

Widening the Circle

Experiments in Christian Discipleship

edited by Joanna Shenk

Study guide written by Annabeth Roeschley¹.

This study guide is designed for small groups, congregations, and intentional communities who have read *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship* or for individuals reading it on their own. In addition to questions for reflection, this guide provides opportunities to for creative expression, verbal and written activity, connection with others, and spiritual engagement.

Opening Up

In this collection of stories, we hear reflections on communal living within a faith context across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. We listen to many voices represented. We know that even more could have been included.

1. What first comes to your mind when you hear “intentional community?” How do these stories resonate with your understanding of community? Where are places of dissonance?
2. What did you find as unexpected in these stories? What surprised you?

Looking Deeper

Chapter 1

1. Vincent Harding speaks of courageous acts and decisions that kept him at the heart of “underdog” communities and pushing against the existing powers. He speaks of courage in the face of fear. In what ways were his communities—Woodlawn Mennonite Church, Mennonite House, Black Power, Black Consciousness—connected in their work for transformation?
2. In the early days of Anabaptism, the idea of *following* was emphasized more readily than that of *faith*. Given this vision and commitment to *following*, how might courage have been fueled for Anabaptist reformers? What kind of courageous “re-formations” do you witness today?
3. What does it mean for love to trump ideology? What are the consequences when that happens?

¹ Annabeth Roeschley lives communally with three justice-seeking friends in Washington, DC. They share meals, creativity, and belief in the importance of a nurturing home. After graduating from Bluffton University in 2007, Annabeth participated in Mennonite Voluntary Service for two years. Annabeth now works as a safe housing advocate for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. She also engages trauma survivors in urban gardens and the creation of safe green space and good food.

4. Vincent speaks about tensions within his Mennonite community as he oriented himself deeper in his black identity and community. He contrasts the term *shift* and the idea of perceived betrayal with a “deepening, expanding, exploring.” He calls it “watering the roots.” What could conflict in the church look like through this fresh lens? Think of a specific tension around identity that exists in your church, house, or community. Ponder it through this lens of watering and deepening.

Chapter 2

1. Rosemarie Freening Harding reflects on the strong, simple witness of Mennonite House, whose primary “mission” was to live together in a multi-racial household. Members modeled a way of being that drew others to them—activists, civil rights leaders, people down the block. How might this example reshape your understanding of what “mission” looks like?
2. The guiding principles of Mennonite House reflected the power and importance of learning from others—internally from its own members and outwardly from neighbors such as the Koinonia Partners community. Has there been a moment when you discovered clarity, as Rosemarie describes, through sharing life with folks who are different from you?
3. Part of what held Mennonite House together, amidst difference, were the participants’ shared values, including the value of racial integration. What composes a healthy balance of differences and shared values? Can there be too much of one?
4. Consider taking part in some aspect of a discipleship community near you. What shared value can you discover? How might you learn from your differences? How might this intersection bring clarity to your view of the Christian community?
5. If one of the communities in this book is near you, consider making a visit.

Chapter 3

1. Celina Varela and Sally Schreiner Youngquist speak of the greatest strengths and challenges of Reba Place Fellowship. How do their accounts differ? How do they resonate?
2. Both Celina and Sally reflect on power dynamics over the decades. How might Reba Place Fellowship’s story have been told differently from a “traditional” power-holder in the community?
3. Sally asks, “What is leading new and younger people to join Reba Place Fellowship and what are the challenges?” How would you answer this question about Reba Place Fellowship? About other faith communities or churches that you know?

Chapter 4

1. Regina Shands Stoltzfus refers to the “gospel imperative” —breaking down walls that divide. What strikes you about the way that Lee Heights Community Church took this on? How does a shared vision to change a system as big as

racism draw a community together? How might this differ in communities that are focused on specific local issues?

2. Regina concludes that radical faith and new ways of being arise from an understanding of one's own stories of formation. What are your formation stories? Take time to tell these to yourself or write them down. If you are in a group, consider sharing your stories with one another.
3. Explore with the formation story of your broader community. Was your neighborhood segregated? Who lived there before you? Who held the power? In what ways has your community encountered, supported, resisted, or dismantled systems of oppression?
4. Tell your own stories of the radical hospitality that Regina describes.

Chapter 5

1. "Go home and work for peace." Where did these words from a friend take Hedy Sawadsky at various points throughout her life? In this age of globalization, what might the example of "going home" say to us? What might it say to understandings about missions?
2. Hedy considers herself a "contemplative activist," integrating "being" and "doing." How necessary is this balance? Does one come easier for you than the other?
3. Hedy spent time in many places with various communities. What influenced Hedy's decisions about where to go and when? Where do you see the Holy One in her process?

Chapter 6

1. Andre Gingerich Stoner shares about his ecumenical awakenings within the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C. Have you discovered a group of people living out beliefs you hold? What does it mean to actualize shared values with people who come from different religious backgrounds or belief systems?
2. Sojourners and other ecumenical communities invite us to embrace the integration of old and new in the Anabaptist tradition. How do you see this playing out in churches you know or are a part of? In denominational institutions?
3. Often, combining the old and new is easier said than done. It may seem like there's more in common with someone of another faith than with someone in our own faith community. What does "common ground" mean in such a context?

