Collins, 1991)

⁴⁷ Berryman, "Children and Mature Spirituality," Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 22-41.

⁴⁸ Sophia Cavaletti, Religious Potential of the Child, (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983).

the topic of children and communion.

In The Spirit of the Child, David Hay, with research support from Rebecca Nye, argues convincingly that “children’s spirituality is rooted in universal human awareness; that it is ‘really there’ and not just a culturally constructed illusion.”⁴⁹ He argues scientifically that humans are biologically programmed to be spiritual, and that deepened awareness of one’s spirituality is an effective way to redress the moral decay of society. Although their research was based in British schools and conducted with an intention to improve the curriculum for the British public school system, a focus that is quite removed from that of this thesis, their research suggests that children have and are aware of spiritual experiences, which is significant for the church’s understanding of the child as part of the body of Christ or the family of God. Their definitions of spirituality, which are articulated within and for an increasingly secular society, are also valuable for a deeper understanding of children’s spirituality and their place within the communion rituals of the Mennonite denomination. This work is built upon by Nye in “Christian Perspectives on Children’s Spirituality: Social Science Contributions?”⁵⁰ in which she further describes the innate and rich spiritual capacities of children and demonstrates how cognitive descriptions of faith hampered earlier researchers’ abilities to understand and appreciate children’s spirituality.

Of interest for describing the current religious understanding of childhood in North America is Yust’s Real Kids, Real Faith.⁵¹ Yust’s work builds on the work of Hay

⁴⁹ David Hay with Rebecca Nye, The Spirit of the Child, (London, Harper Collins, 1998).

⁵⁰ Rebecca Nye, “Christian Perspectives on Children’s Spirituality: Social Science Contributions?” Donald Ratcliff, senior ed. Children’s Spirituality: Christian perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), pp 90 – 107.

⁵¹ Karen Marie Yust, Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass,) 2004.

and Nye and stresses the importance of vocabulary and practices of faith for nurturing children's innate spirituality and relationship with God. Serving as an unofficial consultant for recent curricular development in the Mennonite Church, as Yust does, makes her work especially relevant.

Mercer's Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood,⁵² is helpful for a variety of reasons. Her articulation of her "search for a child-affirming theology and for a church that genuinely welcomes children, cares about their well being, and advocates for them in situations in which they are marginalized or harmed,"⁵³ provides a model for developing a Mennonite theology of childhood. Mercer articulates a powerful apologetic for practical theology, for new understandings of childhood as a time of *vocation* and growing *agency*⁵⁴ and for an increased welcome and flourishing of children in North American mainline congregations. In addition, Mercer provides a detailed review of studies on the impact of ritual on the faith formation of children, a thorough study of children in the Gospel of Mark and a concise theology of childhood.

Miller-McLemore's Let the Children Come,⁵⁵ as well as her essay, "'Let the Children Come': Revisited,"⁵⁶ provide support for Mercer's perspective. Mercer also engages comments about children by Menno Simons, as interpreted by Keith Graber-Miller in the book edited by Bunge. Even though Miller-McLemore's reflections on childhood are directed mainly at parents rather than at worship leaders, her work is helpful for developing a theology of children as it relates to their participation in

⁵²Joyce Anne Mercer, Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood (San Francisco: Chalice Press), 2005.

⁵³ Mercer, ix.

⁵⁴ Mercer, 67.

⁵⁵ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003).

⁵⁶Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "'Let the Children Come': Revisited," The Child in Christian Thought ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 446 -47.

communion. Her argument for *children as spiritual agents* is particularly relevant for this thesis.

Marcia Bunge's essay, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church,"⁵⁷ and the essay collection also deserve mention. While I did not quote this or other essays in her collection that are less specifically related to the thesis topic, reading about historical views of childhood in other denominations provided a rich background and valuable perspectives for understanding the Anabaptist tradition. Gundry-Volf's essay in this volume, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,"⁵⁸ was helpful for comparing to the biblical views of Anabaptists and Mennonites.

Issler's Baptist perspective in "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality"⁵⁹ provided a model for adding to the mainline understandings of children's spirituality with a Believers Church perspective that is concerned with the age of accountability and the preparation for baptism upon confession of a maturing faith. His description of the similarities and differences of children's and adult's faith and salvific status were helpful in articulating the Mennonite theology of childhood that this thesis proposes.

D. Sources for a Nuanced Mennonite Communion Theology

I consulted a broad range of Mennonite theologians and who have engaged the topic of children and communion to develop a new Mennonite theology of communion which includes a participatory role for children and other faith novices. Eleanor

⁵⁷ Marcia Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church," Donald Ratcliff, senior ed. Children's Spirituality: Christian perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 42-53.

⁵⁸ Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," Bunge, ed. 29-60.

⁵⁹ Klaus Issler, "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality", Donald Ratcliff, senior ed. Children's Spirituality: Christian perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 54-71.

Kreider's Communion Shapes Character treats this issue most comprehensively, but there are several other significant sources. John Rempel mentions the role of children in articles on communion for the Minister's Manual, which he also edited, for inclusion in the issue of Vision: A Journal of Church and Theology⁶⁰ that tackled the issue of communion in the Mennonite church from a wide variety of perspectives and for Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership,⁶¹ which was envisioned by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, to help prepare the church for a new identity as a major denominational transformation was in process. Tom Finger's Systematic Theology⁶² provided helpful comments on the current situation as well as the Anabaptist era. The seminary essay, "Are Children welcome? Children and the Lord's Supper in the Mennonite Church,"⁶³ addresses this topic with the combined insights of a former basketball player and coach, pastor, parent and Mennonite seminary student. Her comments on the impact of learning through practice are of particular interest.

A new resource written collaboratively by Mennonite Seminary professors for visioning and planning worship, Preparing Sunday Dinner,⁶⁴ provided current reflections from Mennonite theologians and worship leaders, and included significant input on communion. These resources provided a rich dialogue with the formative theological voices in this Mennonite tradition on the topic of communion and children.

⁶⁰ Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, "Communion," vol.2, no.1.

⁶¹ Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership, Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997.

⁶² Finger, 2004.

⁶³ Marla Langelotz, "Are Children welcome? Children and the Lord's Supper in the Mennonite Church," unpublished M. Div. paper for "Theology of the Church", Professor Gayle Gerber Koontz, AMBS, Dec 2005.

⁶⁴ June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf and Rebecca Slough, Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching, (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press), 2006.

E. Sources from other Denominations on the Topic of Children and Communion

The final chapter of this thesis deals with recommendations for improved practice. The reflections, official statements, process resources and curricula that have been developed by and implemented in other denominations provide a fascinating broader context for this study. The Mennonite process of changing practice and theology on the topic of children and communion can only gain by observing how others have dealt and are dealing with this topic. Selected resources from three denominations include the following. The United Church of Canada recommends the Presbyterian resource, A Guide for Parents⁶⁵ which promotes the practice of inclusive communion, as does the UCC 1986 General Council report, A Place for You,⁶⁶ the congregational resource “Honouring a place for all,”⁶⁷ a curriculum, In the Name of Love,⁶⁸ which includes an intergenerational event on communion, six sessions for children and a teaching communion, and a “Summary of United Church Beliefs.”⁶⁹

This project refers to a set of congregational resources from The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) that respond to its 1991 “Statement on Sacramental Practices,” including the congregational resource for teaching and implementing children’s involvement in Holy Communion, God’s Children: Worship Resources for All

⁶⁵ Thomas G. Long, A Guide for Parents: God’s Family at the Table, Atlanta GA, General Assembly Mission Board, PCUSA, 1981.

⁶⁶ United Church of Canada, Division of Mission in Canada, A Place for You: The integration of Children in the Life of the Church (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1986), 29.

⁶⁷ The website description of this resource says: “This congregational resource with a vision, strategies and resources to live out a more inclusive ministry for all ages is available free to U.C. congregations upon request.”

⁶⁸ Beth Benjamin-Cameron, In the Name of Love: A Communion Resource for Congregations, (Toronto, United Church of Canada), 2006.

⁶⁹ Summary of United Church Beliefs” available from <http://www.united-church.ca/ucc/summary.shtm#4>.

Ages,⁷⁰ and a personal email from Lutheran Pastor, George Johnson, who serves St Paul's Lutheran Church in River Hills, where we worship when we're at our cottage, which outlines seven children's times in worship where he introduced this practice to the children in his rural congregation.

Resources from The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches follow a similar pattern and include a study paper, "Toward a Theology of Children",⁷¹ which recommended the separation of communion from baptism, a four session children's curriculum "First Steps for Kids,"⁷² a commentary on their Confession of Faith,⁷³ a pamphlet for parents,⁷⁴ and a recent essay "A Little Child Shall lead Them,"⁷⁵ that reflects positively on the implementation of their new communion practice.

F. Summary Comment

This concludes the review of literature that has been formative in researching this topic of Mennonites, children and communion. It is a somewhat unusual blend of resources to engage in a dialogue with each other, but the dialogue has been lively and the research has been fruitful. This blended, inter disciplinary process has led the researcher toward a sense of resolution between what seemed to be competing core convictions.

⁷⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Working Group for Worship, God's Children: Worship Resources for All Ages (New Hamburg, ON: Trinity Lutheran Church), 1990-1999.

⁷¹ David Wiebe, "Towards a Theology of Children," *Direction: Toward a Theology of Children*, Spring 1993, vol.22, no.1, 33-50, available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?785>.

⁷² Lorraine Dyck, First Steps for Kids (Winnipeg: Kindred), 1995.

⁷³ Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, "Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application," (Winnipeg, Kindred), 2000.

⁷⁴ John Neufeld, "Children and Communion," (Winnipeg: Kindred), 2002.

⁷⁵ Sharon Johnson, "A Little Child Shall Lead Them," *Direction Journal*, Fall 2002, vol.31, no.2., 168-75, available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1262>.

CHAPTER 3

Proposing A Theology of Childhood

A. Introduction

In order to develop recommendations of improved practice for the current context, with regards to children and communion in this contemporary North American believers church, the core issues of its theologies of childhood and communion must be researched and reflected on from that current context. Only in this way can the recommended changes in practice be a true evolution of that theological tradition. This includes researching the particular Anabaptist reformation roots for their understanding of children and communion, because that is where their ecclesial development diverged from the Christian tradition they share with other western denominations. The next chapters of this paper will therefore propose and develop theologies of childhood in chapters three and four and a theology of communion in chapter five that, while rooted in the Anabaptist tradition, will be engaged with from and for our current context.

Beliefs about the nature of *faith* in children will be explored to develop a foundation from which to examine the beliefs surrounding communion, because the invitation to participate in communion has traditionally been so closely linked to the confession and practice of *faith* for Mennonites. From this base a new Mennonite theology of communion will be proposed and shifts in communion practice will be recommended that integrate children appropriately. As Jesus took children on his lap and blessed them during an otherwise adult-focused event, it is my hope that Mennonites can also bless and affirm children, with their unique places on the lap of the gathered body of Christ, as they worship, remember and encounter him in communion.

Articulated theologies of childhood are a relatively new phenomenon and, as such, are one indicator of the increased attention our society pays to children. The theology proposed below articulates a theology of childhood that is rooted in an Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective and acknowledges children's spirituality. Articulations of earlier Anabaptist/Mennonite theologies of childhood are sparse and will be deduced by gathering and interpreting scattered comments about children in Anabaptist sources and interpreting them for what they believed about the relationship of children with God.

B. A Proposed Believers Church Theology of Childhood

1. God calls all people into relationship with God and God's people, equips and sends them to be a blessing, during all life stages.⁷⁶
2. Responding to God's call involves an ongoing process of conversion because of the problem and lure of evil. This process is characterized by re-orientation, by welcoming and submitting to God as the center of one's life, and is an integral part of Christian formation.
3. Children are spiritual beings with gifts that reflect their unique place in the family of God. The church must learn from them in ways that acknowledge their spiritual and developmental gifts.
 - a. As blessed participants in the inbreaking kingdom of God, children have a privileged spot on the lap of Jesus and the church.
 - b. Children possess a complex innocence, in which they are protected by God's grace and a nurturing Christian community, enjoy God's favour and mature

⁷⁶ The Mennonite Church Canada statement of identity and purpose begins with the sentence, "God calls equips and send the church to engage the world with the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ."

- towards increasing levels of accountability as moral and spiritual agents.
- c. Children contribute to the worship, the community and the mission of God's church through their age appropriate participation in the worship and work of the church.
4. Children are spiritual beings with needs that reflect their unique place in the family of God. The church must serve them in ways that meet their spiritual and developmental needs.
 - a. Children remain among the *least of these* whom Jesus calls us to serve. In a denomination that bases membership on a mature covenanting response to Christian belief and practice in believer's baptism, children are at a distinct membership disadvantage.
 - b. Young children, in their hide-and-seek stage of development, are nurtured by religious activities that include repeated experiences of "here I am", "I see you" and "I see you seeing me" with the congregation and with God.
 - c. Children's spiritual awareness is developmentally sensitive and needs to be cultivated by instruction, by being encouraged in wonder and contemplation of the divine, and by inclusion in the life and mission of the church.

C. Commentary on this Proposed Theology of Childhood

1. God calls children into relationship with God and God's people, equips and sends them to be a blessing.⁷⁷

This theological statement is a fairly natural outgrowth of some of the earliest

⁷⁷ This echoes the Mennonite Church Canada statement of identity and purpose, which begins with the sentence, "God calls equips and sends the church to engage the world with the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ." I have extended this basic foundational statement by adding a reference to all ages and by nuancing the engagement of the world in terms of extending the blessing we receive, language that appears in closely related documents about our identity.

theological documents of the Anabaptists, but it also aligns itself closely with the thoughts of current leaders in faith formation such as Walter Wangerin, who writes:

Who can say when, in a child, the dance with God begins?
No one. Not even the child can later look back and remember the beginning of it, because it is as natural an experience...as the child's relationship with the sun or with his bedroom...the dance, then, the relationship with God, faithing, begins in a mist... It is a universal experience.⁷⁸

Similarly, the Christian Catechist who has become well known in Catholic Catechetical circles in the last decades, Sophia Cavaletti, insists on laying the foundation for religious and moral instruction with an exposure to “faith as encounter with the living God.”⁷⁹ Her many years in leading the Catechesis of three to six year old children have convinced her of the “existence of a mysterious bond between God and the child” that “subsists in early childhood even in cases of spiritual “malnutrition” and appears to precede any religious instruction whatsoever.”⁸⁰

James Fowler, another well respected leader in the area of faith formation, works with “the assumption that God has prepotentiated us for faith. That is, as human beings we have evolved with the capacity and the need for faith from the beginning.”⁸¹

What is important about these three current expressions of children's spirituality for this theological point is the way their statements acknowledge that God has created people to be in relationship with the divine from their very beginnings. This condition is not diminished if the child is not baptized. Even though the denominational ancestors of

⁷⁸ Walter Wangerin, The Orphean Passages, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1986, pp. 20-21), Donald Ratcliff and Scottie May, “Identifying Children's Spirituality,” Donald Ratcliff, ed., Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene: Cascade Books), 2004, 7-21, 12.

⁷⁹ Mark Searle's preface in Spohia Cavaletti, The Religious Potential of the Child, translated by Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter, (Chicago, IL, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992 edition), 6-7.

⁸⁰ Cavaletti, 22.

⁸¹ James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith and the Public Church: Stages of Faith and the Public Church, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991, 101.

the Mennonites, the early Anabaptists, were more concerned with faith as demonstrated in the freely chosen, mature commitment to God and the church of a believer's baptism, they also understood God as the initiator who calls us into relationship with God and God's people. In 1527, at a gathering of Anabaptists leaders in Schleithem, a series of theological statements, or articles, were formulated into a confession in an attempt to unify the direction of the emerging Anabaptist movement. Article three of the Schleithem Confession states: "Whoever does not share the calling of the one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one spirit, to one body together with all the children of God, may not be made one loaf together with them, as must be true if one wishes truly to break bread together according to the command of Christ."⁸² In this article, God is clearly recognized as the one who calls us into relationship with God. The relationship with God's people is acknowledged in several ways; as part of one body, as children of God, and as one loaf. The term *children* is used as a metaphor in this statement, for the Anabaptist understanding of the one body excluded children from baptism, communion and membership. It did not, however, exclude them from a relationship with God. This is demonstrated by comments about children and their relationship with God in the original writings of two major leaders among the Dutch Anabaptists, Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips, who expressed that children of Christians "are saved, holy and pure, pleasing to God, under the covenant and in his church," and that they "are already washed and baptized with the blood of Jesus Christ which saves their souls," although "the sign of baptism they shall receive at the appointed time, on the confession of their

⁸² John H. Yoder's translation of art.3, The Schleithem Confession, John D. Rempel, The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Phillips. (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), p.16.

faith.”⁸³ Lest we develop a biased view of their appreciation of children’s place in the church, it must be added that Menno Simons also wrote “It is plain to an intelligent person that with infants are found neither doctrine, faith, Spirit, nor fruits of the divine commandment.”⁸⁴

Anabaptists had expectations that their children would participate in a life of Christian witness which, in their experience, was closely tied to a life of suffering because of the way their faith placed them in conflict with dominant socio-religious practices. As in any social conflict, children suffer. Many lived as refugees or lost their parents to martyrdom and were then cared for by the broader community of faith.⁸⁵ Occasionally, as the following harsh example demonstrates, children were imprisoned with their parents. David Joris, a Dutch Anabaptist leader, even commented to Anabaptist friends, who wanted to rescue his children, “that they should desist for it was right that they suffer with him in prison.”⁸⁶ This statement could indicate Joris’ lack of affection for his children, or his belief in the positive benefits of suffering, but it could also indicate that Joris recognized his children’s identification with the suffering of Christ and their participation in the life of the church, the body of Christ.

In more recent Anabaptist-Mennonite writing about children and faith, the authenticity of children’s relationship with God has been challenged and affirmed in ways that echo the mixed statements of the early Anabaptists. Marlin Jeschke, a

⁸³ Finger, quoting (Simons, Complete Works, p. 33) and (Philips, Writings of Dirk Philips, p 106), 169.

⁸⁴ Graber Miller, quoting (Complete Works of Menno Simons, 386), 215.

⁸⁵ Graber-Miller writes, “Because of excommunication and even more so persecution and martyrdom, Simon and other Anabaptists broadened the nurturing community. While parents carried primary responsibility for their children, in their absence, children sometimes were cared for by the extended family or others in the Christian community.” 218-19.

⁸⁶ Garry Waite, “Women Supporters of David Joris” in Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht, (Waterloo, ON, Wilfred Laurier Press, 1996), 322.

respected Mennonite educator, devoted a chapter in a book on baptism to a theology of childhood. In this theology, he compared the spiritual experiences of children to the way they play at weddings, to demonstrate that preteen children were no more capable of a true, mature confession of faith than they were of getting married.⁸⁷ Jeschke does, however, also acknowledge that children have a relationship with God – “the kind he has ordained [for] there is a religion appropriate to children during the age of innocence,”⁸⁸ a formulation which he based on the earlier work of Gideon Yoder.⁸⁹

Jeschke’s apparent devaluation of childhood faith is understandable in the context he was writing for, for he was attempting to counteract the impact of the child evangelism movement, which was leading to coerced or manipulated conversion experiences of children and to numerous preteen baptisms.⁹⁰ His arguments in defense of a more natural faith appropriation process for children of the church may have contributed to an attitude of disrespect for the relationship he acknowledged children do have with God. When Jeschke reflected on the nature of faith in youth and named the challenge of supporting them in what he described as a pattern of right thinking and relating, he concluded that, “When all is said and done, we wouldn’t want it any other way than for them to encounter God and be encountered by him for themselves.”⁹¹ This thought agrees with the proposed theological statement that it is God who calls, equips and sends us, except that Jeschke acknowledges the possibility of encountering God only after the age of discretion

⁸⁷ Marlin Jeschke, Believers Baptism for Children of the Church, (Kitchener, ON and Scottdale, PA, Herald Press, 1983), 111.

⁸⁸ Jeschke, 114.

⁸⁹ Gideon Yoder, The Nurture and Evangelism of Children, (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1959), 80, described the religion of childhood in four phases. He wrote, “The activity of God in the life of a child begins in infancy through the process of religious impression. In the more specific sense it begins at the dawn of self-consciousness (ages three to five). In a fuller sense, it begins at the dawn of moral consciousness or at the age of discretion. In the final sense it begins at the age of mental maturity.”

⁹⁰ Jeschke, 76-77.

⁹¹ Jeschke, 116.

whereas this statement includes the possibility of divine encounter for younger children as well.

Other recent Mennonite writing about children and faith also acknowledges this changing view of the child and its spirituality. The Mennonite systematic theologian, Thomas Finger, even though he devotes very little space to the faith of children in his systematic theology, does make the following, significant statement:

Since Jesus was fully human, he also passed through infancy and childhood in communion with God. He brought the whole span of human life into it. Since adults participate in that saving process in the way appropriate for them (faith), can we not assume that young children also do so in a manner suitable for them?⁹²

In the theological foundation statement of the newest Sunday school curriculum, Gather' Round: hearing and sharing God's good news, children's spirituality is affirmed and their relationship with God is acknowledged in the statement that "God longs to be in relationship with all people: young and old, female and male, from every race, nation and religion. Precious and valued in God's family, children express their response to God's love in age appropriate ways."⁹³ This shift toward acknowledging children's relationship with God received repeated affirmation in introductory workshops that were conducted in 2006. Constituency protests about this theological shift have not emerged from users of this curriculum to date, but, how this shift will be integrated into Mennonite theology, ecclesiology and practice, remains to be seen.

At a recent national missional leadership training event, John Rempel, the church

⁹² Thomas Finger, A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive, (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity, 2000), 183.

⁹³ Eleanor Snyder and Amy Gingrich, compilers. Gather'Round Handbook: the Essential Guide for Leaders and Teachers. (Elgin, IL, and Waterloo, ON, Brethren Press and Mennonite Publishing Network, 2006), 14.

historian/theologian who eloquently defends the concept of closed communion for the believers church, presented a paper on worship in which he supported the integration of children in worship by quoting a statement by Evelyn Underhill, the English spiritual writer, who has said that “true worship is where elephants can swim and lambs can wade.” By stressing the importance of choosing worship words, actions and songs “that speak to and for the lambs as well as the elephants in our congregations”⁹⁴ Rempel acknowledged that God was in relationship with the whole age spectrum, in all its faith-stages, of those who gather to worship.

A review of Anabaptist/Mennonite theology regarding children encourages one to ask whether the relationship God has with children has been questioned within this faith tradition mainly for its impact on the practice of believers baptism. This seems to have been the case when Anabaptists were being persecuted for not baptizing their infants as well in the situation with the Child Evangelism movement that encouraged Mennonite preteen baptisms, and led Jeschke to write his book.

When the theological focus shifts from the human ability to make a mature response, as is the case when one’s frame of reference is the topic of believers baptism, to focusing on God’s initiative in calling, equipping and sending and on the authenticity of children’s faith, the apparent discontinuity of this statement with Anabaptist tradition is lessened, for this faith tradition does recognize both God’s initiative in the divine human relationship and God’s special grace for children. What has changed to nuance the implications of these Anabaptist beliefs is our changing understanding of children’s spirituality, an understanding that is being informed by substantive research done in this

⁹⁴ John D. Rempel, “Worship and Identity: the shaping of a people”, an unpublished paper presented at Mennonite Church Canada’s course, “Transforming Congregations in Worship,” Regina, SK, March 30-April 1, 2007, 4-5.

area in the last several decades. Recognizing God's relationship with children does not need to challenge the practice of believer's baptism, with its emphasis on mature commitment to belief and discipleship, though the interrelationship of these two topics definitely invites further study.

2. Responding to God's call involves an ongoing conversion process because of the problem and lure of evil. This process is characterized by re-orientation, by welcoming and submitting to God as the center of one's life, and is an integral part of Christian formation.

Dealing with the problem of evil would clearly go well beyond the parameters of this thesis, but it must nevertheless be acknowledged here as the reality that makes a conversion process necessary. This theological statement differs from a focus on conversion as a one time experience of giving one's life to Christ, by stating that conversion, whether it begins suddenly or gradually, involves a life long process of Christian formation. Including a statement on conversion in a theology of childhood reflects the influence of James Fowler, who perceived the developmental stages of faith to be in a dialectical dance with "the conversional, transformational dynamics of faith as lived in commitment to God in Christ."⁹⁵ It also agrees with the comment by Klaus Issler, who cautions teachers and parents about hurrying children toward a conversion and asserts that "God has provided children with a measure of developmental grace, before they become adults, to grow in their faith and experience God."⁹⁶ Issler's statement about conversion acknowledges the importance of both development and conversion, and is further supported by Catherine Stonehouse, who says that "Development prepares the

⁹⁵ James W. Fowler, Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church, (NY: Harper Collins, 1991), xiii.

⁹⁶ Klaus Issler, "Ch. 4: Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality," Donald Ratcliff senior ed., Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 54-71, 68.

way for conversion as the image of God forms and children learn the stories that make God known. But the time must come when persons choose God as the center of life,⁹⁷ a process which continues throughout the developmental stages of our life of faith.

Although an appreciation of an ongoing conversion process finds support among some of the Christian Educators in our current Christian Education context, one must ask whether it is in continuity with beliefs of the early Anabaptists. The vocabulary they used is not identical with this statement on conversion, but the way they wrote about repentance, obedience and baptism for their very different context, is quite compatible with this statement's description of conversion. Thomas Finger writes that:

Hubmaier outlined the personal salvation process comprehensively. It arose from the missional impetus of the new creation's coming, usually through preaching. It commenced with deep despair over sin...But then Christ, the living Physician, leads us to repentance. We surrender as much as a wounded person can, and his healing gradually enables us to follow his teaching.⁹⁸

This process of becoming aware, despairing, and repenting followed by a gradual enabling by Christ to follow his teachings is compatible with the proposed statement about conversion. Finger also writes that by affirming the divine initiative in this process, "theology in Anabaptist perspective has no reason to separate faith and love. To be born of God is to be renewed by God's love... That is why it will inevitably produce works of love."⁹⁹ What is missing in this Anabaptist description of conversion, or being born of God, is any reference to children. For a concept in which they included children we must turn to the Anabaptist concept of learning obedience as a re-orientation to the

⁹⁷ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 167.

⁹⁸ Finger, 114.

⁹⁹ Finger, 154.

good or godly way. With children, Anabaptists described this as a matter of education¹⁰⁰ rather than conversion.

Anabaptist education of children included vigilant care and instruction by their parents and the Anabaptist community. Their instructions regarding child-rearing sound harsh to our ears and must be considered within their historical context. Hillel Schwartz's essay on children in Anabaptism demonstrates that Anabaptists measured child development according to the levels of obedience children accomplished. This perfect obedience was encouraged in three ways: (1) discipline that was intended to break their will, (2) developing their fear of God so they could live out of that fear with a clear conscience, and (3) by helping them develop their reason and understanding with a Bible based education.

Perfecting *obedience* included learning to rejoice in corporal punishment, whether it was deserved or not, and stressed the importance of fulfilling parental commands out of love rather than fear.¹⁰¹ As harsh as this may sound, one can appreciate that learning to rejoice in undeserved punishment may have helped prepare these children to accept persecution and martyrdom as they matured and joined the church through baptism. It certainly included a sense of willing submission to God as the center of life. Keith Graber Miller summarizes the Anabaptist goal of faith formation in their children as follows:

Making lifelong commitments of discipleship rather than momentary decisions for personal salvation is what was essential to the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers.

¹⁰⁰ Hillel Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 47, no.5,(April 1973), 102 -114, "In Peter Riedeman's writings "The weaned baby is told of prayer "and such things as children can understand". It is taught and expected to obey, but its obedience is as involuntary as rote learning."110.

¹⁰¹ Hillel Schwartz, 109.

Hence, children were nurtured toward this more positive, life-giving way of being, not simply left wallowing in their adamic misery.¹⁰²

How has this focus evolved in the life of the Mennonite church? Jeschke's book on baptism for children of the church continues the focus on obedience and life long discipleship, but his recommendations no longer reflect the harshness of the early Anabaptist era. Jeschke seeks to link conversion as closely as possible to the date of baptism. This conversion, which he describes as coming to an owned faith, is presented as a gradual process, that can include an "an immediate, datable, all-or- nothing proposition."¹⁰³ To ascertain an appropriate date for the baptism one must "listen to the guidance of the Spirit and baptize when the Spirit bears witness with spirit and we recognize genuine spiritual life."¹⁰⁴

Although the expectation of obedience and submission by children, that can lead to conversion, has continued throughout most of Mennonite history, it is now being replaced by a sense of learning about and experiencing God's love and guidance with and from children. Similarly, attitudes to repentance and forgiveness, integral components of conversion, are being replaced by an understanding that repentance and forgiveness can be learned with and from children as we practice and model saying we're sorry for hurtful things we do and as we practice and model forgiveness by giving each other repeated chances to make a fresh start after we've received the sign of repentance in words or actions that say "I'm sorry." This learning with and from, while it relates directly to the proposed statement on conversion, will receive further attention in a separate section.

¹⁰² Keith Graber Miller, 210.

¹⁰³ Jeschke, 120.

¹⁰⁴ Jeschke, 49

There are developmental aspects to this process of learning to be sorry, or submitting and starting over. Conversion, which includes submission, must be owned in a mature way to arrive at an owned faith. The statement on conversion, statement two in this proposed theology, deliberately includes the currently unpopular idea of submission to God for children and adults alike. From news reports about priests who are pedophiles, to the struggle of developing access to leadership for women in the church, our current culture has rightly emphasized that the concept of religious submission has been used to maintain human hierarchies of power that deserve to be challenged. This statement does not recommend submission to human hierarchies of power that misrepresent God's intentions, but it does recommend submission to God. When the one we submit to is God, whose desire for our lives is more pure and holy than ours can ever be, submission can be a matter of being freed from our own unholy and impure desires, from "wallowing in our adamic misery,"¹⁰⁵ and can convert us to greater freedom and realization of the self our Creator intended us to be. Differentiating between God's desire and ego desire is challenging, especially as it relates to the exercise of authority. Tools, such as a broad understanding of God's intentions as revealed in the Biblical canon combined with an understanding of healthy human development, can assist in this challenging task.

3. Children are spiritual beings with gifts that reflect their unique place in the family of God. The church must learn from them in ways that acknowledge their spiritual and developmental gifts.

This statement introduces the heart of the proposed theology of childhood and is a natural outgrowth of the first two points of being called to relationship with God and

¹⁰⁵ Graber Miller, 210.

God's people, but living with the reality of evil and therefore requiring ongoing re-orientation toward God and God's purposes. If children were not spiritual, attention to those topics could be reserved for when they leave childhood behind. And, if Mennonites still lived in close rural communities that formed a distinct identity in their children before they were mature enough to commit themselves to believers baptism and membership in the church, it might not even be critical to address these theological issues, for children would still be affirmed and nurtured as Christian apprentices in the broader life of the not-so-scattered church between Sunday worship services. However, the words that Gerald Gerbrandt, who has spent his adult life connecting with and serving the Canadian Mennonite constituency, wrote a decade ago, urgently call us to do so now. He writes, "The time when our Mennonite communities were so close that a distinct Mennonite identity was formed in children before they were confronted with the question of baptism is largely behind us."¹⁰⁶ Eleanor Snyder, during her long tenure as Director of Christian Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church, agreed with Gerbrandt and commented, "Without the strong communal forces from our past we lament that our children do not desire to be part of our church life."¹⁰⁷

That time of close and closed communities has largely past, with the exception of some of our conservative sister denominations, and Mennonites are rapidly assimilating into a post-modern, post-Christian culture with sophisticated advertising that takes identity shaping in our children very seriously.¹⁰⁸ The church must do no less, for

¹⁰⁶ Gerald Gerbrandt, "Church Membership, Circumcision, and Children," Naming the Sheep. Understanding Church Membership, (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 67.

¹⁰⁷ Eleanor Koch Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration." Doctor of Ministry Thesis, (Toronto School of Theology, 1999), 92-93.

¹⁰⁸ This reality is convincingly presented in the documentary film, "The Corporation."

children are gifts and belong to God's kingdom.¹⁰⁹ They are entrusted to us by God, with the mandate to nurture them for the purposes of God rather than for those of the advertising industry.

As spiritual beings, children are created in the image of God and therefore, it is reasonable to affirm that they reflect the love, the creativity and the righteousness of God. One reason children are so attractive is that they reflect these qualities with a transparency and humility that adults have often lost. However, children also possess an age appropriate egocentrism which produces less inspiring activities and attitudes in them. Children also drive their caregivers and each other to distraction, and harmful egocentric ways need to be channeled and challenged.¹¹⁰ Our present context teaches them many values that contradict the social, ethical and spiritual values of God's reign. Therefore, it is critical that the church community find ways of remaining involved in their identity shaping process by reflecting on their gifts and needs in a more specific and disciplined way.

While understanding that the faith of children who experience faith but can not fully understand, analyze or articulate what they are experiencing, remains a mystery laden task, we can be encouraged in the attempt because this generation of Christian educators has access to tools that earlier generations lacked. These tools are the recent contributions of theologians, social scientists, educators and other practitioners in the broader ecumenical and interfaith community. These specialists are collaborating in the

¹⁰⁹ See Hymnal Worship Book, (Scottdale and Waterloo: Faith and Life Resources), #792 "Child Blessing", or Matthew 18:1-4; 19:13-15, Mk 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17.

¹¹⁰ Bonnie Miller McLemore, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood for a Christian Perspective, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), describes it this way: "Adults have a responsibility to curb children's harmful, aggressive, and inhumane desires – and, more difficult yet, to model love of self, neighbor, and God,"52.

relatively new interdisciplinary area of study known as *children's spirituality*. With a desire to be faithful with the use of these additional resources this proposed theology of childhood will approach this deepening understanding of the children with which God has entrusted the church. Because the gifts children offer the church form such a fundamental part of a theology of childhood, this statement will be expanded upon in three separate sub points.

- a. As blessed participants in the inbreaking kingdom of God, children have a privileged spot on the lap of Jesus and the church.

This statement is rooted in the Gospel accounts of Jesus blessing the children in Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, and Luke 18:15-17 and may therefore not need much elaboration. Of the actual blessing action, Matthew and Mark only say “he laid his hands on them and blessed them.” After Jesus invites the little children to come, Luke writes that “he took them in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.” To put both hands on them, Jesus must have been sitting and holding them in his lap. In the NRSV translation, Luke uses the term ‘infants’ for the children whereas the other references are to ‘little children’. Were these little children or infants really on the lap of Jesus? Cultures and practices change and vary, but it remains very likely that Jesus’ lap was involved in this recorded action of inviting and blessing. But, whether they were or not, the spot children had with Jesus was a privileged one. This is clear from Jesus’ invitation to them despite his disciples’ discouragement of the children’s approach.

If we accept that the church is the body of Christ, another term with solid biblical foundations, then it stands to reason that children also have a privileged spot on the lap, or in the arms, of the church. Since this does not translate quite as easily into a literal image it can be interpreted in a number of ways. In this reflection about Mennonites and

communion, I am interpreting it to mean that children are privileged and blessed by participating in that ritual supper in a way that is both honoured and differentiated from the participation of baptized believers.

This identity of children as blessed participants in the already-but-not-yet kingdom of God finds support in Anabaptist as well as current sources. It was frequently cited by Anabaptists leaders as a defense for not baptizing their children, but the testimony of an Anabaptist mother, Soetgen Van Den Houte, to her children David, Betgen and Tanneken, in the farewell treatise she wrote to them before her execution, represents this view with particular poignancy. The treatise contains lengthy exhortations about desired behaviour and attitudes along with the related biblical stories or admonitions that reflect the expectations of obedience, submission and fear of the Lord. However, it also includes the following passionate affirmation of their unique and favoured place in the kingdom of God:

O my lambs, you are still in your youth, in your infancy;
you have yet your part in your Father's kingdom, see that
 you *keep* it well and do not as Esau did, who gave his
 inheritance or birthright for a mess of pottage...But Jacob
 chose the better part, and was obedient to God and his
 father, walking the ways of the Lord with all
 righteousness.¹¹¹ (italics added)

Although we might challenge Soentgen's interpretation of Jacob's purity in acquiring the birthright from Esau, it is clear that she considers children to have a part in the inbreaking kingdom of God, and that they can preserve that part by obediently living God's way. What may also be true is that Soentgen recognized her children as already

¹¹¹ Thieleman J. van Braght, Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Fifteen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom From the Time of Christ to A.D.1660, translated by Joseph F. Sohm, ninth edition, (Herald Press: Scottdale, 1972), 647.

being part of the *Father's kingdom* and thereby also as a special part of the body of Christ.

The major leaders of the earlier Anabaptists, Conrad Grebel, Pilgram Marpeck, Dirk Phillips and Menno Simons agreed that children were understood to be in God's safe-keeping until they deliberately chose to sin as understanding, discerning youth.¹¹² Pilgram Marpeck also reported on the ceremonial commendation of infants to the church's and their parents' care,¹¹³ thereby indicating their privileged place in the church they were not members of.

The belief about the special status of children has remained as an underlying assumption within the Mennonite church, but relatively little has been written about it. The 1963 Confession of Faith article on "Man and his Sin" states that: "Before the age when children are accountable to God, their sins are atoned for through the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus himself assured us that children are in the kingdom of God."¹¹⁴ In the 1995 Confession, this understanding is implied in the only line that refers to children, "Children are of great importance. Jesus saw them as examples of how to receive the reign of God."¹¹⁵

In a doctoral dissertation on including children in the life of Mennonite congregations, Eleanor Koch Snyder articulated her theology of childhood. One of the ten theological points she makes is that "Children are blessed by God and welcomed in

¹¹² Finger, 169, Keith Graber Miller, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurture, and Parental Vigilance: 'The Child' in the Work of Menno Simons," The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia Bunge, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 194-226, 201. E Koch Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration," Dissertation, (Toronto School of Theology, 1999), 31.

¹¹³ Marpeck, Writings of Pilgram Marpeck, 147, 242, Finger, 169.

¹¹⁴ Mennonite Confession of Faith (Kitchener and Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1963), 12.

¹¹⁵ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottsdale, Kitchener: Herald Press, 1995), adopted by both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, 72-73.

God's reign."¹¹⁶

When we engage the ecumenical community on this topic, we find a comparable attitude in the writings of Klaus Issler, a Baptist, who therefore also has a believers church orientation, who argues that "Scripture supplies sufficient evidence that children are blessed by God's favor and that children have the capacity to have a relationship with God"¹¹⁷ and "from birth on—and perhaps in the womb as well—children are receptive to God's overtures and interventions in their lives."¹¹⁸

Dawn De Vries, a Systematic Theology Professor at Union-PSCE, in her essay "Toward a Theology of Childhood"¹¹⁹ presents a biblical view of Jesus' intrinsic, opposed to society's instrumental valuation of children. "What counts is not what the child will be but what the child is right now."¹²⁰ As support for Jesus' high view of children she builds on an argument in Judith Gundry-Volf's essay, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament" that children are models of entering the reign of God.¹²¹ "What stands out in the gospel passages is that children as children in particular, qualify as disciples and symbols of the reign of God."¹²² Gundry-Volf writes out of the context of the interdenominational academic community at Yale Divinity School, demonstrating that this high view of children in the reign of God is present across a broad denominational spectrum as well as in theological statements from within the believers church cluster of denominations.

¹¹⁶ Eleanor Koch Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration," Dissertation, Toronto School of Theology, 1999, 106.

¹¹⁷ Issler, 39.

¹¹⁸ Issler, 64.

¹¹⁹ Dawn De Vries, "Toward a Theology of Childhood," Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, 55.2 (2001): 161-173.

¹²⁰ De Vries.

¹²¹ Judith Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," The Child in Christian Thought, ed. M. J. Bunge), 29-60, 38-40..

¹²² De Vries, 165.

- b. Children possess a complex innocence, in which they are protected by God's grace and a nurturing Christian community, enjoy God's favour and mature towards increasing levels of accountability as moral and spiritual agents.

This is a point where denominations that baptize infants and denominations that baptize upon confession of the believer's own faith diverge in their emphasis. The Augustinian view of original sin¹²³ and the view that the sacrament of baptism had the power to save a child from the damning effects of that original sin were challenged by the Anabaptists as they refrained from baptizing their infants. I am indebted to Keith Graber Miller for the term *complex innocence*, to describe this Anabaptist concept for the relationship of unbaptized children with God, a concept which continues to inform current Mennonite attitudes to children's faith.

The early Anabaptist view of children's status in the eyes of God was complex. Balthasar Hubmaier, the major Swiss Anabaptist theologian of early Anabaptism, was both "certain that children are born in sin and under wrath [and] ...that they are innocent and that Christ loves them."¹²⁴ This mixed opinion about the innocence/sinfulness of children is also attributed to other Anabaptist leaders, such as Conrad Grebel, Pilgram Marpeck, Dirk Phillips and Menno Simons, who agreed that, while "children were

¹²³ McLemore, 70, presents Augustine's view of sin as follows: an infant was tainted in the moment of conception itself, contaminated by Adam's semen, in order to foist off his religious opponents' optimistic claims about the ease with which humans could do good... Sin is misdirected, humanly unquenchable desire, a distorted desire that he believed evolves and deepens in stages as an infant grows to be a child, adolescent, and adult. Children are neither romanticized as wholly innocent, like Adam before the fall, nor completely beguiled by evil and in dire need of control, as some of his peers claimed. Graber Miller, 201, affirms this description and describes that Menno Simon's view differed from Augustine and the magisterial reformers "on the soteriological ramifications of the corrupt, sinful nature, particularly as it is embodied in children. "Our entire doctrine, belief, foundation and confession is that our innocent children, as long as they live in their innocence, are through the merits, death, and blood of Christ, in grace, partakers of the promise." (Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," CWMS, 708.)

¹²⁴ Finger, in *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical Constructive*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), refers to primary information in Hubmaier, *Balthazar Hubmaier*, pp. 140-41, 203-4, 218, 284, 291.), 168.

affected by sin, they were cleansed by Christ's atonement."¹²⁵ Not only were they cleansed, they were also understood to be in God's safe-keeping until they deliberately chose to sin as understanding, discerning youth.¹²⁶ Because they were affected by sin, vigilant discipline was used to train them in what the Anabaptists understood as godly living.¹²⁷

Keith Graber Miller, presents Menno's view of the spiritual status of children as *complex innocence*, and describes it as "a recognition of the absence of both faithfulness and sinfulness in children, but an *innocence*, as he describes it, tempered with the acknowledgement of an inherited adamic nature predisposed toward sinning."¹²⁸

Even though the Anabaptists did not consider baptism necessary or appropriate for their children, a ritual that was appropriate to their believer's church orientation was instituted early in this denomination's life by Pilgram Marpeck, who reported on the ceremonial commendation of infants to the church's and their parents' care.¹²⁹

A ritual of child dedication, which gives witnesses to an understanding of children's complex innocence alongside of recognizing the sacred responsibility of

¹²⁵ Finger, lists primary sources on Grebel, Marpeck, Simons, and Phillips, as support for this statement in a footnote on 169.

¹²⁶ Finger, 169, Graber Miller, 201, E.K. Snyder, 31.

¹²⁷ Graber Miller, 212-13, "According to Simons, again quoting Sirach, "parents who love their son will cause him to often feel the rod so that they may have "joy of him in the end".... For Simons, as for many of his contemporaries, this was to be "controlled beating": parents should apply the rod with restraint."

¹²⁸ Graber Miller.

¹²⁹ Finger, quoting (Marpeck, Writings of Pilgram Marpeck, pp 147,242), 169. Unfortunately, Marpeck only refers to this ceremony, but does not include a prayer or a description of how such a ceremonial commendation was conducted. A ceremonial commendation, or child dedication service, is briefly described in the Simple Confession of 1590, a rare Anabaptist document which is just being translated by C. Arnold Snyder, where it states, "...it should be permitted and allowed...to bring children to Christ if one so wishes. But it must be done in the correct manner, in the way Christ himself has determined, namely: first, through prayer by means of which children may – and should – be brought to Christ, commended and dedicated to him." C. A. Snyder presented this quotation as part of a lecture on, "Mennonite baptismal theology and practice." at a conference named *Bridgefolk 2007*, Elkhart, IN, on July 28, 2007.

parents and the church for the nurture of its children, is once more common practice in the Mennonite denomination.¹³⁰ The underlying belief in the complex innocence of children is quite evident in the 1963 Confession of Faith:

We believe that children are born with a nature which will manifest itself as sinful as they mature. When they come to know themselves as responsible to God, they must repent and believe in Christ in order to be saved. Before the age when children are accountable to God, their sins are atoned for through the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus himself assured us that children are in the kingdom of God.¹³¹

Even though only hints of this Anabaptist view of complex innocence remain in the most current Confession of Faith,¹³² it remains the underlying assumption for conversations on the place of children in the church.

Klaus Issler, who writes about the spiritual status of children from his Baptist perspective, articulates a similar approach. As well as addressing children's uniquely *safe* status in matters of salvation before the age of discernment,¹³³ he adds the claim that "children are similar to adults in that they are persons created in the image of God and thus welcomed into experiencing a genuine relationship with God appropriate to their developmental abilities" and helpfully includes those with mental disabilities in this special status.¹³⁴ Issler's view concentrates on validating the child's relationship with God, but then goes on to describe children's participation in the rituals of the church, as

¹³⁰ In the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg, Church bulletins that include children's dedication services, on Mother's day, begin appearing in the 1960's and become common soon thereafter.

¹³¹ Koch Snyder, quotes the Mennonite Confession of Faith (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1963) 11-12, on p 31.

¹³² Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Scottdale, Kitchener: Herald Press, 1995), adopted by both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, 72-73, includes this statement: "Children are of great importance. Jesus saw them as examples of how to receive the reign of God. Children are to be loved, disciplined, taught and respected in the home and in the church. Children are also to honor their parents, obeying them in the Lord."

¹³³ Klaus Issler, "Biblical Perspectives on Developmental Grace for Nurturing Children's Spirituality," in Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, research and Applications, senior Editor, Donald Ratcliff, (Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2004, 54-71), 54.

¹³⁴ Issler, 54-55.

occurring under the spiritual authority of their parents. The theological statement about children's complex innocence, does not connect children's spiritual status to any one else's spiritual authority, but is deliberately linked with their own increasing levels of accountability as moral and spiritual agents, which are developed under the protection of God's grace and within a nurturing Christian community. This difference in emphasis is significant for the way it links the concepts of innocence and growing accountability to acknowledging children's voice and agency in the worship and work of the church, the body of Christ on earth. It also acknowledges the reality of children who come to worship in Mennonite congregations apart from their parents' participation. Further, linking these concepts claims the relevance of this sixteenth century belief, which was crafted as a response to some of the problems of Christendom, for our present post-Christendom reality.

The Anabaptists did not develop this view, however, out of a desire to give their children voice and agency. Their foundational desire was for a church that was autonomous from the state in terms of its worship and its decisions regarding faithful discipleship, including their rejection of violence. This was only achievable in a church where membership was voluntarily based, where the human response in membership and baptism symbolized a mature commitment to follow Christ.¹³⁵ Motivated by this position, the Anabaptists developed their understanding that "all children are covered by God's grace...and that parents and the Christian community together are responsible for nurturing children toward voluntary commitments of faith and discipleship."¹³⁶

Even though this view was formulated as part of the struggle to separate church

¹³⁵ Graber Miller, 195.

¹³⁶ Graber Miller, 197.

and state, an issue that has lost most of its impact on the Mennonite denomination in North America, its implications for children's increasing levels of voice and agency are significant. When Menno Simons articulated the view "that grace covers children's sinful nature, with children taking increasing responsibility for their actual sins as they age,"¹³⁷ he laid a foundation for including children in the worship and work of the church as they mature. Graber Miller defends Menno's views on children by writing, "implicit in his writings, at least with a generous reading of his treatises, is a valuing of childhood in its own right."¹³⁸

Complex innocence, as described by Graber Miller, is also affirmed for its role in supporting the place of children in the life of the church by the Christian Feminist, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, as she lobbies for the agency and voice of children in the church:

Children have far less control over their actions than adults, and blame often lies rightfully on the parent's doorstep. But they still have some control. Children can act perversely of their own human and God-given volition. Debunking the myth of innocence in children requires gaining greater knowledge about good and evil in others, children and adults alike. Moral and religious development actually requires gaining control and discernment with age. This does not come easily or even naturally. Moreover, adults have a responsibility to curb children's harmful, aggressive, and inhumane desires – and, more difficult yet, to model love of self, neighbor, and God."¹³⁹

I am indebted to Miller-McLemore's articulation of the way childhood is shaped by the dynamic tension between innocence and sinfulness. The difficulty she

¹³⁷ Graber Miller, includes an interesting footnote: "This is similar to the view espoused by Thomas Aquinas, as Christina Traina noted in her essay in this volume." fn 43, 207.

¹³⁸ Graber Miller, 226.

¹³⁹ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood for a Christian Perspective, (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2003), 52.

acknowledges for adults, as they seek to model love of self, neighbor and God for children, affirms the need of the nurturing Christian community, not just for the sake of nurturing the church's children, but also for encouraging and supporting the children's nurturers.

c. Children contribute to the worship, the community and the mission of God's church through their age appropriate participation in the worship and work of the church.

Advocates for attending to the needs of the younger members of the church family have often challenged others by stating that children (or youth) are the future of our church. While agreeing that their nurture and training will contribute substantially to the future health and growth of the church, the statement in the proposed theology challenges the church to recognize that children (and youth) contribute substantially to the present health of the church. If one compares the church, as the family of God, to the biological family for a moment and tries to imagine proud grandparents holding their grandchild and saying, "Oh sweetie, someday, when you grow up, you are going to add so much to our family!" the poverty of not recognizing children's present contributions to the life of the church becomes obvious.

Gifts that children bring to the church are being described by current leaders in Christian education and nurture across the ecumenical spectrum. One is Sophia Cavaletti, the Roman Catholic catechetist who has nurtured and observed worshipping children from Italy, Africa, N.A., S.A., in rural, urban, middle class, working class settings for decades. Cavaletti has observed that 3-6 year old children 1) listen and respond to specific spiritual themes with passion, 2) that contemplating on these themes leads them to exhibit a profound sense of serene peace and that 3) these spiritual themes

become part of the children themselves, as if they had always known them.¹⁴⁰ She has been deeply impressed that at this age “the child is free from any preoccupations and is open to encounter with God and to the enjoyment he derives from it.”¹⁴¹ What a blessing this can offer the worship life of the church!

Jerome Berryman, a theologian/practitioner who studied with Cavaletti, and who has led similar children’s faith nurture groups in Protestant settings, challenges the church to recognize that “children are at the very center of what it takes for the church’s mission to be accomplished.” That mission, he says, is accomplished through learning from children to recognize our dependence on God and, while it may appear as weakness, such *weakness* is very strong (2.Cor.12:9) because it makes the church into a doorway into God’s realm.”¹⁴²

While these specialists recognize that children cannot reflect on beliefs or *know* God’s will in an adult sense, they affirm that children do *know* God and God’s will in age appropriate ways. If the church can learn to integrate them more fully in its worship and work, children will offer these gifts to the church, and will thereby help the church to be the church, especially as we learn with and from them.

Joyce Ann Mercer, an Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, makes us aware of the gifts children are for the church from a biblically oriented base. Mercer writes:

In Mark, God gives the gift of children so that the church will know how to live out it’s vocation as disciples. This

¹⁴⁰ Sophia Cavaletti, The Religious Potential of the Child, translated by Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter, (Chicago, IL, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992 edition), 170.

¹⁴¹ Cavaletti, 155.

¹⁴² Jerome Berryman, “Children and Mature Spirituality” 22-41, in Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, research and Applications, Donald Ratcliff, senior ed., (Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2004), 38, adds to this that “Building a child-like church, however, sounds weak and powerless, but that is just the point. It acknowledges the difficulty of the powerful being able to bless in a way that elicits mutual blessing. Such “weakness” is very strong (2.Cor.12:9) because it makes the church into a doorway into God’s realm”.

clue from scripture, then, concerns children as agents, children as participants, and children as already expressive of the purposes of God... [already] contributing to the mission and the work of the body of Christ.¹⁴³

With Mercer, this statement on the gifts of children for the church recommends that we follow Mark's example and consider the church's children as active apprentices in the actions or rituals of worship as well as in the church's actions of discipleship or lived faithfulness.¹⁴⁴

Dawn De Vries, a systematic theologian, demonstrates another way the church can learn from children. She relies on interviews with children by J Kozol¹⁴⁵ to present, not a theology of childhood, but a children's theology of Soteriology and Eschatology. Willing to learn from these interviews with children, this theologian offers her readers a "child's-eye view of salvation [that] defines wholeness as the conditions that make for human flourishing, both physical and spiritual."¹⁴⁶ When children's age appropriate contributions are interpreted by a theologian, as happened in this situation, their reflections can help the church be the church, even in complex matters, such as developing theologies of salvation and end times, which go well beyond children's cognitive abilities. At the same time, DeVries' method of using interviews with children demonstrates that inviting children to help the church be the church does not include asking them to formulate or create such theologies on their own. Another unique contribution DeVries makes to support the church's appreciation of the gifts of children is her inclusion of Schleiermacher's views that "childhood and adulthood were best

¹⁴³ Joyce Ann Mercer, Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood, (St Louis, MS, Chalice, 2005), 67.

¹⁴⁴ Mercer, 204.

¹⁴⁵ J. Kozol, Amazing Grace: the Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation (New York: Crown Books, 1995), quoted by Dawn de Vries. "Toward a theology of childhood," Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, 55.2 (2001): 161-173.

¹⁴⁶ Dawn De Vries, 169.

understood not as successive phases of human development but as distinct spiritual perspectives that could coexist in any human at the same time.” This view, that the “distinct spiritual perspectives” of childhood and adulthood can coexist in us simultaneously, helps us recognize a specific gift children bring into both the biological and the church family. When children participate with us, the perspective of the child within us is often refreshed and nourished and we get a clearer glimpse of the joy and playfulness that is part of the inbreaking kingdom of God. With DeVries, the church can learn from children that salvation is holistic and that the Eschaton will include experiencing Jesus as both healer and divine playmate.

In her theology of childhood Eleanor Koch Snyder challenges the church toward a sense of greater mutuality that would give children a greater presence and voice. She argues that “children can teach adults about how to be the church” and transmit God’s grace and judgment if adults will listen to them.¹⁴⁷ As she describes the place she desires for them at the communion table, she writes, “Perhaps this is what children can teach us; to enjoy God, to revel in the mystery of the bread and cup, to be in awe of God’s divine yet intimate presence and to willingly receive God’s unreasonable love and grace.”¹⁴⁸ To conclude this section, let us return to the proud grandparent analogy. One way in which a grandchild helps a family be family, is by basking in the love of the generations and having its needs met by the family. By receiving this outpouring of love and care, the child meets the needs of its caregivers to give care. As the child matures, it continues

¹⁴⁷ Eleanor Koch Snyder, “Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration,” Doctoral Dissertation, Toronto School of Theology, 1999, 106-107.

¹⁴⁸ “Eleanor Snyder, “Pass-over, morsel, or the real meal deal? Seeking a place at the table for the church’s children,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart and Winnipeg: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 73-83, 80.

to contribute to the health and welfare of the family in ways that are appropriate to its age and unique set of gifts. In the family of God we know as the church, children also help the church be true to its essence in many ways that parallel their role in the extended human family. Rituals, appropriate for Mennonites, which help acknowledge how the church is blessed by and blesses the contributions of children as they mature, are available in the booklet, Wrapped in God's Love.¹⁴⁹

In summary, children do help the church, the Body of Christ, in its journey of being a faithful, missional church whenever the church accepts children as part of the worshipping, learning and serving Body of Christ. The church is blessed and gifted whenever it embraces, blesses, teaches, worships *with* and learns *from* the children to whom the kingdom of God belongs.

4. Children have Needs as Well as Gifts

This chapter has presented the foundation for a theology of childhood for Mennonites to better equip that denomination to respond to the needs of childhood. The needs of the church's children are clearly an important part of that theology. Because this thesis has been deliberately building a theology of childhood, for the purpose of addressing the *unmet need* of children in Mennonite communion rituals, a separate chapter will be devoted to researching and articulating children's spiritual needs. Membership and communion have been inextricably linked for centuries, but children cannot be members in the Mennonite denomination without seriously compromising its membership beliefs. Therefore it is vital to understand these needs well before we consider changing this holy ritual which is so intertwined with our core beliefs about

¹⁴⁹ Canadian Interchurch Stewardship Committee, Wrapped in God's Love: A Milestones Ministry Resource, (Toronto, Canadian Interchurch Stewardship Committee, 2007).

membership and believers baptism. Subtopics for focusing the study of children's spiritual needs in the next chapter are:

- a. Children remain among the *least of these* whom Jesus calls us to serve.
- b. Young children, in their concrete, hide-and-seek stage of development, are nurtured by religious activities that include experiences of "here I am", "I see you" and "I see you seeing me" with the congregation and with God.
- c. Children's spiritual awareness is developmentally sensitive and needs to be cultivated by instruction, by being encouraged in wonder and contemplation of the divine, and by inclusion in the broader life and mission of the church community.

CHAPTER 4

The Faith Nurture Needs of the Church's Children

Children are spiritual beings with needs that reflect their unique place in the family of God. The church must serve them in ways that meet their spiritual and developmental needs.

A. Introduction

This chapter continues the proposed theology of childhood by researching and articulating the currently understood faith nurture needs of children within our denomination and beyond. Can these needs of children be met in a denomination that denies them membership and full communion but acknowledges their special status in God and the church's eyes? If this denomination is to continue and thrive as part of God's plan for the inbreaking Kingdom of God, the answer must be yes, so let us continue on this theological journey.

B. Faith Needs of Children

1. Children remain among the *least of these* whom Jesus calls us to serve.

Do the references from the Gospels to children as *the least of these* still apply to children in the current life of the church? It was certainly the case when the Gospels were written, and may still be the case more often than we realize. Because the attitudes that regard children as lesser parts of the family of God are rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview, it is worth summarizing at least one theologian's sketch of the complex role of children in the Jewish context of the Gospels, even though this thesis has otherwise restricted its scope of research to Anabaptist and current reflections on the role of children.

Children were among *the least of these* in Jesus' socio-religious context, even though Hebrew Scriptures described children as a blessing and precious gift from God¹⁵⁰ and male infants were ceremoniously blessed through the ritual of circumcision. Hebrew children were not romanticized, for the Old Testament and Apocryphal writings include numerous negative descriptions of children as being “ignorant, capricious, and in need of strict discipline.”¹⁵¹ They did, however, fare better than Greco-Roman infants, whose fathers could expose them to die on trash heaps if they were not desired. Gundry-Volf asserts that, in Jewish society, the value given to children arose from their role in ensuring “economic survival and well-being as heirs in whom they would live on after death” and that “childhood was viewed largely negatively as a state of immaturity to outgrow.”¹⁵² The Jesus of the Gospels acknowledges children's low status in Matthew 18:1-5, where he praises and holds up the humility of children as an example for his followers who are seeking greatness. This humility could “refer both to a condition typical of children (who, by virtue of their weakness and vulnerability are “humble”) and to a corresponding quality or frame of mind.”¹⁵³

In Mark 9:33-37, as well as the parallel passages in Matt. 18:1-5 and Luke 9:46-48, Jesus challenges his followers that “to be great in the reign of God, disciples have to love and serve children,” which is “of course, ironic, for children occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder, and caring for children was a low status activity.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ See Genesis 12:3, Genesis 24: 60, I Sam. 1, Psalm 127: 3-5.

¹⁵¹ Gundry-Volf, “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament,” *The Child in Christian Thought*, Marcia Bunge ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 29-60, 35, refers her readers to 2 Kings 2:23-24; Isa:3:4; Wisd.12:24-25; 15:14; Prov.22:15; Sir. 30:1-13.

¹⁵² Judith M. Gundry-Volf, 31.

¹⁵³ Gundry-Volf, 41.

¹⁵⁴ Gundry-Volf, 43.

The low rung children have had on the social ladder may be one of several reasons that a number of feminist theologians advocate for the place of children in society and the church. Bonnie Miller McLemore explains the phenomenon as follows: “Women may be enabled to hear children precisely because they have stood where children have stood, at the intersection of society’s contradictory outward idealization and subtle devaluation of childcare and children.”¹⁵⁵ In a similar vein, but addressing the broader Christian church, Marcia Bunge critiques the church for its lack of attention to parents in the process of faith development and for inadequate training of those who teach children in congregations.¹⁵⁶ She challenges theologians and churches to “not consider reflection on the moral and spiritual formation of children as “beneath” the[ir] work” and to become “consistent public advocates for children.”¹⁵⁷ This comment appears to echo Jesus’ challenge to his disciples to achieve greatness by serving children.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes that there is “a long Christian history that has largely stripped” children of the agency that is acknowledged when we recognize children as spiritual. “Even those classical theologians who advocate developmental understanding still pictured children as generally passive recipients of church teachings.”¹⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Berryman warns those who still “conclude that children do not experience existential questions” by saying that “this is more than an error in fact. Undervaluing the existential experience of children can be very destructive for their spiritual growth.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), Xxxi.

¹⁵⁶ Bunge, 43.

¹⁵⁷ Bunge.

¹⁵⁸ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 148.

¹⁵⁹ Berryman, 137.

These experiences and reflections are shared by some Mennonite women who advocate on behalf of children, but a denomination that bases membership on a mature covenanting response to Christian belief and practice in believer's baptism, places children at another disadvantage. In her doctoral dissertation, Koch Snyder states her disappointment with the lack of attention afforded to the *faith needs of children*, and attributes this, not to a lack of care, but to "the implications of [articulating] faith from a *believers church perspective* which assumes a voluntary, adult faith commitment to God and *believers baptism*."¹⁶⁰

How can a believers church respond to these challenges and preserve their appreciation for the significance of believers' baptism? Arthur Paul Boers, writer and professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, describes the traditionally Mennonite view that engaging in the sacraments involves commitment that is freely chosen and linked to mature commitment. He defines baptism as joining God's reign and communion as the sacrament in which believers renew the kingdom loyalties *first expressed* in believers baptism, thereby excluding children.¹⁶¹

This statement does more than define a believers church understanding of these sacraments. It also indicates the marginalized status of the child's perceived place in God's reign and the status the Mennonite church has given to its expressions of faith. A metaphor developed by Catherine Stonehouse, a Professor of Christian Discipleship in an evangelical seminary, may be helpful as Mennonites assess a more appropriate response to faith that precedes belief and baptism. Stonehouse includes children in her claim that

¹⁶⁰ Eleanor Koch Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration." Doctor of Ministry diss., (Toronto School of Theology, 1999), 39.

¹⁶¹ Arthur Paul Boers, "In search of something more: a sacramental approach to life and worship", 42-58, in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart, IN, Winnipeg, MB, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 50.

“wherever we are on the journey, God has a place for us.”¹⁶² Can her journey metaphor be used to identify and affirm the place Mennonites have for unbaptized children and youth in the church, as part of the family of God, even before they join the body of Christ? If Mennonites can agree with her that the journey with God begins well before the cognitive and social maturity develop that are a prerequisite for the confession and covenant making of believer’s baptism, a new level of respect could be accorded to the faith of children within the Believers Church tradition. Perhaps her *place on the journey* metaphor can help Mennonites nuance their description of baptism as the beginning of their participation in the body of Christ on earth.¹⁶³ When children and youth of the church, as opposed to first generation Christians, are told they must wait for adult baptism to be spiritually born, their spiritual birth is preceded by a very long pregnancy that requires appropriate acknowledgment. Furthermore, what of the increasing numbers of youth who choose not to get baptized when, or after they reach their *age of discretion*? Is it not more helpful to think of them as still being on a journey in which God and God’s church have a place for them and their questions than to consider them to be lost as self-aborted fetuses or still births? Would embracing this metaphor push the church to focus more on the grace and hospitality of God than on God’s holiness and our accountability to God and each other? Or, might such a metaphor help the church keep these foci, which Mennonite leaders consider essential for a healthy church, in a desirable dialectical tension?¹⁶⁴ Not doing so consigns children to a continued role of being among *the least*

¹⁶² Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 2005), 132.

¹⁶³ Confession of Faith, article 11, Baptism, 46, “Baptism by water is a sign that the person has repented, received forgiveness, renounced evil, died to sin, through the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Thus cleansed, believers are incorporated into Christ’s body on earth, the church.”

¹⁶⁴ At the Mennonite Church Canada National Assembly, in Edmonton, AB, July 4-7, 2006, the Faith and Life Committee of Mennonite Church Canada encouraged the denomination to “hold holiness

of these in the worship life of the church. Those who are beyond childhood, but not yet ready for baptism and full membership, are then consigned to a similar role. Even if we would consider children and youth only as the *future* of the church, not acknowledging their spiritual journey in our worship and communion indicates a disregard for Jesus' teaching about children. The *least of these*, including the children in our midst, are the ones Jesus challenges us to receive as we receive Christ. They are also the *greatest of these* from whom Jesus challenges us to learn.

2. Young children, in their concrete "hide-and-peek" stage of development, are nurtured by religious activities that include experiences of "here I am", "I see you" and "I see you seeing me" with the congregation and with God.

Jerome Berryman breaks with traditional theological language as he develops his theology of childhood, to assert that "playing hide and seek is fundamental to human nature, [and to our] relationships with God and each other."¹⁶⁵ Among developmental psychologists this fundamental activity is recognized and sometimes referred to as children develop skills such as mirroring and perspective taking. Children progress from taking their cues from the voices and expressions of those around them to recognizing both their separateness and their connection with family and community, to being able to evaluate situations from a third person's perspective.¹⁶⁶ A great variety of *hide-and-peek* activity is involved in this process of social, emotional and intellectual maturation.

While the language of hide-and-peek is not used by the Mennonite missionary theologian, C. Norman Kraus, the concept can be implied as he refers to "modern insights

and hospitality in a positive tension, much as one needs to breathe in and breathe out to stay alive," (PowerPoint presentation, July 6, 2007).

¹⁶⁵ Jerome Berryman, "Children and Mature Spirituality", in Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications, (Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2004, 22-41), 24, adds that "This has been dignified in theology by the Latin phrase *Deus Absconditus atque Praesens* (God is hidden yet also present.)"

¹⁶⁶ Laura E. Berk, Child Development, Canadian ed., (Pearson Education Canada, Inc., Toronto, ON, 2003, 406 -407 and 469-470.

from anthropology, sociology and psychology [to support the] biblical presupposition of the basic human unit as the *individual in community*.”¹⁶⁷ Kraus does this to make the point that “we become self-conscious individuals only in community relationships. Indeed we might say that personhood is the gift of the familial community.”¹⁶⁸ Within a familial community, children definitely develop their sense of being *individuals in community* through a process that involves a lot of healthy *hide-and-seek*. If we accept the assertion that *hide-and seek* is fundamental to human social behaviour, then it is reasonable to conclude that experiences of hiding, being found and being seen are essential to a child’s experience of God and the church as well. This could, therefore, be considered in planning Sunday worship, which has become the remnant of Christian communal activity in many congregations. Furthermore, if experiences of *hide-and seek* are truly fundamental to all of our lives, it could be possible to plan worship that includes the essentials of *hide-and-seek* in ways that are also appropriate for the older worshippers. While a short round of actual hide-and-seek is welcomed by the frisky four-year-olds I currently teach in my congregation and helps them to respond enthusiastically to the biblical stories with their teacher, this would not enhance intergenerational worship. , Certain elements of the game, however, can be used to respond to the worship needs of the congregation’s children. According to Berryman, using language that connects with the need to *hide-and-seek* invites the whole person to respond in a wondering, active, and creative way, even when they are no longer four and may be less eager to run and hide or seek.¹⁶⁹ The language of discovery, of being seen and found by God and the church, can

¹⁶⁷ C. Norman Kraus, The Community of the Spirit: How the Church is in the World, (Scottsdale, PA, Waterloo, ON, Herald Press, 1993), 28.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Berryman, 26.

be used in our worship services, and used with basic enough vocabulary for children to understand. Using some of the playfulness and unwritten rules of *hide-and-seek*, such as providing safe places for *playing* this game of seeking and seeing God seeing me, could enrich our times of praise and confession. Using appropriate language, balancing the durations of children's *hiding* and *finding* times, can also be planned so that worship, like the other experiences of hide and seek can "shape the way they relate to others, to nature, to the deep self and to God."¹⁷⁰

The need for and the reality of playing *hide-and-seek* continues throughout our lives. It is symbolized for our broader faith tradition in Eden, where "God was always present. Adam and Eve hid, but God found them. God sent them away, but God was still there, playing hide-and-seek, so the relationship could continue."¹⁷¹

There are many situations where children are marginalized, or *hidden*, in unhealthy ways in worship services, and that is not being recommended. For instance, when regular worship services are planned for adults only and children are sent off to separate activities, it can give the unspoken but clear message that children are not considered capable of worshiping. Joyce Anne Mercer affirms how harmful this can be when she says that, "In a society that routinely renders children invisible" worship practices that exclude children "exist in a relationship of mutual reinforcement with prevailing social practices that exclude or sequester children."¹⁷²

Even in services where children are present, because children start off much smaller than the adults with whom they worship, they all but disappear from view when seated among the pews or chairs. The danger of children hiding from the worship

¹⁷⁰ Berryman, 26.

¹⁷¹ Berryman, 39.

¹⁷² Mercer, 212.

leader's view and consciousness longer than is safe for their spiritual health is real. Even though children are not seen, worship leaders and preachers must find periodic ways of letting children know that they are included, so that their participation in worship can align with the principles of good *hide-and-seek*. When children are part of the worshipping body in the fullest worship of a communion service, but are not invited to the Lord's Table because they and their faith are too young for mature covenanting, and the congregation sings "Unless you eat of this bread, you cannot have life within you,"¹⁷³ children are hidden or marginalized in a way that is not safe. One can hope and pray that children aren't listening, but that is a poor way to plan worship.

Part of children's need to play *hide-and-seek* as I have been describing here is based in the reality that they have a real need to move and to learn through actions. The very lively four-year-olds with whom I am learning and worshipping in Sunday school this quarter rejoice in chances to hide under the table or jump up to show how much they love Jesus. While this physical friskiness wears off as we mature, we continue to be active learners throughout our lives. The spiritual development of these children is closely linked to their physical development and their friskiness is part of the way they make sense of their whole world, including the spiritual. Too often, they sense God telling them to move when the church is expecting them to sit still and listen. Marla Langelotz, a newly ordained Mennonite Pastor in a Winnipeg congregation, lobbies for including

¹⁷³ June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf and Rebecca Slough, Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching, (Scottsdale, PA, Waterloo, ON, Herald Press, 2006), 292, recommend the common communion hymn, HWB #492 "I am the Bread of life" in this new resource book for planning Mennonite worship because "this forty year old song still works exceptionally well in congregational settings. By now, many worshippers bring past experiences of singing the song to each new singing, which connects memories of communion across time." While I appreciate most of this song, I object to the communion memories we build for the children of the church when they sing with us or hear us sing the lyrics of verse 3, "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you cannot have life within you."

physical acts that include children and youth in the Lord's Supper because we, especially as children, are embodied people who "learn through what we hear, what we see, what we feel and what we do."¹⁷⁴ Using the example of learning to play basketball, she reminds her readers that "practices are like training the body to act and react well in certain circumstances [to make the point that] we are formed and shaped by what we do."¹⁷⁵

3. Children's spiritual awareness is developmentally sensitive and needs to be cultivated by instruction, by being encouraged in wonder and contemplation of the divine, and by inclusion in the life and mission of the church.

The recognition of the developmental nature of faith has a long history in the Christian tradition. It is a significant component in statements about the age of discretion, which Anabaptists and Mennonites consider a crucial level of maturity for making a membership covenant with the church through baptism. In our era, the most foundational work for describing and understanding the developmental nature of faith has been contributed by James W. Fowler.¹⁷⁶ However, because the process of analyzing faith growth is changing rapidly this study will work with his most recent revisions of the faith stage theory.¹⁷⁷ Fowler examined the dynamics of faith through the description of

¹⁷⁴ Marla Langelotz, "Are Children welcome? Children and the Lord's Supper in the Mennonite Church" and unpublished M. Div. paper for the course "Theology of the Church", Professor Gayle Gerber Koontz, AMBS, Dec 2005.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ This appreciation of Fowler's contributions is widespread. For example, Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell in Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 2005), 84, say, "James Fowler is [well known as] an American scholar who is largely responsible for opening the door to serious investigation of faith development as a critical piece of human development."

¹⁷⁷ James W. Fowler, Weaving the New Creation: Stages of faith and the Public Church, (Harper Collins, NY,NY, 1991).

faith stages that he described as “a succession of ways of constructing and interpreting our experience of self, others, and the world in light of relatedness to God.”¹⁷⁸

The first of these stage descriptions is what Fowler calls *Primal Faith*. He claims that “*Primal faith* forms before there is language. It forms in the basic rituals of care and interchange and mutuality...and lays the foundation on which later faith will build.”¹⁷⁹ In his 1991 summary of these stages, Fowler adds that “recent research offers profound new insights into the importance of pre-language experiences and relations for the roots of faith and selfhood in infancy.”¹⁸⁰

The second stage is called *Intuitive-Projective* faith. During this stage the young child “does not distinguish between fact and fantasy...Her imagination is not yet bound by reason in sorting out why things happen, yet her young mind stretches outward to find some sort of meaning.”¹⁸¹ From this early attempt to understand and articulate faith, he asserted that the primary school-aged child progressed to a stage of *Mythic-Literal* faith. “Here concrete operational thinking—the developing ability to think logically—emerges [so that the child can now] sort out the real from the make-believe, the actual from fantasy, enter into the perspectives of others... [and] become capable of capturing life and meanings in narratives and stories.”¹⁸² According to Fowler, faith development can be arrested and many Christians remain in this Mythic-Literal faith stage for much of their lives. His 1991 treatment of stages of faith included the example of a middle-aged woman’s faith to describe this stage.

¹⁷⁸ Fowler, 91.

¹⁷⁹ Fowler, 103.

¹⁸⁰ Fowler, 191.

¹⁸¹ Fowler, 104.

¹⁸² Fowler, 105.

If faith is encouraged in its maturation process, Fowler projected that progress would occur toward a stage of *Synthetic-Conventional* faith in early adolescence, a stage many theologians and church fathers have described as *the age of discernment*. As Fowler's label suggests, conventional ideas, facts, and self-concepts are analyzed and synthesized in this stage so that the individual can formulate and commit to personal faith concepts or conventions.¹⁸³ It includes a more relational dimension as well, however, for he also claimed that "at the same time we begin to construct an awareness of our *interiority* and that of others...correlate[ing] with a hunger for a personal relation to God in which we feel ourselves to be known and loved in deep and comprehensive ways."¹⁸⁴ At this stage of faith growth the individual "must form a set of beliefs, values, commitments that provide orientation and courage for living"¹⁸⁵ that respond to a hunger for adult truth and faith community involvement.

While indebted to Fowler's foundational work, his 1991 assessment of faith development defers the non-rational and more relational ways of knowing to his description of adult faith stages. However, from the ringing endorsements he provides for Miller McLemore and Mercer on the back cover of their recently released books, it is reasonable to conclude that his appreciation of children's spirituality and ways of knowing God has evolved and deepened. This theology of childhood operates from the assumption that the "hunger for a personal relation to God in which we feel ourselves to be known and loved in deep and comprehensive ways,"¹⁸⁶ which he ascribes to the Synthetic-Conventional faith stage, is possible on an experiential level without the

¹⁸³ Fowler, 107.

¹⁸⁴ Fowler, 108.

¹⁸⁵ Fowler.

¹⁸⁶ Fowler.

cognitive maturity that is needed to synthesize and formulate personal faith concepts. Put more simply, this theology of childhood claims that a child's faith can be experienced and lived without conceptualizing, before conceptualizing becomes part of the way the child makes and experiences meaning.

In his 1991 assessment of faith stages, Fowler made another significant contribution for this thesis by the way he differentiates between faith and belief. He described belief as a rational process that involves “intellectual assent to propositions”¹⁸⁷ and claimed that: “Faith is deeper than belief. We hope our beliefs are congruent with and expressive of our faith. But faith is deeper and involves unconscious motivations as well as those that we can make conscious in our belief and in our action.”¹⁸⁸ Perhaps, as Mennonites learn to differentiate between faith and belief, they will be freed to affirm the faith of children without needing to equate it with the belief that is a prerequisite for believers' baptism.

These earlier stages of faith are perhaps better described as a “*relational consciousness*—a marked perceptiveness in the child of his or her relationships with other people, God, or the self.”¹⁸⁹ This valuable definition of children's faith by the Social Scientist, Rebecca Nye, has been consistently affirmed by others who study Children's Spirituality.¹⁹⁰ I observe this shift occurring when I lead my granddaughters in

¹⁸⁷ Fowler, 100.

¹⁸⁸ Fowler.

¹⁸⁹David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, (Harper Collins, London, 1998), 114, and Chris J. Boyatzis and Babette T. Newman, “How Shall We Study Children's Spirituality?” in Donald Ratcliff, (senior ed.), *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 166- 181, 167.

¹⁹⁰ This definition emerged from a foundational qualitative study on the Spirituality of Children for the University of Nottingham. Rebecca Nye's qualitative methods, as well as her definition of spirituality, may be becoming as foundational for this new and growing field of interdisciplinary studies and reflection called Children's Spirituality, as Fowler's faith stage descriptions have been. Her research

evening prayers and ask them to find that quiet place inside where they know God is near. The four-year old marks this perception with a little twitch of her eyelids, a slight nod of her head and a willingness to tell God about the joys and sad points of her day.

Cavaletti and Berryman, who have both been intensely involved with forming faith and worshipping with young children, offer us their broad and deep understanding of faith at the Intuitive-Projective and Mythic-Literal stages. Just as their extensive experiences and reflections on worshipping with children in a contemplative, devotional setting has informed my evening prayer ritual with my granddaughters; their work has much to teach the church in its children's ministry. Their approach leads us to value a process of wondering together with young children about the mysteries of God's love and truth as revealed in selected parables, Gospel narratives, and as we introduce them to the Lord's Supper.¹⁹¹

Berryman describes this faith formative method as *Godly Play*. It "identifies, names, and values the religious language domain, and its deep wellspring of silence. It does the same for the subfunctions – liturgy, sacred story, and parable."¹⁹² By naming and valuing this domain and these subfunctions in their own language and frame of meaning, children develop a sense for the language, the organization and balance of worship and communion from an early age, long before they can talk about it.¹⁹³ This sense grows as they are instructed and guided in *Godly Play*.

interviews with children align with my own observations, made by learning from the children in my classrooms, congregation and family, rather than with the research tools of a Social Scientist.

¹⁹¹ For summative descriptions of their observations see Cavaletti, 22 and Berryman, "Mature Christianity", 26, or *Godly Play*, 158.

¹⁹² Berryman, *Godly Play*, 154.

¹⁹³ Berryman.

Similarly, Marcia Bunge recommends that we consider children as “developing beings who need instruction and guidance” as we develop a theology of childhood. Just as children need instruction in many basic physical and mental skills, she argues, “they also need to be taught what is right and just and to develop virtues and habits.”¹⁹⁴ This would include developing attitudes, habits and vocabulary for worship. Joyce Ann Mercer agrees with this approach when she stresses the importance of children’s growth as active apprentices in the worship and work of the church.¹⁹⁵

Karen Marie Yust is another supporter of this focus on the developmental nature of children’s faith. She asserts that reflecting consciously on the spiritual aspect of experience, rather than just having a spiritual experience, is a learned response, even while she describes faith as a gift we all receive from God. The reflective process that is part of relational consciousness must be nurtured to be recognized. Therefore adults have the responsibilities of providing religious vocabulary and content to help children articulate the spiritual stirring within their imaginations.”¹⁹⁶ Her writing has influenced the latest Mennonite and Church of the Brethren Sunday school curriculum significantly. While her focus on children’s need for guidance and instruction aligns closely with Mennonite confessional statements on discipleship and family,¹⁹⁷ her understanding of

¹⁹⁴ Bunge, 48.

¹⁹⁵ Mercer, Joyce Ann. Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood, (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2005), 204.

¹⁹⁶ Yust, 122-123. She also argues that Spiritual awareness “is developmentally sensitive, which means we need to tailor our expectations of children’s spiritual reflection to their age and stage of psychosocial development. 124.

¹⁹⁷ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, article 17, “Discipleship and the Christian Life” states “The experience of God through the Holy Spirit, prayer, Scripture, and the church empowers us and teaches us how to follow Christ, 65. Article 19, “Family, Singleness and Marriage” states “Children are of great importance...Children are to be loved, disciplined, taught and respected in the home and in the church,”72.

faith as gift, rather than as a call to reciprocal relationship, indicates a somewhat different theological starting point.

What is common to all these specialists in children's spirituality is their growing conviction about and sense of advocacy for children's place in the worship life of the church. The passing era of Christian education was quite good at teaching children *about* God and the Bible. Intuitive teachers who listened to and learned from children and the Holy Spirit will have balanced their teaching *about* God and the Bible with opportunities for an actual worship filled encounters *of* God. Thanks to the research and reflection of these specialists in children's spirituality, the rest of the church's leadership can now know that our children's opportunities to learn *about* God and God's Word need to be matched by experiential knowledge *of* God and *of* God's truth as they participate holistically in the worship and work of the church.

D. Conclusion

As part of the family of God, children have specific identity shaping needs that can and must be met as the church gathers for worship. We nurture and bless, hope and pray that our youth will freely choose to make life-long covenants with God and the gathered church as they reach the levels of maturity that are needed to make such decisions. If joining that church as a member is to be considered a real choice as they mature, in a church culture where members gather from scattered lives for weekly worship, children will need to be mentored, included and blessed as apprentices in the gathered worship life of the church.

CHAPTER 5

Mennonite Beliefs and Practices Regarding Communion.

A. Introduction

The focus of this thesis must now shift away from the child's faith and spirituality to a theology of communion. I agree with John Rempel, that our communion practice incarnates our theology and "reveals more of what we believe about grace, the church, and mission than any other aspect of congregational life."¹⁹⁸ I would add to his statement that our communion practice also incarnates what we believe about those who are not yet baptized. "Questions about whom to invite to the Lord's table, how to include children, and how to serve the elements are not easy to answer—they depend on what we believe about the nature of the church and our life together."¹⁹⁹ As the church's understandings of children's faith change and deepen, they are impacting its communion practices. This needs to be articulated and integrated theologically. In 2001, Eleanor Snyder, as Director of Christian Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church, challenged Mennonites to match this shift in practice by at least developing a "theology of grape and cracker."²⁰⁰ In the incarnated theology of congregational practice, and in theological reflection in some individual congregations, this has been happening, but a theology that integrates children and other unbaptized people of faith has not been articulated at a denominational level. My research of our tradition and current ecclesiology has convinced me that a differentiated inclusion of non-baptized believers is the most

¹⁹⁸ John D. Rempel, "The Lord's Supper in Mennonite Tradition." Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, Vol.2, No.1, 4-15, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "The Lord's Supper", Canadian Mennonite, June 14, 2004, vol.8, no.12, (Waterloo, Canadian Mennonite Publishing Service), 2.

²⁰⁰ Eleanor Snyder, "Passover, morsel or real meal deal? Seeking a place at the table for the church's children," in Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, vol. 2. no.1, (Elkhart, IN and Winnipeg, MB: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 73-83, 77.

appropriate communion practice for a missional believers church. I have gone beyond Snyder's challenge for a *Theology of the Grape and Cracker* and am therefore proposing a *Communion Theology for the Whole Christian Faith Journey*.

Understandings of communion, membership and baptism are inseparably intertwined. Loosening these intertwined understandings is unsettling. As quoted to introduce this thesis, Arnold Snyder contends, "If we tug at the threads of the Supper, lots of other threads come undone as well, because the whole was made up of an interlocking weave, which taken together made up the cloth, the nature, of the church as our tradition has understood it."²⁰¹ The very label for our broader family of faith, a *Believers Church*, indicates how closely the *voluntary* nature of membership is tied to the identity of these denominations.²⁰² Since children are not mature enough to make life-long, belief-based, voluntary commitments to the church, they are not baptized and not recognized as members. Therefore, they have traditionally not been invited to participate in communion. The importance of the *voluntary* nature of our mature commitments to God and God's church may be the enduring reason for linking baptism, communion and membership in our current context. According to Tom Yoder Neufeld, the Anabaptist tradition, which "was born in rebellion to the *Volkskirche* [State Church], struggles with the limitations of a micro version of a State Church as a "*Familienkirche*—a biological

²⁰¹ C. Arnold Snyder, "The Lord's Supper in the Mennonite Tradition," in *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership*, (Wpg., MB: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 79-87, 86. Ellie Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997), 130, agrees with this position when she writes "Community boundaries help to shape identity and a sense of belonging. Traditionally, the church has bounded the Lord's table with baptism, and to break apart this connection could be disastrous."

²⁰² Donald F. Durnbaugh, in "Believer's Church Perspectives on the Lord's Supper", 63-78, Dale R. Stoffer, ed. *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1997), says "The fact needs constant reiteration that the concept of the believers church is based upon the knowing decision of the uncoerced person. One reason infant baptism was discarded was that it was held to be the coercion of conscience,"⁷⁰.

family church”²⁰³ that lacks a missional focus. Gerald Gerbrandt reflects on this dynamic as follows:

One of the ironies of Mennonite history is that despite its original emphasis on a believers church, persecution, migration and historical and social circumstances resulted in some of the descendants of these same Anabaptists developing communities in which church and community were essentially one.²⁰⁴

Gerbrandt does not celebrate that “our congregations have [once more] become voluntary societies,”²⁰⁵ but does challenge the church to develop rituals that help shape an alternative Christian identity in our children to help them resist the secularization of the society we live in, to help our children continue to identify with the family of faith. He understands that the social/ecclesial tensions of once more becoming *voluntary societies* are among the driving forces behind changing communion practices.”²⁰⁶ Another driving force is our changing assessment of children’s faith. For much of Mennonite history, children were considered to be incapable of *real* or belief based faith. At the same time, children have had a special status within the Mennonite family of God, as articulated by the convictions regarding complex innocence in the previous chapters. They were embraced and nurtured as part of the faith community, even before it became a *Familienkirche*. Their special status, of being covered by the grace of God until they reach the age of discernment, which was recognized as Mennonite baptismal practice emerged, has definite implications for children’s current integration in the worship life of the church, including the celebration of communion.

²⁰³ Tom Yoder Neufeld, “The Lord’s Supper: Party or Solemn Ritual?” in *Naming the Sheep*, 71-78, 76.

²⁰⁴ Gerald Gerbrandt, “Church Membership, Circumcision, and Children,” in *Naming the Sheep*, 61-69, 66.

²⁰⁵ Gerbrandt, 67.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

The Sunday morning worship hour, in which most communion services are now being conducted, also provides the most significant experience of church community for many Mennonite congregations.²⁰⁷ This adds to the reasons why the nature of children's involvement in communion needs to be clarified. The question how God's grace applies to adolescents who have reached the age of discernment but have not been baptized; or have been baptized but struggle with faith issues and the difficult questions of post-modern skepticism, is also begging to be addressed for the health of the church. While that question takes us beyond the disciplined focus of this thesis, the issue must at least be acknowledged here. Implementation of the recommendations in this thesis may help to establish a stronger Christian identity for children as a foundation for entering the increasingly complex life and faith stages of adolescence.²⁰⁸

As in the previous two chapters on childhood, the remainder of this chapter will be structured around a proposed theology. This one acknowledges a differentiated role for unbaptized people of faith in the communion ritual. I have deliberately expanded the inclusion to go beyond children in this theology because, for differentiated inclusion to be missional, it has to address the worship needs of those who are on the faith journey between childhood and readiness for baptism. In this paper, however, the focus of my reflections will remain on children's place in believers church communion.

Each point will be reflected on in a theological dialogue with Anabaptist and

²⁰⁷ "Worship in the Missional Church.", developed by Mennonite Church Canada staff for the Transforming Congregations in Worship Seminar in Regina, March 30-April 1, 2007, begins with the statement: "Worship is the "one big thing" all people in church do together. Nothing else we undertake in the church approaches the same level of regular participation or broad involvement.

²⁰⁸ In a personal conversation with Mary Lehman Yoder, Pastor at the College Mennonite Church in Goshen Indiana, on July 28 at the 2007 Bridgefolk Convention in Elkhart, Indiana, Mary indicated that her teenage children, who participated in differentiated inclusion and a *Godly play* approach to children's worship and storytelling throughout their childhood, deeply appreciate the foundation this has given their adolescent faith.

current positions, but the sources that are consulted will be from within the believers church tradition. Just as current Mennonite approaches to children's faith grow out of their unique Reformation roots, so do Mennonite understandings and theologies of communion. By relying on the work and analysis of current church historians of the Anabaptist era, whose references have led to a few original sources, I have made some independent observations by approaching them from my role as an advocate for children in the church. As I examined these sources from our tradition in dialogue with current reflections, the great difference in contexts for faithfulness became apparent. The historic arguments about the substance of the elements and the need to fight for the separation of church and state are no longer the burning issues they were for the early Anabaptists. As we are emerging from a rational and *Familienkirche* ecclesial culture into a missional, more experiential and voluntary church culture, new front burner issues have emerged for us to address with appropriate zeal. The sixteenth century Anabaptists sought to restore biblical worship by sweeping out "ceremonial actions and many *superstitious* elements such as pictures, statues, gestures, vestments, and verbal formulations,"²⁰⁹ but we are being challenged to restore ritual actions and visual stimuli to our worship to share the Gospel holistically for people with varied learning styles. Understanding the impact of ritual and the ordinance or sacrament of communion for the processes of faith formation and missional identity are among the burning issues in our context of faithful living.

B. A Proposed Communion Theology for the Whole Christian Faith Journey

1. Jesus is the host who calls us to receive God's grace and thankfully remember Christ's life, death and resurrection at his table, but Jesus does not coerce us to come.
2. Jesus meets all who welcome him at the communion table, through the Holy Spirit,

²⁰⁹ Kreider, 65.

- wherever they are on the journey of faith; inviting, equipping and sending all to participate with their gifts in the life and mission of the family of God.
3. Jesus' broken body and shed blood are signified in the elements we receive at his table. His suffering continues in the brokenness of our lives, the brokenness of the church's unity, the lack of justice in our world and the destruction of our environment.
 4. Christ's work of reconciliation is signified by the church as we join together at his table, give thanks, and celebrate the inbreaking reign of God.
 5. Christ invites and the Holy Spirit equips believers to renew their covenants with God and the church, each time they approach his table with an open spirit. The responsibility of weighing the participants' hearts rests in God's hand.
 6. Christ invites and welcomes faith novices to participate or observe at Christ's table, as they wish, without compulsion or discouragement, as novices, receiving the blessing of God and God's people, and giving their thanks and love to God and God's church through alternative elements.²¹⁰

C. The Proposed Communion Theology in dialogue with Anabaptist and Current Mennonite Voices.

1. Jesus is the host who calls us, but will not coerce us, to receive God's grace and thankfully remember Christ's life, death and resurrection at his table.

Thankfully remembering Christ's death has been a constant theme of Anabaptist and Mennonite communion services for five hundred years. In his three point summary

²¹⁰ This can be symbolized in a number of ways that are appropriate for different ages of novices, but to maintain our identity as a *Believers* church, it is necessary to differentiate between those who are renewing their freely chosen covenant and those who have not yet made a mature covenant or may not be ready to renew it. Garry Jansen, Pastor of the Sherbrooke Mennonite Church in Vancouver, recently indicated that in his congregation, this differentiated level of receiving communion helps those who struggle with faith to progress on their spiritual journey with God and has encouraged several adults to request baptism. They pass the trays of bread and cups along the rows, but include the differentiated option of crackers in the trays for unbaptized people of faith.

of the Anabaptist understanding of the Lord's Supper, John Rempel includes this as one of their primary foci. He writes, "The Lord's Supper is, inseparably, an act or remembrance of and thanksgiving for Jesus suffering sacrifice for the world. It is a visible word by which the church "proclaims the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26)."²¹¹ The most recent *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* continues this emphasis. Article 12, paragraph 2, states:

The Lord's Supper points to Jesus Christ, whose body was given for us and whose shed blood established the new covenant. In sharing the bread and cup, each believer remembers the death of Jesus and God's act of deliverance in raising Jesus from the dead. As we relive this event with a common meal, we give thanks for all God's acts of deliverance in the past and present, for the forgiveness of sins, and for God's continuing grace in our lives.

The somber and reflective mood of this focus on remembering Christ's suffering is one reason that children's participation in communion was discouraged.²¹² This is probably not because they sheltered children from somber reflection, but rather because children, who have not yet perfected self control and obedience, could distract the adults from their own somber celebration. While this mood has dominated Mennonite communion services for centuries, it is no longer the only one associated with communion. A growing number of worship specialists are encouraging more joyful celebrations of this event. For instance, Ellie Kreider encourages her readers to follow the example of the Early Church and "embrace with unabashed joy and cleansing release...Jesus' encounter with us at his table."²¹³ She contends that "as we come to his table again and again, we learn to bring more of ourselves, to receive more of him, to

²¹¹ John D. Rempel, "Communion," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1955-9 [vols.1-4], 1990 [vol.5]), 5: 170-172, esp. 170.

²¹² Eleanor Snyder, "Passover, morsel, or the real meal deal?" 74.

²¹³ Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 22.

experience the deeply joyful solidarity with others at the Lord's table with us."²¹⁴

Whether the mood is somber or one of joy, the host of this meal is clearly the resurrected Christ.

This role of Jesus as host remains clear, even when the scriptural focus shifts from his death to his life, as is the case in a new worship resource book, where Jesus, who fed the multitude, is the host in these words of invitation for communion:

As Jesus stood before the multitude, he saw their hungry, seeking hearts. Opening his hands, Jesus gave them bread, abundant bread, more than enough to satisfy every man, woman and child. At a table with his friends Jesus shared bread—the gift of life, living bread that comes down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. If you are thirsty or hungry, come and find strength for your soul.²¹⁵

Jesus clearly remains the host of this table, but, in contrast to a somber remembrance of Jesus' salvific sacrifice, the scriptural focus and tone of the invitation encourage a response of thankful joy. Earlier personal conversations with the authors of this book, at Christian Formation events over the past few years, suggest that they may not be encouraging full participation of unbaptized children in communion with these words of invitation, even though there is a reference to a child in the invitation. It is clear, however, that they are encouraging a response of thankful joy, for they also reflect on communion participation as follows: "Christ welcomes all who are hungry and offers for our journey the sustaining grace of bread and cup. By gathering only infrequently at the Lord's Table, we deprive ourselves of much needed sustenance and also of the joy of

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough, Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching, (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2005), 275. For recommended communion songs in this liturgy that also emphasize Jesus as host who invites the hungry, see p. 278.

anticipating the eternal banquet.”²¹⁶ This statement goes beyond an attitude of joy filled thanks, to a joyful anticipation of feasting in the reign of God.

Eleanor Snyder writes, “I’d like to think it is God who invites us to commune together at God’s table. This is a banquet table at which all can feast, all who love Jesus and try to follow him...Communion symbolizes our eschatological hope.”²¹⁷

The focus on Jesus as host introduces this communion theology because of the importance of recognizing the divine initiative in communion. Perhaps doing so can help Mennonites heal from fractious historical attempts at unity and holiness.

This first statement in my proposed theology, on page 81, engages these themes by naming God’s grace, Jesus as host, remembering all Christ has done, and giving thanks. It also includes a reference to the voluntary nature of communion in a believers church by stating that Jesus does not coerce us to participate. The different voices in the dialogue, some of whom support a radically open communion invitation, the core value of *voluntarism* has emerged as being particularly significant for the cultural and ecclesial shifts of today’s Mennonite church. A radically open invitation exposes us to the risk that our children will grow into the church community without freely choosing Jesus as the center of their lives in a mature way. Keeping the first celebration of full communion linked to making a voluntary and mature decision and covenant, as demonstrated in baptism, is essential to our believers church identity.

2. Jesus meets all who welcome him at the communion table, through the Holy Spirit, wherever they are on the journey of faith; inviting, equipping and sending all to participate with their gifts in the life and mission of the family of God.

This statement progresses from the focus on Jesus as host to those whom Jesus is

²¹⁶ Alliman Yoder, 353.

²¹⁷ E. Snyder, “Passover, Morsel, or Real Meal Deal?” 80.

hosting. The Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition has often focused on the worthiness of the participants at communion and has encouraged deep soul searching and acts of reconciliation as preparation for communion. A celebratory collection of essays on the writings of Menno Simons reveals that Mennonite belief that the church, or body of Christ, consists of those who have been redeemed and purified by God's grace; who have responded to that grace in repentance and full obedience to the discipline of the congregation.²¹⁸ It also highlights a closely related belief of Menno's that the worthiness of participants and ministers as part of the *unblemished* [my italics] body of Christ is essential for communion to be an experience of the unity of the body of Christ.²¹⁹

Mennonites today respect the Anabaptist's radical approach to radical discipleship. They also, however, recognize that this focus on discipline and full obedience to the congregation has not always fostered unity or healthy congregational life. Among other things, it led to infrequent observation of communion and a heavy focus on the participants rather than on Christ.²²⁰ As Mennonites move toward more frequent celebrations of communion during Sunday morning worship, their focus is shifting to our human need for God, who graciously meets us, wherever we are on our spiritual journeys, rather than focusing on the church representing the purity of Christ's body, as our Anabaptist ancestors did. Anabaptists were certainly aware of their need for healing and God's grace, as was illustrated in discussion of their understanding of the

²¹⁸ Isaak, 67

²¹⁹ Blok, 128 Isaak, 66, Voolstra, 43.

²²⁰ John D. Rempel, ed. *Minister's Manual*, (Scottsdale, PA, Waterloo, ON, Herald Press, 1992), writes, "Unless we believe that Christ is the host, we have no adequate basis for frequent communion: the strain of having to come in a perfect commitment of faith and life every time will be too much for people; or they will trivialize the Lord's Supper and simply make it another fellowship hour... The reverence with which most traditional Mennonites come to the Lord's Supper is profound and should not be lost. At the same time, the emphasis on relationships and the later reduction of the eucharist to an act of human remembering has made the occasion burdensomely human centered." 65.

conversion process in chapter three, but their concern for obedience and discipline developed into a “burdensomely human centered”²²¹ focus for Mennonite communion.

In our current context, congregations are striving to be faithful in an increasingly fragmented and secular context. Participants are becoming more *voluntary* than they have been for centuries, and nurturing a sense of belonging to God and God’s people at all ages has become essential for our health and future as a believers church. Focusing on God’s relationship with us is freeing many to open the communion table to all who desire to participate. Claire Fisher Ewert, is one such Mennonite pastor. She serves two small congregations in rural Saskatchewan where many members have a United Church background and some are former Catholics. She has offered an open communion table for years, based on this reasoning:

Even when there is a beginning interest in things Christian, (that) God has already begun relationship with that person. We believe that the essential ingredient in receiving communion is precisely relationship with God... From our Anabaptist tradition, we learn the importance of community life. There are many in our communities who are believers but who have not chosen baptism. There are children who are learning daily about Jesus and who have varying levels of commitment to Jesus Christ. We also have teens and adults who are seeking a stronger relationship with God and with a supportive community.²²²

Since 1970, a Mennonite Pastor in Ohio and Kansas, Donald Steelberg, has offered children the opportunity to take communion with their families. He brought a resolution, which was discussed but did not come to a vote, for allowing the church’s children to commune, to the bi-national conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1971. His practice is based on convictions that include the importance of

²²¹ Rempel, *Minister’s Manual*, 65.

²²² Claire Fisher Ewert, Pastor at Fiske/Hershel Mennonite Churches, personal email, 3/20/2007, quoted with permission.

enacting biblical stories for learning how to live as followers of Christ. He bases his practice on the family tradition of the Jewish Seder, and sees it as the church's task to show our children that God does not exclude them. His other reason for choosing communion as the ritual that is most appropriate for communicating this message is that "children understand, by the importance attributed to what we do, the importance of their inclusion" or exclusion.²²³

Even the current *Minister's Manual* recognizes a place for unbaptized believers at the communion table when "the participation of unbaptized believers at communion is always preparatory, always anticipating baptism."²²⁴ If this attitude of anticipation was accepted in an extended way, access to the Table would be quite open. James Brenneman describes an alternative, more inclusive view, as he describes a postmodern phenomenon in his congregation, in Pasadena, where people are coming to faith "by first becoming part of a community of faith and only later coming to actually believe."²²⁵ He writes that this "relational inclusion harks back to a time... [when] salvation was viewed as a communal rather than an individual experience."²²⁶ He does this to offer "a truly biblical evangelical missionary understanding of Holy Communion"²²⁷ where we remember Jesus through all our senses in the tradition of the Passover meal, so that "we alongside our children... [and other seekers], experience that God is at table with us."²²⁸

Mennonite seminary professors have recently published a worship resource book

²²³ Donald Steelberg, "A Brief Argument: Children and Communion," unpublished paper presented at a Consultation on Communion at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1995.

²²⁴ Rempel, *Minister's Manual*, 67.

²²⁵ James E. Brenneman, "Missional Practice: A Pasadena Mennonite Church Story," *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation*, James Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, Charles E Van Engen, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 158-166, 158.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., 159-165.

in which the following words of welcome for all who know they are on a journey with God are included:

This is the Welcome Table of our Redeemer, and you are invited. Make no excuses, saying you cannot attend; simply come, for around this table you will find your family. Come...because you need to, to seek the courage to follow Christ...to listen, to be open to the ways the Spirit moves among you.²²⁹

The need to accept the challenges involved in following Jesus have not disappeared as Mennonites are opening access to the communion table. The Mennonite professor of worship and mission, Eleanor Kreider, reminds her readers that the eucharist was not shaped by “Jesus’ story of the master sending servants out to bring everyone from the highways and hedges to the banquet...Jesus made a great point of the inclusive invitation to all, but he also insisted that choices be made.”²³⁰

The phrase in this theological statement on communion, on page 81, that “Jesus meets all who *welcome* him” recognizes the dynamic tension in Jesus’ challenging invitation to salvation *and* discipleship. Welcoming Jesus implies accepting his challenge and responding as we are able. And, the encounter with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, equips us to grow in our ability as invited and sent disciples.

But how do we respond to the children in our midst? Because children do experience God and respond to Jesus’ invitation in age appropriate ways, and need identity shaping, tactile reminders of their place in the family of God, we must not deny them a tactile way of receiving and responding to Jesus during communion. Anecdotal accounts of their longing to participate are common. One eight-year-old girl’s longing to

²²⁹ Alliman Yoder, Kropf and Slough, 280, quoting “Words of welcome” that were sent to Mennonite churches who subscribed to the Hymnal Subscription Series in 2002. This Series is still available from Faith and Life Resources: Scottdale and Waterloo.

²³⁰ Kreider, 130.

respond to Jesus in communion is described by Gordon Zerbe when he writes that his daughter “is hooked on the Jesus Supper...she is enthralled with this communal ritual, and longs intensely to join in more fully as an expression of her devotion to Jesus and his way.”²³¹

Alliman Yoder, Kropf and Slough write that “worship...is the communion that satisfies our deepest longings. It gives us a family with whom to share the journey, and it unleashes creative energy that empowers us to join what God is doing in the world.” This is no less true for children than for the more mature members of that faith family. Surely, it can become true for Mennonite worship that combines the “service of the word” with the “service of the table” for worshipers of all ages at all stages of the journey of faith. As our worship and communion practice facilitates this meeting of Jesus with his followers, empowerment for God’s mission will take place among us. “Communion symbols point to God’s greatest expression of grace and forgiveness...We don’t need to guard the gate of grace, we need to open it for all.”²³²

3. Jesus’ broken body and shed blood are signified in the elements we receive at his table. His suffering continues in the brokenness of our lives, the brokenness of the church’s unity, the lack of justice in our world and the destruction of our environment.

The Anabaptist position on communion, or the Lord’s Supper, responded to excesses in late medieval sacramentalism, which ascribed saving power to the physical elements used in communion apart from that which they were to signify.²³³ Early Anabaptist leaders “were inspired by the evangelical critique of the sacraments, even

²³¹ Gordon Zerbe, “Children and Jesus Supper: Some anecdotal and theological reflections,” 84-94 in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart, IN, Winnipeg, MB: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 84.

²³² Lawrence Martin, Minister of Pastoral Leadership training, Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada, “Natural Altar Call,” *Canadian Mennonite*, June 14, 2004, 4.

²³³ Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition*, (Kitchener, ON: Pandora 2004), 122.

though they came to part company with the mainline reformers in their understanding of what would take the place of the sacramental view.”²³⁴ They considered the Lord’s Supper as a memorial meal, in a very similar manner to the Reformed branch of Protestantism represented by Andreas Karlstadt and Ulrich Zwingli.²³⁵ With Karlstadt and Zwingli, they understood the term “communion of the body of Christ” as the transformation of the congregation into the body of the Lord.²³⁶

John Rempel’s succinct and helpful summary of the Anabaptist understanding of the Lord’s Supper states that, for them:

The “body of Christ” signifies not only the historical person of Jesus and not only the bread and wine, but also the church. The church is the body of Christ because it is made up only of those who have personally covenanted with Christ as fellow believers in baptism. In the breaking of the bread, this reality is recreated; in it Jesus’ incarnation is prolonged through time.²³⁷

This summary is supported by other researchers who also affirm the Anabaptist view of the elements as purely symbolic reminders of Christ’s redeeming, saving work. They support this view with quotes such as the following: “It is the state of the believer’s life that determines whether the elements truly constitute the Lord’s Supper.”²³⁸ This

²³⁴ Arnold C. Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology: Abridged Student Edition, (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 147.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁷ John D. Rempel, “Communion,” The Mennonite Encyclopedia, [vol.5]:170, as quoted in Durnbaugh, 64.

²³⁸ Marjan Blok, “Discipleship in Menno Simon’s Dat Fundament”, 105-129, Gerald R. Brunk, ed. Menno Simons: A Reappraisal: Essays in honour of Irwin B. Horst on the 450th Anniversary of the Fundamentboek,” Harrisonburg, VI: Eastern Mennonite College, 1992, 114. While this quote is specific to Marjan’s work, the same point is made in this essay collection by Sjouke Voolstra, in “Themes in the Early Theology of Menno Simons,” (37-55), 43, and by Helmut Isaak, in “Menno’s Vision of the Anticipation of the Kingdom of God,”(57-82), 67. Some “spiritualist” Anabaptists, such as Melchior Hoffman and Nicolaas M. van Blesdijk in the Low Countries and Caspar von Schwenkfeld in Silesia even recommended the suspension of the Lord’s Supper because they believed the inner dimensions of the faith to be more important (Koop, 123), or, in Schwenkfeld’s case, believing “that flesh can never participate in spirit, nor

focus on the community and their response does not mean that they did not have a strong sense of Christ's body being present with them in the Lord's Supper. It is because the Anabaptists took themselves as being united, as Christ's incarnated body for their context, so seriously, that they participated in a rigorous discipline of examination and reconciliation before celebrating the Lord's Supper. They were passionate about being the body of Christ in and for the world, without spot or blemish, each time they participated in the Lord's Supper.²³⁹ This understanding developed from their interpretations of John 6 and John 13, which they used to interpret the words of institution in the Gospel of Luke and in Corinthians.

While Mennonites continue to focus on the wine or juice signifying the body and blood of Christ, and continue to see themselves as part of the "body of Christ in the world" during communion, the somber mood of Anabaptist communion is no longer the only one at communion celebrations. A special issue of the denominational paper, "Canadian Mennonite," included anecdotal surveys of communion practices across Canada, and reported that numerous congregations focus on themes that encourage a more celebratory mood, such as Advent and the gift of the Holy Spirit, during different seasons of the church year.²⁴⁰ This would be in agreement with Eleanor Kreider's recommendations to "express joy in God's salvation, in the advent of God's reign."²⁴¹ While the somber mood is lifting from Mennonite communion practice, the explicit reference to Christ's body and blood remain, even as the church begins to "joyfully

serve as a means in the work of the Spirit."(The Mennonite Encyclopedia, vol. 5, "Schwenkfeld, Caspar von," 5: 801-802, esp. 801).

²³⁹ Rempel, Stoffer, ed. The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives, 205.

²⁴⁰ Canadian Mennonite, June 14, 2004, vol.8, no.12, (Waterloo, ON, Canadian Mennonite Publishing Service) 4,5.

²⁴¹ Kreider, Communion Shapes Character, 33.

celebrates its identity and its liberation through the lifeblood of Christ poured out...[and] grow[s] in deep inner commitment to each other and to Christ.”²⁴²

The late medieval preoccupation with the nature of the elements themselves is no longer an issue in our current cultural context, with its appreciation of the place and function of symbols. A current issue, which is growing in intensity, is the awareness of the need to confess the brokenness we see in ourselves, in our societies’ lack of justice, and, more recently, in the brokenness of our environment. This makes it appropriate for us to relate those issues to Christ’s body which was broken while forgiving us. Perhaps doing so can help Mennonite communion practice recover from its tendency to focus on the human response to God’s grace at the expense of focusing on God’s saving, empowering grace or from the inward focused piety which became typical during the era of being a *Familienkirche*. Connecting a passion for justice and creation care with communion is supported by current Mennonite worship resources; of which the following comment is one example: “As worshipers open themselves to be grasped by God’s vision and God’s desires for the world, the table also becomes a place of justice. The table that feeds us so abundantly is meant to feed all God’s children, for this table is meant to transform all tables.”²⁴³ The implications of this broad statement for communion will be considered in the final chapter under recommendations for improved practice.

4. Christ’s work of reconciliation is also with us in the church as we join together at his table, give thanks, and are strengthened to participate in God’s reconciling, redeeming work in the brokenness of the church and the world.

John’ Rempel’s summary of the Anabaptist view of the Lord’s Supper also includes the statement: “in a gathering of believers who break bread in faith and love,

²⁴² Kreider, 128.

²⁴³ Alliman Yoder, 294.

there is an assured participation in Christ's saving presence."²⁴⁴ He also writes that "the nature of the human action with the sacrament, rather than the nature of the sacrament itself, stands at the center"²⁴⁵ in their writings. The human action they valued in the Lord's Supper was one of "*conformitas* with the body of Christ...[which provided] the foundation for the *nonconformitas* to the world."²⁴⁶ This indicates that the Anabaptists' tendency to focus on the faithful human response to God's grace during the Lord's Supper linked their celebration of this supper to their ecclesiology and their ethics, which contrasted the focus on God's initiative which "was the case in the Catholic Church and in the Magisterial reformation."²⁴⁷ Pilgram Marpeck stressed that the church "forms an extension of Jesus' physical humanity. This means that inner, spiritual reality continues to flow through its outward material actions—including its sacraments."²⁴⁸

The Anabaptist focus on the congregation as an incarnation of the reconciling Body of Christ in our context is still evident in this part of the proposed communion theology, as formulated on the preceding page. The ideals of radical discipleship remain evident as it calls communing Christians to participate in God's reconciling, redeeming work in contexts of brokenness. The Anabaptist's disciplining of church members through the ban and expectations of conformity, however, has been replaced by a greater tolerance for diversity and the recognition that faithfulness expresses itself in a variety of ways at the different stages of the journey of faith. A child's faith will often exhibit

²⁴⁴ John D. Rempel, "Communion," 170-172, esp. 170.

²⁴⁵ John D. Rempel, The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck and Dirk Philips, (Waterloo, ON and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press 1993), 26.

²⁴⁶ Hans Juergen Goertz, in his Foreword to Rempel's The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism, 13.

²⁴⁷ Rempel, 26.

²⁴⁸ Thomas Finger, "Eucharistic theology: Some untapped sources," 28-41, Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart and Winnipeg: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 32.

intuitive expressions of how we are loved and welcomed by God and may identify with Christ's work of reconciliation in less inhibited ways than an older believer. An adolescent may bring intense struggles with existential questions of identity to the Lord's Table while older believers may bring a broader concern for others and social issues. Whatever we bring, "when we eat and share bread and wine, we are being formed so that all our eating and relating reflect the love of Christ."²⁴⁹ This is not a magical, or instantaneous transformation, but the ritual re-enactment of Christ's work of reconciliation can and does strengthen the participants, "both as individuals and as congregations...[to] increasingly become more conformed to Jesus' own character... as we joyfully meet him at the table."²⁵⁰

Our communion practice could participate more effectively in Christ's work of reconciliation if we followed Eleanor Kreider's suggestion to include a time for hearing "one another's testimonies, however simple or mundane, of God's providential signs."²⁵¹ This would build Christian community and identity across generational lines, as would following Thomas Finger's recommendation to complement the sharing of elements "by sharing mutual commitments, concerns and Christ's peace" within a worship service.²⁵²

The actions and words we share at the communion table can clearly help us to participate in Christ's work of reconciliation within the church. While this empowers believers, it also serves as a witness of "God's ultimate mission to heal and redeem the entire cosmos... and as a colorful appetizers of the feast to come, signifying the dynamic

²⁴⁹ Alliman Yoder, 309.

²⁵⁰ Kreider, Communion Shapes Character, 27.

²⁵¹ Eleanor Kreider, "Communion as Story Time," 16-27, "in Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, vol.2. no.1, (Elkhart and Winnipeg: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 24.

²⁵² Finger, "Eucharistic theology: some untapped sources," Vision, vol.2. no.1, 28-41, 38.

connection between worship and mission.”²⁵³ A sample formulation of such reconciling words will be included in the final chapter in the recommendations for improved practice.

5. Christ invites and the Holy Spirit equips believers to renew their covenants with God and the church each time they approach his table with an open spirit. The responsibility of weighing the participants’ hearts rests in God’s hand.

Anabaptist emphases on the ethics of discipleship and on the worthiness of the participants at communion have been effectively transmitted through the centuries, but as the Mennonite tradition was impacted by the rationalism of the modern era, the spirituality that fueled the radical discipleship of the Anabaptists was largely forgotten. They did, however, rely on God’s Holy Spirit and view faith as a gift. John Rempel and Arnold Snyder are reclaiming and proclaiming the spirituality that fueled the ethics of the early Anabaptists for our post-modern era, and claim that all of the early Anabaptist leaders “understood faith primarily as a gift of the Spirit... [and that] whatever happened in the believer’s heart or in the midst of the community came from God’s initiative.”²⁵⁴

Among these early Anabaptist leaders, Pilgram Marpeck and Hubmaier articulated the greatest reliance on God’s grace within their perception of the divine challenge to be a pure church, without spot or blemish. Both wrote of the church as a place where broken people could find healing. Marpeck spoke of Christ as the *Great Physician* and of the forms of outward worship, in ceremonies and ordinances as “*the Great Physicians’ medicine* that leads to a deeper appreciation and grasp of God’s love and love for one’s neighbour.”²⁵⁵ Hubmaier spoke about Christ in similar terms, but emphasized how “Christ, the living Physician, leads us to repentance. We surrender as much as a wounded person can, and his healing gradually enables us to follow his

²⁵³ Alliman Yoder, 353.

²⁵⁴ Rempel, 201, A. Snyder, 433.

²⁵⁵ A. Snyder, 434.

teaching.”²⁵⁶ For Hubmaier this meant, that “its material form was a gift through which the Giver pledged faithfulness and love. If this material form was received with corresponding commitment, it became the seal of a covenant.”²⁵⁷

Current North American Mennonites are not effusive in writing about the role of the Holy Spirit in communion, but a greater awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit is emerging. In the Minister’s Manual, John Rempel mentions that “the recovery of an appreciation for the non rational dimensions of human experience are leading to a fuller theology and practice of communion in all churches.”²⁵⁸ This fuller theology and practice includes a greater acknowledgement that our lives of faithfulness depend on the equipping we experience through the Holy Spirit.

Depending on the work of the Holy Spirit is implied in comments such as “[i]n the Lord’s Supper a major, though largely untapped, source of spiritual nourishment already exists among us,”²⁵⁹ or in Ellie Kreider’s comment “[a]s we joyfully meet him at he table, we may find that we receive in the breaking of the bread more than we ever knew to hope for.”²⁶⁰ The Spirit’s equipping role is more clearly recognized in Kreider’s article on “Communion as Storytime,” where she promotes the sharing of personal testimonies of the Spirit’s activity and writes “It would be good to hear many voices giving thanks for the Spirit’s movement now, this week, today.”²⁶¹

A renewed reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit can only help us recover from some of the self-righteousness and arrogance that exhibited itself as we sought to

²⁵⁶ Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 2004, 114.

²⁵⁷ Finger, 190, quoting *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. and trans. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1978) 169-172.

²⁵⁸ Rempel, *Minister’s Manual*, 62.

²⁵⁹ Finger, “Eucharistic theology,” 29.

²⁶⁰ Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 27.

²⁶¹ Kreider, “Communion as Storytime,” 24.

maintain a *pure and spotless* church through church discipline. We have recognized the dangers and become shy of church discipline and are moving beyond these to new ways of learning to be accountable to each other as God's people.²⁶² This new attitude is also helping us connect with the broader Mennonite family of faith. Indonesian Mennonite, Mesach Krisetya, then president of the Mennonite World Conference wrote, "Humility comes when we realize that no one is perfect. It removes arrogance. We become less concerned about *who* is right and more concerned about *what* is right....God creates communion to overcome dependency and a sense of inferiority in the body."²⁶³ This recognition that none of us are perfect combined with an awareness of how hurtful attempts at excluding those who were not considered righteous enough were, are the considerations behind my communion statement, repeated on page 94, that "the responsibility of weighing the participants' hearts rests in God's hand." Such a statement does not eliminate the tensions of a church that seeks to live faithfully between holiness and hospitality, between individual and community discernment. By acknowledging our dependence on the Holy Spirit to free us for holiness and recognizing that God knows others' hearts better than we do, our lives as worshiping communities could be freed to be ruled by God's grace and righteousness rather than our own.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Harry Huebner, "Church Discipline: Is it still possible?" Naming the Sheep, vol.2. no.1, 89-94, 93, suggests that discipline remains important in our context but would be constructively approached by giving the *faith teaching* and *faith living* sides of discipline more attention rather than focusing our attention on problematic church practices.

²⁶³ Mesach Krisetya, "A vision of global communion," 59-67, "in Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart and Winnipeg: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 61- 62.

²⁶⁴ Rempel, "The Lord's Supper in Mennonite Tradition," makes this point as follows: "Our practice of the Lord's Supper enacts the competing claims at work in our midst—between grace and sanctity, boundary and inclusion...How we celebrate the Lord's Supper profoundly shapes and is shaped by our belief about the work of grace and the nature of the new humanity." I would add to this that our view of the new humanity includes children, just as Jesus' view did when he said "For to such as these belongs the kingdom of God.", 15.

6. Christ invites and welcomes faith novices to participate or observe at Christ's table, as they wish, without compulsion or discouragement, as novices; receiving the blessing of God and God's people, and giving their thanks and love to God and God's church through alternative elements.

Sunday school and the children's story in worship are two well accepted activities that the Mennonite Church uses to show its children that they are loved and welcomed by Jesus. It would only be consistent to also invite children to participate in that meal which remembers Jesus, who loves and welcomes them, and allow them to express their love for him in the context of the intergenerational worship that includes communion. Doing so would contradict almost two millennia of tradition even though it does not contradict Scripture. "The exclusion of children from communion is derived from strands of church tradition, not directly from Scripture... [and the] biblical tradition centering on the Last Supper,"²⁶⁵ was based on a family Seder meal in which children asked questions to prompt the retelling of the salvation story, but it does not "hold full sway in determining church practice on participation in communion."²⁶⁶ The common meals of the Early Church, in which the tradition of the Lord's Supper took root as part of the life of the church, were family meals.²⁶⁷ For a variety of reasons, the common meal approach to the Lord's table did not become normative and boundaries between baptized believers and others were soon clearly drawn. Even candidates for baptism were *dismissed* from worship "while only the baptized members continued with further prayers and the service of the eucharist."²⁶⁸ A tradition developed, which the Anabaptists reinstated and Mennonites have continued, that:

The invitation has to be clear and faithful to Jesus and

²⁶⁵ Kreider, Communion Shapes Character, 178.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

communicate some sense of crossing that frontier into the kingdom where the Lord's table stands, of crossing into protection and solidarity within God's loving community. Jesus' own invitations invariably implied challenge as well as generous welcome" and "those who had fallen into sin could be excluded from the table until proper restoration and reconciliation."²⁶⁹

It was a pleasant discovery to find that early Anabaptist leaders left us a few explicit comments about children's participation or exclusion from the Lord's Supper. The Dutch leader, "Dirk Philips, (1504-1568), argued that infants had as much right to commune at the Lord's Supper as at the other sacrament of baptism, *namely none* (my italics). He challenged Magisterial reformers that their churches were inconsistent in forbidding infants to commune but demanding they be baptized."²⁷⁰ The Swiss leader and theological giant among the Anabaptists, Balthazar Hubmaier, wrote that: "where brotherly discipline and the Christian ban are not also present, [o]ur water baptism and breaking of bread have become but empty illusions, indeed, nothing better than the futile infant baptism and *spoon-feeding of children in communion*."²⁷¹ (my italics)

These two references to children, baptism and communion, while dripping with sarcasm, demonstrate clearly that baptism and communion were considered essential signs, or ordinances, of the Anabaptist church, and needed to be treated with equal and similar reverence. Magisterial Reformers were chastised for not being consistent in their inclusion or exclusion of children in these sacraments. Interestingly, Anabaptists did not take long to adapt the sacrament, or ordinance,²⁷² of baptism by incorporating a Believers

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 174, 179.

²⁷⁰ Durnbaugh, referring to material in Cornelius J. Dyck et al., eds. The Writing of Dirk Phillips, 1504-1568, (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1992), 101, 71.

²⁷¹ Durnbaugh, quoting Hubmaier from Durnbaugh, Every Need Supplied: Mutual Aid and Christian Community in the Free Churches, 1525-1625, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1957) 36, 73.

²⁷² Because of the anti-sacramental character of the Anabaptists, the language of ordinance, (something the church does because Jesus commanded it to) rather than sacrament, was and continues to be

Church appropriate child dedication ritual into body life of the church. Pilgram Marpeck and the 1590 Simple Confession²⁷³ both refer to the practice. This important enactment of a Mennonite theology of children has reemerged in the last half of the twentieth century to become a treasured and standard practice. No water was or is currently used in child dedication services, but the service of blessing and of promising to nurture the faith of children in and by the church community is clearly articulated.²⁷⁴ The dedication ritual serves the faith nurturing functions that are also part of infant baptism.

For over four hundred and fifty years, however, we have not adapted the closely linked sacrament, or ordinance, of communion to include participatory rituals for children of the believers church community. Might the Mennonite inconsistency in not adapting this ordinance with regard to our children be linked to the historical inconsistency in this matter of denominations that practice infant baptism? Perhaps. Now that these denominations are rapidly becoming consistent by opening their communion tables to children, might Dirk Phillips accusation of inconsistency echo through the centuries to accuse the believers churches? Or would he splutter and say that's really not what he meant to say? If Mennonites believe that communion and baptism are integrally intertwined, and we do, then it is reasonable to expect an adaptation of both rituals for children, in ways that are appropriate for a believers church. The theological statement,

preferred by many Mennonites. Personally, I find the language of sacrament a more meaningful because of the way it alerts us to signs of God's activity in our worship and other responses to the divine.

²⁷³ Finger, 169 and A. Snyder, quoting from the manuscript of his translation of Simple Confession.

²⁷⁴ A common blessing which is spoken at child dedications in Mennonite Church Canada and USA congregations is as follows: "You have offered your child to the strong and tender providence of God. We rejoice with you and give thanks for the gift of your child. We promise, with humility and seriousness, to share in your child's nurture and well being. We will support, by our example and words, your efforts to provide a loving and caring home, where trust in God grows and Christ's way is chosen. Our prayers will be with you and for you. May our shared life and witness help make your task both joyful and fruitful." Hymnal Worship Book, (Elgin, IL and Newton, KS: Brethren Press and Faith and Life Press, 992), # 791.

repeated on page 97, which claims participation for faith novices with alternative elements, no matter what their chronological age, is an attempt to move toward correcting this inconsistency. The alternative nature of the elements does not need to water down the significance of the experience for faith novices; as some congregations argue.²⁷⁵ What will impact the significance of the experience will be the integrity of the ritual presentation and sense of the sacred with which these alternative elements are offered to children and others on the earlier stages of the faith journey. Alternative elements acknowledge that making a mature covenant in believers baptism is an essential step on the journey of faith. Jesus, who is the host, welcomes our age appropriate responses to his love and challenges us to age appropriate faithfulness. Jesus does not expect children and adolescents who love him to understand or take up their cross in adult ways, but does challenge and lead them in age appropriate discipleship. They have a special status of blessed inclusion until they choose a different life center in a mature manner.

D. Conclusion

Because Mennonites are being challenged to rediscover what it means to be truly *voluntary* congregations, all are invited to the communion table, but none are coerced into church membership before they choose Jesus as the center for their adult lives and make a mature commitment. Not only is our congregational life becoming more voluntary, the broader society into which we have integrated, offers us many good and tempting options for the hours when we are not at our work places. Unless we become more deliberate in resisting these temptations, participating in these many good options can reduce the time we have for building church community, and can lead to a sense of

²⁷⁵ Maurice Martin, "Communion in three Ontario churches" *Canadian Mennonite*, June 14, 2004, 14, reports that "at St. Jacob's Mennonite Church they have chosen not to offer grapes or crackers because they are not sure what it means—a watered down experience or a symbol of inclusion."

urgency in addressing questions such as: “how to incorporate ...children into the faith community, how to draw others to faith in Jesus, how to deepen church fellowship, how to relate to the weak and needy members, how to serve the crying world.”²⁷⁶ The children, the seekers, the church and the crying world we seek to serve are increasingly post-modern, and are characterized, among other things, by the desire for experiential worship and a sense of belonging. This has been deeply grasped by Saskatchewan pastor, Claire Fisher Ewert when she writes: “There are several things that we recognize as crucially important... to belong to a community, that the best way to learn and believe is to have experiences of faith in action, and not to be lectured to with theories and abstract concepts.”²⁷⁷

As we gather to worship and commune at the Lord’s Table, “as we hear the familiar story over and over again, as we share generously at the table, and as we open our hearts and minds and bodies to the many ways the Spirit moves in rituals, we will be transformed by God’s vision.”²⁷⁸ This is the hope and the freight that our current church life is placing on Sunday morning worship and communion for the Mennonite family of God. The expectations of this hour are high, perhaps too high to be realistic. Clear welcome of faith novices, as novices, in the words and actions at the Lord’s Supper, can help Mennonite worship respond to these expectations as it seeks to align with God’s activity in our current context. Perhaps a prayer, such as the following, can become part of the communion theology we incarnate when Mennonites gather around the Lord’s Table on Sunday mornings:

Jesus, our gracious, welcoming and challenging host,

²⁷⁶ Kreider, 181.

²⁷⁷ Claire Fisher Ewert, email.

²⁷⁸ Alliman Yoder, 295-296.

We come to your table to feast with you
from wherever we are on our journey of faith.

We need you.

We need your grace and Holy Spirit power
To see the Kingdom of God around and within
To follow God's way
To let your love and healing flow through us.

We love you, Jesus.

Take our love, our hopes, our questions, our faith and our beliefs
Take our lives, and feed us with foretastes
of your will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

We thank you, Jesus.

We thank you for being with us,

For feeding us

For leading us

For loving us

For forgiving us

Redeeming us and

Equipping us to share the blessings we receive at your feast.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ Elsie Rempel, 2007

CHAPTER 6

Exploring Options and Making Suggestions for Improved Practice

A. Introduction

Mennonites are participating in an era of worship renewal and transformation as their identity and purpose are refocused according to a missional vision.²⁸⁰ According to Eleanor Kreider, “Churches will be renewed when the Lord’s Supper, graced by God’s presence and Word, oriented to the living Lord and empowered by the Spirit, is fully restored to the place it had in the early centuries—as the central communal Christian act of worship.”²⁸¹ The renewal of communion practice is to “allow God to shape the character of our churches so we enter into the gift of Christian unity and go out with joy into the task of Christian mission.”²⁸² This central communal Christian act of worship has renewing potential for all who love and seek to follow Jesus, no matter what their age or membership status is. The theologies of childhood and communion that have been presented in this paper articulate a place around this Table for faith novices as well as covenanted followers of Jesus, just as there is a place for all ages around biological family tables.

The family of God is both similar and dissimilar to a biological family. These families are similar in that both are intergenerational communities that have places for people from the cradle to the grave. In the family of God we strive to align ourselves with God, who has a place for us all, wherever we are on our spiritual journeys. They are

²⁸⁰ The Statement of Identity and Purpose for Mennonite Church Canada ends with this missional statement “Gratefully responding to God’s initiatives and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves and our resources to calling, equipping and sending the church to engage the world with the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.”

²⁸¹ Eleanor Kreider, 15-16.

²⁸² Ibid.

dissimilar in that the biological family has a membership that is limited by procreation, adoption and death rates, whereas the family of God connects the *saints above* with the *saints below* and is called to keep inviting others in, at all stages of their physical and spiritual lives. The family of God's missional focus includes recognizing that God is always there ahead of us. If the family of God that is the focus of this study, the believers church, is to be missional, it must acknowledge two convictions in its communion theology, that can be in tension, namely that: 1) God is already in relationship with those who are on a journey toward making a choice about baptism and 2) Jesus' invitation to follow him is no less challenging today than it was for his first disciples. Living with this tension includes recognizing and articulating the place of unbaptized children and youth who worship with us during communion, whether or not they are part of our biological families, and holding before them the challenge to choose Jesus as the centre of their lives as they mature in wisdom and stature.

B. Can Mennonites Include Unbaptized People of Faith in Communion?

How Mennonites can include children and other unbaptized believers in this holy ritual without violating centuries of tradition, or watering down our understanding of the church as a covenanted community of Jesus' followers is the focus of this final chapter. Eleanor Snyder recommends a policy of *radical inclusiveness* as an advocate for children.²⁸³ She recommends that the church "find creative ways to teach children and parents about the practices of communion... [and] vary (your) [its] communion practices to help people of all ages experience God and each other in surprising and mysterious

²⁸³ Eleanor Snyder, "Pass-over, morsel, or the real meal deal? seeking a place at the table for the church's children." *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, vol.2.no.1, (Elkhart and Winnipeg: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 2001), 73-83, 82.

ways.”²⁸⁴ Snyder also recommends a “theology that allows for a covenantal membership assumed in the child dedication or consecration service, and an adult baptismal membership that comes with baptism.”²⁸⁵ By adding significance to the child dedication service, she seeks to make a way for the church’s children to approach the table for communion in a believers church. While there is much to commend in this position, it unfortunately excludes seekers who come to our worship from outside of the Christian community; all who have not been dedicated, consecrated or baptized. Therefore, this option remains tainted by the culture of being a *Familienkirche* and is not inclusive enough for a missional church.

When Gordon Zerbe, a theology professor at Canadian Mennonite University, considered what paths intergenerational Mennonite communion practice might take in the new millennium, he saw four options:

1. Maintain the traditional practice...of tying baptism and communion closely to formal church membership and its adult responsibilities and refrain from serving children and unbaptized youth.
2. Baptize believers and welcome them to communion at a much younger age.
3. Maintain a close link between baptism and formal, adult church membership, but associate participation in communion with active or emerging faith, even for unbaptized children and youth.
4. Let things go fuzzy: congregations would increasingly invite unbaptized children and youth to participate in communion without giving careful thought to the issues and consequences.²⁸⁶

Zerbe saw weaknesses in each of these options, as do I. Zerbe, and other

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 82

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Gordon Zerbe, “Children and the Jesus Supper: Some anecdotal and theological reflections,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, Spring 2001, vol.2, no.1, 84-94, 92-93.

Mennonite theologians, may have been limited in examining the possibilities for communion by a limited understanding of children's spiritual gifts and needs. Mennonite theologians need a theology of childhood that validates the faith which precedes belief in children. Many of them recognize the growing needs for forming Christian identity in *children* that live in our fractured social context but can not see a way forward on the communion question. As they recognize the growing levels of faith, voice and agency in children, which are compatible with our long held theology of children's complex innocence, additional options will become clear. A fifth option, that I am recommending, such as the differentiated inclusion for faith novices articulated theologically in chapter five, could lead us forward in ways that are faithful to our tradition and the current faith needs of our children and youth.

Even though Zerbe is so touched by his daughter's longing to participate that he inconspicuously shares some of his communion bread with her, so she can eat it at the margins of the event,²⁸⁷ his bottom line remains his hope and conviction that "she grow to appreciate the meaning of faithful discipleship to Jesus in the context of a believing community and a world in need."²⁸⁸ His response of sharing some of his bread with her may suggest his intuitive sense that Jesus would not turn her away. His hope and conviction about her eventual appreciation of the *meaning* of faithful discipleship are good; but his reasoning is based on a model that defines faith and belief in cognitive terms without affirming precognitive faith. Zerbe's hope and his daughter's faith and emerging belief would be nurtured well if she were invited to freely enact her child's place in the saving Gospel story of communion as a recognized part of the family of God,

²⁸⁷ Zerbe, 85.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 93.

rather than as a marginalized not-yet-member.

C. Exploring Options: Learning from other denominations' engagement with the topic of children and communion

1. A Mennonite Brethren Approach to Children and Communion

As indicated in my introduction, Mennonites are not alone in seeking new ways to include children at the Lord's Table. In the Mennonite Brethren Church of Canada, a sister denomination that aligns closely with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, a process of commissioning and then discussing biblical and developmental psychology research papers at the conference level with delegates from their congregations (pastors as well as lay members) was undertaken in the late eighties and early nineties. The decision was arrived at, democratically, at the conference level, to separate access to communion participation from baptism and membership. David Wiebe, then the Director of Christian education for the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches, promoted this separation to recognize the faith of children, to provide a meaningful level of inclusion for children and to promote a more mature age for baptism.²⁸⁹ The Mennonite Brethren denominational staff responded to this denominational decision by producing a matrix of congregational resources on the topic of children and communion. Families and congregations were thereby provided with resources that include a four session curriculum "First Steps for Kids: Communion,"²⁹⁰ a commentary on their Confession of Faith,²⁹¹ and a pamphlet for parents²⁹² that recommend an increasingly open communion table. With this material, parents are equipped and charged to help their children decide

²⁸⁹ David Wiebe, "Toward a Theology of Children," *Direction: Toward a Theology of Children*, Spring 1993, vol.22, no.1, 33-50, 9,11,13,19-21, accessed on <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?785>.

²⁹⁰ Lorraine Dyck, *First Steps for Kids* (Winnipeg: Kindred), 1995.

²⁹¹ Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, "Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application," (Winnipeg, Kindred), 2000.

²⁹² John Neufeld, "Children and Communion," (Winnipeg: Kindred), 2002.

when they understand enough to participate meaningfully in communion. This approach, I assert, undercuts the belief in the congregation as the discerning body, excludes children who are there without their parents, and resorts to a cognitive criteria for including children who are cognitively immature. Reflections on a decade of discerning and responding to this issue as a denomination are the subject of the essay “A Little Child Shall lead Them;”²⁹³ an essay that actively promotes the new position and the supportive resources the Mennonite Brethren have developed for this purpose. In it, pastors, parents and Sunday School teachers are encouraged to use these denominational resources to help children understand communion and decide when they are ready to participate. Informal research indicates that this shift in communion practice has become quite widespread. A 2002 essay on baptism, in the same Mennonite Brethren journal, supports the increasing trend toward baptizing children under eleven years of age to “acknowledge and honor the early faith experiences of children”²⁹⁴ and to take advantage of the faith formative aspects of this enacted ritual. This could indicate that separating access to communion participation from baptism and membership rather than separating faith from later belief did not have the desired effect within this believers church denomination. Must the inclusion of unbaptized children in communion lead to a lowering of the age of baptismal candidates? Perhaps not, for in Donald Steelberg’s Mennonite Church pastorates, the baptismal age remained in the upper teens even after decades of including unbaptized children in communion.²⁹⁵ The shift in practice with regard to the baptismal ritual in the Mennonite Brethren denomination may therefore reflect a broader trend in the

²⁹³ Sharon Johnson, “A Little Child Shall Lead Them,” *Direction Journal*, Fall 2002, vol.31, no.2., 168-75, available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1262> .

²⁹⁴ Laura Kalmar, “Children and Baptism in the Mennonite Brethren Church,” *Direction*, Fall 2002, vol.31, no.2, 148-58, 13,9, available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1260>.

²⁹⁵ Personal telephone communication with Donald Steelberg, April 18, 2007.

evangelical movement, with which they are closely aligned, which cannot be addressed in this paper. The shift in baptismal practice does, however, invite reflection. What is clearer is that David Wiebe's study paper, which examined faith stages and children's spiritual and ethical capabilities,²⁹⁶ and the denominational delegates' decision to separate communion and baptism, were the initiating events that opened the communion table for unbaptized children of the church. This process of study, democratic deliberation and decision making which leads to the development of resources is to be commended and sets an appropriate example for other believers churches.

2. A Lutheran Approach to Children and Communion

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, (ELCIC), also developed an extensive set of congregational resources that respond to its 1991 "Statement on Sacramental Practices," including the congregational resource for teaching and implementing children's involvement in Holy Communion, God's Children: Worship Resources for All Ages.²⁹⁷ This was supported by the family resource Come, For All Is Now Ready.²⁹⁸ An array of articles and worship resources on their denominational website²⁹⁹ further encourage the integration of children in the liturgy and broader worship life of the church.

The Lutheran approach includes an emphasis for helping children understand the *doctrines* surrounding communion as much as they are able by distilling the essence of

²⁹⁶ David Wiebe, "Toward a Theology of Children," Direction: Toward a Theology of Children, Spring 1993, vol.22, no.1, 33-50, 4-8, available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?785>

²⁹⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Working Group for Worship, God's Children: Worship Resources for All Ages (New Hamburg, ON: Trinity Lutheran Church), 1990-1999.

²⁹⁸ Marty Tuer and Fred Ludolph, illustrated by Christine Selbstaedt, Come, For All Is Now Ready, (Winnipeg: ELCIC), 1994.

²⁹⁹ <http://www.worship.ca/>, includes links to resources for assisting the integration of children in the whole worship life of the church such as the following, <http://www.theologic.com/oflweb/inchurch/childlit.htm> , <http://www.stedwards.org/ChildrenWorship.htm>

these doctrines into concrete examples to which children can relate. This is reflected in the example of Pastor George Johnson, who serves St. Paul's Lutheran in River Hills, where we worship when we're at our cottage, and who graciously shared his personal outline for introducing communion participation for children in his rural congregation during Lent of 2007.³⁰⁰ Each of his weekly children's sermons illustrates a point of Lutheran communion theology. Informal conversation with denominational staff in the ECLIC offices indicated that implementation on a broad level has been slower than hoped for. The fact that Pastor Johnson was just introducing this in his rural congregation sixteen years after the policy was approved supports this informal assessment. Might the doctrinal approach they took, which relies on cognitive belief, rather than affirming and working with pre-rational intuitive faith, or, of working with the head rather than the heart of the child, be one of the reasons for the slow shift in practice?

As Mennonites, with our strongly cognitive approach to faith, move toward a communion theology that supports the differentiated inclusion of children and other faith novices at communion, a parallel series of children's times on the points of our

³⁰⁰ Rev. George Johnson, email to author, April 20, 2007.

What I did was a series of children's messages using cookies as a prop.

Message 1 was about remembering. Cookies remind me of eating after school - communion reminds us of Jesus last meal with his disciples; so we remember.

Message 2 was about eating together. We eat with those we accept. Only those people are invited to the table - communion helps us remember that we are all accepted by Jesus who invites us to His table. We are a family in him.

Message 3 was about the words "for you". "This cookie is for you" - communion is Jesus' gift "for you" just as He says.

Message 4 was about forgiveness. Offering food is a concrete sign that we have forgiven someone (acceptance again) - Jesus feeding us in communion is a concrete sign that we are forgiven.

Message 5 was about a foretaste of things to come. Just as we can eat and remember cookies we ate before we can eat and think ahead (look forward to) - communion helps us look forward to the meal we will share with Jesus in heaven.

Message 6 was about what we receive. This one is a stretch with the cookies. It comes off in this way.

When we receive the cookies the person who we remember is there with us - in communion Jesus promised to give himself to us; therefore we really receive Jesus in His gift of Communion.

Message 7 was a review. I tried to use the cookies to help the children remember all the lessons of the cookies. Pastor George

communion theology might also be helpful. If we do so, however, it will be important to validate and work with the dynamics of intuitive faith. For example, we could follow the proposed theology of communion and build the blessings and teachings of communion from week to week, or from one communion service to the next. Such a series could begin with a prayer of thanks for being invited to our Lord's feast to correspond to point one in my proposed theology of communion. Then, it could progress to a mini drama on what it is like when Jesus meets us to correspond to point two. The third children's time could progress to thanking Jesus for his sacrifice and ask him to help us share his saving love in the places of hurt in our world. The fourth ritual could be on reconciliation, and work with a story about a family that has a fight, is sorry and, with Jesus' help, makes a new loving start. This could be followed by a blessing which focuses on how God wants to strengthen and help us be fair and loving, and could culminate in a ritual that would illustrate and bless all the different stages of the faith journey on which God accompanies and leads us.

3. A United Church Approach to Children and Communion

The earliest resources that the United Church of Canada used to promote the practice of inclusive communion that I found in my research came from their broader connections with the National and World Council of Churches. A fairly early Presbyterian resource, A Guide for Parents,³⁰¹ is one of the resources they accessed for practitioners who wished to implement an inclusive practice. The UCC also benefited from and built on earlier ecumenical work of a theoretical and theological nature on this topic, including foundational studies like Jesus and the Children and ...and Do Not

³⁰¹ Thomas G. Long, A Guide for Parents: God's Family at the Table, Atlanta GA, General Assembly Mission Board, PCUSA, 1981.

Hinder Them.³⁰²

A report the United Church of Canada produced for its General Council in 1986, A Place for You³⁰³ lobbied for a broad inclusiveness of children in all aspects of church life, even recommending their involvement in decision-making. In 1997 the United Church published a congregational resource called “Honouring a place for all.”³⁰⁴ In 2006 they published a new curriculum, In the Name of Love,³⁰⁵ which includes an intergenerational event on communion, six sessions for children and a teaching communion. Does this latest curriculum reflect the ongoing need to revise and develop new curriculum, or is it an indication that teaching in this area is still needed to support the process toward full inclusion of children? According to Professor Louise Graves, a United Church Pastor, “It [full communion for children] is common practice now in the United Church, even though some voices of concern are still occasionally raised.”³⁰⁶ In a worship service I attended at the Charleswood United Church in April, 2007, full communion for children was certainly the case, and I was pleased to observe how naturally a child, holding a stuffed toy under one arm, helped serve bread at one of several communion stations, with the assistance of a mature woman who served the juice beside her.

Their newest communion curriculum, In the Name of Love, is exemplary in many

³⁰² Hans Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children. Biblical resources for Study and Preaching*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 1979, and Mueller-Fahrenholz, ed., ...and Do Not Hinder Them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist. (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 1982.

³⁰³ United Church of Canada, Division of Mission in Canada, A Place for You: The integration of Children in the Life of the Church (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1986), 29.

³⁰⁴ The website description of this resource says: “This congregational resource with vision, strategies and resources to live out a more inclusive ministry for all ages is available free to U.C. congregations upon request.”

³⁰⁵ Beth Benjamin-Cameron, In the Name of Love: A Communion Resource for Congregations, (Toronto, United Church of Canada), 2006.

³⁰⁶ Louise Graves, Personal email, June 6, 2007.

ways. It includes an excellent outline for a church retreat for families with children who are getting ready to participate in communion. The retreat activities stimulate all five senses, include the whole family in baking bread and decorating communion goblets, in thinking and talking about communion. The retreat day culminates in a love feast, which is followed by their participation in congregational communion in the next Sunday morning worship service. Further, the curriculum encourages pastors to invite the children to examine and explore the meaning of the vessels and cloths used in communion with him or her outside of the worship context. In the whole curriculum, worship and learning, head and heart, are blended in an integrated and inspiring manner. I was somewhat concerned, however, that the biblical words of institution for communion, referring to the body and blood of Christ which was broken and shed for us, only appeared in one handout page for parents to use in discussion with their children³⁰⁷ and were not included as the words of institution or in any of the litanies in the sample Service of the Table.³⁰⁸ In my opinion, this challenging, but essential, aspect of communion would be better addressed by the trained pastor with the family in the context of the retreat and bread baking day in the church.

The other concern I have about these materials as a member of an increasingly missional believers church is that there is no clear way for community children, who come to church without their parents, to engage in this marvelous initiation process. Further, for those children who have been baptized as infants, I missed the sense of moving toward a rite of passage that could mark their mature decision and response to the Holy Spirit's nudging to an adult life of committed discipleship. On the other hand, for

³⁰⁷ Benjamin-Cameron, 18.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

those children who have not been baptized, and this is a matter of considerable choice in the United Church, baptism is separated from communion in a way that could separate expectations of discipleship from membership.

4. Comparing the Process in these Denominations

While each of these denominations has proceeded somewhat differently, it is clear that each one engaged in a process of discernment that included leadership, pastors and laity. In each denomination, study papers were published, and this was followed by the development of denominational worship and teaching resources. Attention was given in all three denominations to help parents prepare children for participation in communion. Broad implementation in congregations was gradual in each case. The Lutheran documents maintained the strongest link between baptism and communion, whereas the Mennonite Brethren approach deliberately separated the invitation to communion from baptism and church membership. The United Church is unique in that they extended the broadest welcome. Each denomination recognized the formative aspect of participating in the ritual.

Resources from these denominations naturally reflect their own theology of communion, but their process and the pedagogical strategies that were employed can provide a helpful guide for Mennonite Church Canada and USA as they move in the direction of articulating and agreeing on the place of children in Mennonite communion. Theologically and pedagogically appropriate resources will be needed for pastors, educators, parents and children to help children find and freely take their appropriate and welcome place at Mennonite communion tables, and these resources provide helpful guidelines and examples of what can be done.

D. Charting a Mennonite Church Path Forward regarding Children and Communion

In the introduction to this thesis, John Rempel's description of conservative communion practice as *incarnational theology*³⁰⁹ serves to highlight the role of ritual practice in maintaining a theology that may not have been sufficiently reflected on or articulated for much of Mennonite church history. The current, less conservative, *incarnational theology* of communion suggests that a shifting communion practice is leading the way to deeper reflection and theologizing on this important topic. The theologies that have been articulated in this thesis can lead the church to improved practice that keeps in healthy dialectical tension Jesus' open invitation and his challenge to radical discipleship.

1. The Faith Novice Approach of Differentiated Inclusion

The faith novice approach has been articulated in the previous chapter's communion theology. At this point an argument for its appropriateness for the Mennonite church will proceed in point form.

- a. A differentiated inclusion in the Service of the Word, rather than in the Service of the Table, is evident in each of the denominations that have been examined, including our own, in the activity suggestions that are recommended to help active young bodies participate appropriately during the sermon, songs and prayers. What we need, as a believers church, is a similar examination to help children be blessed by a differentiated inclusion in our Service of the Table.
- b. Differentiated participation of baptized believers and faith novices includes all who are on the journey toward accepting Jesus' challenge to follow him and take up

³⁰⁹ Rempel, "The Lord's Supper in Mennonite Tradition." Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, Vol.2, No. 1, 4-15, 4.

- membership in his body here on earth thereby affirming our missional belief that God is always there ahead of us.
- c. A position of differentiated participation parallels the early church's differentiated participation in the service of the Word, but not of the Table.
 - d. It parallels the way believer's churches have instituted a significant ritual to mark the dedication of infants which is similar, but significantly different from child baptism.
 - e. Differentiated inclusion embodies Jesus' words of welcome with the significant actions and sensory stimuli that are the dominant ways that younger children learn.
 - f. It recognizes that wherever we are on our journey, God and the church have a place for us, thereby reflecting the all embracing, gracious welcome of our Lord.
 - g. Differentiated inclusion respects the need for conversion which equips us to make the adult decision to choose Christ and Christ's church, rather than self or some other value system, as the center of our lives.
 - h. Differentiated inclusion of faith novices honours the tradition, since the Didache, of maintaining the tie between baptism, communion and membership.
 - i. It honours current understandings that the 'dance with God begins in the mists of time.' It recognizes that children grow in voice, agency and responsibility for sinful choices that confront them from within and without as they mature. Children are on the journey of faith, yes, and their development in faith and belief is in a dialectical dance with their need for conversion and repeated confession and submission to God as they grow into Christ within the community of saints.
2. Adapting Mennonite Worship and Communion Practices

Eleanor Kreider recommends “the eucharist as a meal and as a storytelling event in which Jesus is remembered [as a] most flexible and accessible form [because] the focus is on Jesus, [with] his fascinating acting and grace-filled presence.”³¹⁰ She assures her readers that, “If we are willing prayerfully to risk evaluating and reshaping our Eucharistic worship, we will find the Spirit in the middle of it, showing us the way.”³¹¹ She also acknowledges that this way forward “especially in its context of a real meal, knows no generational boundaries for participation, access, and comprehension.”³¹²

a. Changing Mennonite Communion Practices

Many Mennonite congregations are seeking and finding that way forward, and are finding ways of inviting the church’s children to *eat with the grown-ups* at this special meal where Jesus is the host. First United Mennonite Church in Vancouver includes “children and those who are not baptized by using grapes. It is a way of acknowledging that everyone is on a journey of learning to know Jesus more.”³¹³ The pastor at the Lethbridge Mennonite Church teaches about pretzels as signs of love, blessing and prayer in the children’s story and offers children pretzels and a blessing, if the children indicate their wish for one by crossing their arms like a pretzel as the deacons distribute the elements to the congregation.³¹⁴ At Grace Mennonite in Regina, “Grapes and fish shaped-crackers are given to those children who anticipate making an adult decision for baptism in the future.” In Ontario, at St. Jacob’s Mennonite Church, they have chosen not to offer grapes or crackers because they are not sure what it means—a watered down

³¹⁰ Eleanor Kreider, Communion Shapes Character, (Scottsdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997), 182.

³¹¹ Ibid

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Angelika Dawson, “Communion meals in British Colombia”, Canadian Mennonite, June 14, 2004, 12.

³¹⁴ Ruth Preston Schilk, Pastor, Lethbridge Mennonite Church, February 19, 2007, personal email.

experience or a symbol of inclusion?...[Instead,] children are invited to stand alongside the adults and receive a verbal blessing or a symbol tying into the scriptural emphasis of the service.”³¹⁵ One Manitoba church, Grace Mennonite in Steinbach, “offer[s] an open invitation and encourage[s] families with children to sit together. This gives them an opportunity to decide amongst themselves how to respond.”³¹⁶ At the 2006 Mennonite Church Canada national assembly, children received bread as a sign of Jesus’ hospitality, were blessed by the denominational minister and asked to serve by distributing baskets of communion bread and grapes to the tables of delegates, visitors and their children.³¹⁷ This approach to communion was well received and blessed all ages of worshipers.

The communion ritual I recommend would verbally recognize that God has a place for us on all stages of the journey of faith, would invite faith novices of all ages to participate by receiving alternative elements of grapes and crackers to signify their reception of God’s gracious, saving gifts and to signify their response of intuitive love, of honest questions or of growing levels of commitment and understanding. It would invite baptized believers to receive those same gracious gifts, as signified by the bread and juice/wine, but it would also challenge them to renew their covenants with God and the church to a life of faithful, costly discipleship. An invitation to the table could be given as follows:

“On the night Jesus died.....”

Dear children of God, our dance with God begins
in the mists of time.

³¹⁵ Maurice Martin, “Communion in three Ontario churches” Canadian Mennonite, June 14, 2004, 14.

³¹⁶ David Bergen, pastor, being quoted by Evelyn Rempel Petkau, “Communion at Grace reflects shifting practices,” Canadian Mennonite, June 14, 2004, 13.

³¹⁷ The children’s worship text from this event, developed by Elsie Rempel, in consultation with the worship planners of the 2006 Assembly, is included, as Attachment 1, to this chapter.

God loves us and has a place for us, wherever we are on the journey of faith.

Jesus still welcomes and blesses children.

Jesus still welcomes and engages those with honest questions.

Jesus still challenges and equips us to take up our crosses and follow him with joy.

So come to the table that has been prepared.

Come with your love, questions, and commitment.

All who are on the journey of faith,

Still growing toward the day of your baptism, come and receive the blessings of our Lord's table.

Know God loves you, welcomes your love, and is with you as you eat the pretzel and savour the grape.

Know that this church, a part of the body of Christ welcomes you, loves you and needs you.

All who have entered the covenant of baptism,

who have freely chosen Jesus and his church as the center of their lives, come, remember and renew that covenant.

Eat the bread and drink the wine of the new covenant,

Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the many signs of the kingdom of God among us, and to lead you into ever greater participation in that kingdom.

Remember, renew and be renewed.

Let us all partake in this feast with thankful hearts.

b) Adapting the Worship Context of Communion

Kreider promotes worship and communion that crosses barriers of age and special interests when she writes, "Even if we have special-interest worship services for various groupings within a church, there can be Eucharistic worship which crosses all the groupings."³¹⁸ This thesis has argued that a basic need of all groupings is for the dynamics of *hide and seek* to be incorporated into orderly intergenerational worship. For most adults these needs can be met on the psychological and spiritual level, but for younger children, these needs still need to be met physically. Berryman's model for faith

³¹⁸ Kreider, Communion Shapes Character, 182.

formation, or children's worship, called *Godly Play*, models "the art of *how to speak Christian* in a way that invites children to create meaning about the absence and presence of God while it is being learned in the safety and intimacy of play."³¹⁹ While Berryman recommends *Godly Play* for an age segregated activity, aspects of this approach, such as its playful wondering and the option to draw a reflective response, can be used in and after the children's story time, as children emerge from their hidden places among the pews to gather in full view of the congregation.

(1) Gathering

"The Holy Spirit gathers the congregation for worship, but the first stage in the action of gathering draws us into awareness that we are worshippers in a *congregation*,"³²⁰ an intergenerational, committed grouping of God's people. Gathering time is filled with imperatives of welcome, of invitation to worship and imperatives that invoke God's presence, making it an excellent time for acknowledging all ages of worshippers. In worship services where it is common to spend time greeting each other during the gathering time rather than passing the peace to each other later in the service, the opportunity is there to bend down, smile, catch the eye and perhaps the hand of the younger worshippers and thereby let them know that the older worshippers value them and are cheered by their participation in the congregation. It is a way for children to know that they are *found*. Gathering is also a time where simple memorized responses, for which one does not need to be a reader, can be incorporated in ways that enrich worship for all ages. If children are memorizing a quarterly scripture passage, as is recommended in the new Mennonite and Brethren Sunday School curriculum, this might be an

³¹⁹ Berryman, 26.

³²⁰ Alliman Yoder, 88.

appropriate time for the congregation to be blessed by their recitation and signing of the text.³²¹ This is also a time of singing and special music in which budding musicians could offer their gifts, especially if they are appropriately paired and supported by more mature musicians. These are opportunities to help children know they are *seen* by God and the congregation. If congregational songs are picked and led so that all God's children are encouraged to participate in the opening songs of praise, the stage can be effectively set for intergenerational worship. On the other hand, if the opening songs of a worship service are difficult to sing, the message can easily be picked up that only those who can sing difficult music are being invited to worship, and alternative activities are quickly resorted to by those whose participation has not been *gathered*.

(2) Hearing the Word

During that portion of the Worship service where the focus is on hearing the Word, the theme of children's story can be intentionally aligned with the scriptural focus of the morning and appropriately interpreted and presented for the younger worshipers. The children's time provides an opportunity to welcome the children onto the symbolic lap of the church for a time of child-appropriate worship for a time of being found by God and the church. They can be made aware of the hidden yet present lap of Jesus, onto which they are welcomed for the story and where they are blessed, before they hide again, perhaps to draw a picture about the story. Children can see with their eyes and their hearts as they are shown the location in the Bible the idea for the story comes from. The specific *children's canon* as described by Sophia Cavaletti can be included as

³²¹ The *Gather'Round: hearing and sharing God's good news* curriculum includes clear posters to guide participants in learning to sign the memory text using American Sign Language to deepen the learning experience by embodying the Scripture text and to communicate with a broader range of God's children.

appropriate.³²² During Advent a focus on Jesus, the Light of the World would be appropriate. On communion Sundays during Lent and Easter week, this could include a focus on Jesus as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name and lays down his life for his sheep, as demonstrated in the appendix. During an Easter or thanksgiving service a children's procession, with a lighted Christ candle or with gifts for the thanksgiving table, could be included to enact the proclamation and enrich the celebration for all worshipers. In a Pentecost service that includes communion, the children's time could focus on the Parable of the mustard seed as a metaphor of the growth of the Kingdom of God among us. Children could readily identify with the birds that can hide and nest in its branches as they return to their parents and their hidden spots among the pews, only to re-emerge a little later and bring their offerings forward, pass the peace, or serve the congregation with specific gifts of music or scripture reading, recitation, or signing. Alternatively, a Pentecost service could focus on the story of the first Christian Pentecost with the symbolism of the pretzel, as demonstrated in the appendix, and give children the chance to be known by giving and receiving a hug from God's Holy Spirit.

If a congregation celebrates communion at the beginning of the school year, a second focus on Jesus as the Shepherd, who knows us by name, leads us to new green pastures, and protects us from lurking dangers could powerfully identify and minister to the anxieties that many children and youth face as they enter a new year of school or university studies.

Children can be *found*, that is, they can be acknowledged, included, identified,

³²² Sophia Cavaletti, The Religious Potential of the Child, translated by Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter, (Chicago, IL, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992 edition), 90,8,116,172.

and mirrored in the prayers of the church as some of their concerns are included. If the congregation regularly recites the Lord's Prayer together, children could be *seen* by leading the congregation in signing this prayer so that its speaking is embodied and communicates with more of God's children.

(3) Responding to God's Word:

Active offerings help the church grow in stewardship and mission. In my home congregation, Charleswood Mennonite Church, in Winnipeg, a senior craftsman built a lovely collection box to receive the children's offering money. In many Mennonite Church USA congregations, a *mission globe* is used for the same purpose. As children come forward to give their offerings, while the adults wait for the basket to come by and receive theirs, children's bodies get a much needed chance to move after being relatively still during the sermon time. As they move, they listen to announcements about where their offering money will go and whom it will help and also learn to be joyful givers and to identify with the broader work of the church.

A wonderful way of responding to God's word is to approach the Lord's Table. On the many Sunday mornings when Mennonites do not yet include a service of the Table as part of their worship service, however, other words and rituals of response are possible and recommended. A sermon on Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6: 1-8) recently included this invitation to respond:

If you want to know what to do with your life acknowledge
 God's holiness and your own humanness accept God's
 mercy and forgiveness, listen for God's call in your life.
 See, be sanctified, serve...
 But because this is the real world, I also add struggle, stand
 and wait. Because all of us are at different points in life,
 we're at various stages of seeing, being sanctified, serving,
 struggling, standing or waiting. But wherever we are in our

lives, we can all say, “Here we are, Lord, we need your mercy—to see, to be forgiven, to serve, to struggle, and even simply to wait.”³²³

These words were followed by a ritual act of commitment in which all worshippers were invited to place a pin on a regional map to mark their daily place of responding to God’s call. For this activity to include young children, they would need an adult’s help to find and mark the place where they dwell in and share God’s love. Such an enactment of our response to God’s call can engage all ages of worshipers and affirms Stonehouse’s conviction that “wherever we are on the journey, God has a place for us.”³²⁴

It is one way a missional church, which seeks to “engage the world with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ,”³²⁵ equips its worshipers so it can send them into that world, whatever their age or wherever they are on their journey with God.

(4) Benediction and Sending

My fondest memories of worship during my childhood are connected to the benediction when the senior pastor would raise his arms wide in a blessing and speak the Aaronic blessing in German. This was followed by another benediction which was sung back to him by the congregation. The blessing I felt in this ritualized, predictable benediction was strong and profound. Knowing that I would finally be able to play and speak again, after this reciprocal benediction was enacted, probably increased its efficacy. Since then, I have come to appreciate the reason for and the power of good and appropriate words of sending as well as blessing, but consider it a loss when a service ends without this gift of articulating God’s blessing. This unconditional gift of blessing

³²³ April Yamasaki, Pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, BC, concluded her Feb. 4, 2007, sermon with this invitation.

³²⁴ Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, and Linda Cannell, Children Matter: Celebrating their Place in the Church, Family and Community, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 2005) 132.

³²⁵ MC Canada Statement of Identity and Purpose.

connects all worshipers, wherever we are on our journeys of life and faith, because blessing emerges from God's graciousness. Alliman Yoder, Kropf and Slough comment on the priestly blessing with outstretched arms as follows, "But we who are of the priesthood of believers all have the authority to bless one another. We bless the world through our service and acts of compassion."³²⁶ Although I agree that we all have authority to bless each other, and am deeply blessed by children and others in my congregation, I am suggesting that the ritual action of a spoken blessing with outstretched arms is a significant symbol of enacted grace that helps children bring blessed closure to a time of worship, especially if they have the opportunity to respond with another blessing as I was able to in the congregational worship of my childhood.

With a growth of a missional identity in the Mennonite Church, the emphasis on concluding a worship service with words of sending, rather than benediction, is growing. The blessings we receive from God, as indicated in the blessing given to Abraham and Sarah, are given *so that* we can be a blessing to others. God's unconditional Grace includes the challenge to pass on the blessing we receive. If this understanding is reinforced with easily understood, profound words of sending that precede the benediction, the missional identity can be nurtured in all ages of worshipers, without depriving worshipers of the words of blessing. While the ways we bless others will be at least as varied and differentiated as the ways worshipers of all ages approach the Lord's Table, the knowledge and affirmation that we are all sent to extend and share the blessings we have received, at all our stages of life and faith, is an equipping force that

³²⁶ Aliman Yoder, 109.

can help us all “engage the world with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ.”³²⁷

Thesis Conclusion

The focus of the final chapter of this thesis has been on recommendations for improved practice. As indicated by the anecdote about the 2004 National Assembly communion service in the introduction to this thesis, it was the desire for improved practice that stimulated the research and reflection process that underlies the entire thesis project. It is my hope that the research and reflection as well as the practical recommendations in this thesis have provided appropriate resources for this denomination. To return to the quote that opened this thesis, “If we tug at the strands of the Lord’s Supper, lots of other threads become undone as well,”³²⁸ we have tugged at the strands of the Lord’s Supper, but have found it to be a strong and contextually adaptable cloth. The threads of membership and baptism beliefs have not become undone. In contrast, the warp and woof of this ecclesial cloth continues to provide a strong structure for this expression of God’s church. I trust that, in this process of researching, analyzing, evaluating, and making recommendations, the Holy Spirit has been “in the middle of it, showing us the way.”³²⁹

I am now confident that we can provide the children in our churches, as well as all other faith novices, concrete, ritualized, faith-expressing and faith-nurturing experiences during communion services. We can do this at the same time as we honour the Mennonite core convictions about communion, membership and baptism.

³²⁷ This is the core purpose of Mennonite Church Canada as describe in its Identity and Purpose Statement.

³²⁸ C. Arnold Snyder, “The Lord’s Supper in the Mennonite Tradition,” in Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership, (Wpg., MB: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 79-87, 86.

³²⁹ Kreider, 182.

Appendix

A. Assembly Children's Sermon for the Communion Worship. (July 2006, Edmonton, Alberta)

This morning we enjoyed a Hospitality Café in the children's assembly. Does anyone remember the long Greek word we learned for hospitality? (*Philoxenia*) We found out that hospitality is an important theme in the Bible.

What kind of things did that include?

- Welcoming strangers in your home,
- giving them food,
- a place to sleep.
- Sharing with people who were poor
- Including strangers in their religious celebrations.

We found out that Jesus taught about hospitality through his words and his actions. One of the ways Jesus taught hospitality was by sharing bread with the people who came out to learn from him. Jesus had an important helper, a boy who had learned his hospitality lesson well and shared his lunch of 5 little loaves of bread and 2 fishes.

We practiced hospitality with our words and actions in our Hospitality Café. We had juice and different kinds of Bread on our menu. Some of the older children showed us how bad it felt when the servers were rude, and how good it felt when the servers were friendly. Tonight, in this children's time, we are going to pretend that Miriam, Laura and I are Jesus, and Jesus is offering us bread with true hospitality, because that is what Jesus did, and that is what Jesus still does through us, the friends of Jesus. We will be offering you bread now and grapes at the tables a little later, just like Jesus offered his disciples grapes when they were ripe in Israel. (Pause to distribute bread at this point.)

Jesus ate a lot of bread, because he didn't have macaroni, or rice, or potatoes to fill up with. Jesus talked about bread a lot, too, because it was the most important food they had for their bodies. When Jesus said that he was the Bread of Life, he meant that he was the most important thing for feeding our spirits.

Jesus used bread to teach other things too. When he was having supper with his disciples on the night before he was arrested, he gave them special instructions to help them remember him and live by his teachings.

For 2000 years Christians have been gathering for this simple meal of bread and juice or wine to remember Jesus and to renew their promise to follow Jesus in their life, even if it means suffering like Jesus did. That is a promise that we make in our congregations when we get baptized. Tonight, we will be having that kind of a meal here at our National Assembly. We will be remembering Jesus and remembering the promises we made when we were baptized.

Because you have learned about hospitality today, because Jesus said we adults should learn to become like children, and because you are part of the family of God, we are going to ask you to help us with this meal.

We have baskets of bread and grapes for you to take to each table of adults. The grapes are there for nibbling on and remembering that Jesus loves us all. Jesus loves us enough to suffer for us. We can be reminded of how Jesus suffered when we think about how grapes are crushed to become juice.

Before you take your baskets of bread and grapes to the tables, Sven Eriksson, the Minister for our whole Canada wide church, will bless you in your ministry of taking the baskets of food to the tables.

When Jesus fed a big crowd of people he organized it by having them sit down in groups of a certain number. We have organized this by using numbers too.

Each basket has a number. So does each table. You will know where to take the bread by matching the number in your basket to the number on the table. There will be a place for you at that table. If your parents want to sit with you, we ask them to trade with some of the adults at your table.

Let's get ready for the blessing for our ministry of hospitality by the minister of our Canada wide church.

Elsie Rempel, June, 2006

B. Children's Story and Communion Ritual for Pentecost

(While baptisms also happen at other times in the church year, Pentecost is the traditional date for baptismal services in many Mennonite Congregations.)

Good morning. It's so good to see you coming forward. It's a bit like the first Pentecost, where more and more people came forward and asked to be baptized. We sometimes call that first Pentecost the birthday of the church. The church is what we call the group of people who love and follow Jesus. The church has been gathering to worship God every Sunday since that first Pentecost. And that's what we're doing here this morning. So let's get settled so we can connect with that quiet place inside of us where we know that God is near.

On that first Christian Pentecost, the followers of Jesus were praying in the Jewish temple where they worshiped. Jesus told them to wait there for a special comforting spirit that he promised to send them when he went up into heaven to be with his Father. They had waited for a long time, when they heard a sound like a strong wind. With the wind came a feeling that God was very near, and was filling them with comfort, and joy and power. This power helped the people speak so that everyone could understand them, even if they spoke a different language. It was the Holy Spirit that had come to be with

them, just like Jesus had promised. As these Jesus followers were filled with the Holy Spirit, they had something that looked like fire on top of their heads, but their hair wasn't burning. Peter got up to speak to everyone about Jesus, and told them that Jesus was God's son and their saviour. All of the people were amazed. Many people decided to join them in living and worshipping the Jesus way that day. That is the birthday of the Church.

On this day, people who have decided to join our church in living the Jesus way will be welcomed. Some of them have been Jesus followers in other churches, and Pastor (John) will welcome them for us with a handshake. You can welcome them later at the potluck. Others have just made the decision that for the rest of their grown-up lives, they want Jesus to be at the center of everything they feel and think and do. They want to become members of the church. Pastor (John) will baptize them with water and they will tell us their promise to God and God's people. Then they will get the welcome handshake and a Bible verse that is just for them.

After that we will take communion. Communion is for remembering and thanking God for being with us, for loving us, for forgiving us and showing us how to live. For those people who are baptized it is also a time of remembering and renewing the promise they made to God and the church when they were baptized. It is a special time of thanking, blessing and remembering.

I am remembering someone who loved Jesus and was baptized a long time ago. I am remembering a man who loved children and wanted them to remember how much God loved them and wanted their love. This man baked bread. So this man took strips of leftover bread dough and shaped them like praying arms. He baked them and gave them to the children in his village. This was a long time ago. In those days people prayed like this; they put each hand across their bodies to hold their other shoulder. It was like getting a hug from God and giving a hug back to God.

What does that shape look like? You are right, it looks like a pretzel. I am going to give each of you two pretzels, and when you get them, keep them until everyone has one. Then we will put our arms into a pretzel prayer position and eat the first one. While we eat we will remember how much God loves us, how much the church loves us, and thank God that the family of God is such a loving place. We will tell God about our love. Then we will get up quietly and go back to our parents. We will hold the other pretzel until the trays of communion bread come along. Then we will eat our second pretzel as our way of joining in the prayers and blessings of communion.

While I hand out these pretzels I invite you to connect with that quiet place inside of you where you know God is near again. Are you ready? (Hand out pretzels)

Let's eat together, pray together and know the blessings of God and God's church. (Observe silence and offer a short prayer of thanks. As the children return to their seats the congregations sings a simple song of confession or adoration such as *Jesus loves me*, or Sing the Journey #15 *Holy, holy, holy, my heart, my heart adores you.*")

Elsie Rempel, June, 2007

C. Children's Time: Jesus, Our Good Shepherd and Leader
(John 10:1-10)

To the Storytellers:

As you invite children forward for Children's Time, recognize and appreciate their intuitive and pre-rational faith in your heart. Trust God to work through you as you lead them in a time of reflective worship. Take time to settle. Ask them to connect with that quiet spot inside of them where they know God is near. Show them the scripture text on which the children's time is based. Make eye contact with each child during the children's time and tell or read the story from your heart.

When Jesus taught his disciples, there were lots of sheep and shepherds around. The shepherds had to take the sheep into the hills until after the crops were harvested and collected so they wouldn't eat the food in the gardens and on the fields. So the shepherds took the sheep on a really long trip into the hills and found streams for them to drink from. They found meadows with good plants for them to eat. They built and led the sheep to fenced areas called sheepfolds. Shepherds knew their sheep really well. They knew each one by name and worked hard to protect them and give them everything they needed to stay strong and healthy and safe. The sheep knew and trusted the shepherd's voice. They came when he called them. They followed him when he led them to new meadows or creeks. When a wolf or a lion came hunting for sheep, the shepherd risked his life by acting like a gate to the sheepfold. That blocked the wolf's way to the sheep. A good shepherd was a leader who was good to follow.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know how much he cared for them. Jesus wanted them to trust and follow him. Jesus wanted them to know that he was the best leader to follow. A good leader makes sure you have everything you need and that you make good decisions. So, Jesus told them he was like their shepherd. Jesus wants us to know that, too. Jesus is our good shepherd. Jesus knows us all by name and loves us enough to give his life for us. Following Jesus, our shepherd, is something like being on a long trip with him. Jesus, our leader, knows us all by name and calls to us to make sure we stay together with the other followers. Jesus cares that we get the food, the drinks, and the rests that we need. Just like a shepherd insures that the sheep are not in danger, Jesus, our leader, helps us stay safe when danger is near. Jesus gave his life for us. Jesus is the best leader to love and follow.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we love you. You are our faithful shepherd and leader. Like a good shepherd, you know us by name. You show us the way, keep us from danger, and give us what we need. Lord Jesus, thank you for loving and leading us. Amen.

Elsie Rempel. August 9, 2007

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