Chapter 7

1. Bijou Street Community is described as a "community of work," not a church. What makes a church a "church," versus a community with a "common understanding of the gospel" that grounds its vision and work?
2. In Mary and Peter Sprunger-Froese's story and others' throughout this book, people decide to live and work in community. They felt led. Called. They sensed that it was "good to the Holy Spirit." They discerned. Made a visit. Met

someone who drew them in. How might we imagine the guidance of the Creator in all of this? What does this process look like for you?

3. Peter makes a steep call for the “body protest” of Mennonites. How does this kind of witness differ from individual protest? Can worship be a political act? Can dissent be a kind of service?

Chapter 8

1. What are the institutions in your life, and what is your relationship to them? Dawn Longenecker responds to institutional tension throughout her life—believing in the value and purpose of institutions in society while recognizing that they can “become tools for those in power to promote and maintain a status quo, which often works against justice for the poor.”
2. What do you think of the Church of the Savior’s model of “scattered” faith communities, each with its own mission and vision? To what extent can this compare to a non-hierarchical denomination like Mennonite Church USA or Mennonite Church Canada that connects churches and regional conferences with diverse missions and visions?
3. In seeking institutional change, how do you navigate working from within to change the system, working outside the system, or working somewhere on the margins? Is this always a choice?

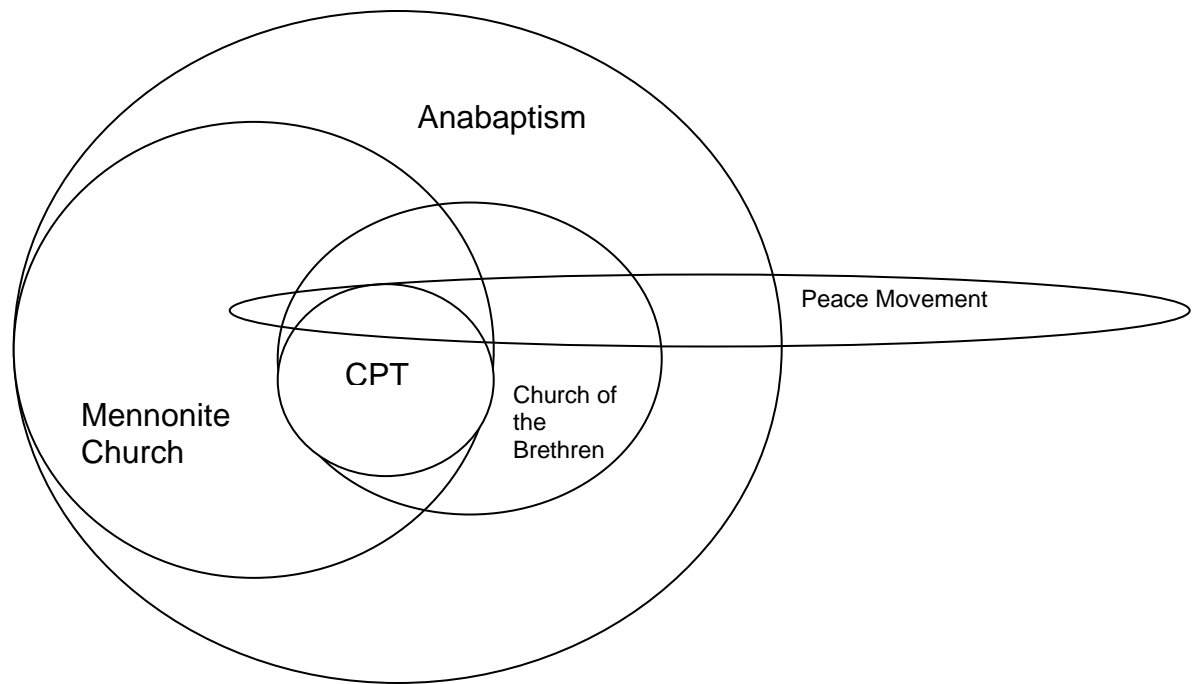
Chapter 9

1. What has Christian Peacemaker Teams learned in listening to communities in which they serve? As they deepened their identity as “allies in the work of resisting violence,” how did their approach shift and what were significant impacts?
2. How do they respond to the “clear call to deeper examination” of white privilege? Compare this “call” narrative to the persecution narrative of sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

3. *Circle Activity*

The purpose of this activity is to help participants visualize the relationships among various communities and institutions—where they touch and overlap. Participants can reflect on how communal identity is influenced and shaped by other movements and institutions.

CPT’er Dorothy Friesen locates the growth of CPT on “the margins of the established peace churches” —on the edge of the church, but at the core of Anabaptism. Consider the communities, movements, and institutions that you are a part of or with whom you share an identity. If each one were a circle, how would they overlap? Touch? Exist in tension with one another? Try drawing this as an overlapping circle diagram. Below is an example.



Chapter 10

1. For Maple City Health Care, how did “naming the fear of death” propel their mission and deepen their vision?
2. Think about the vision of a community in which you work, worship, serve, or care. What three questions would you ask to keep vision-centered?
3. Consider the implications of Maple City Health Care’s model; how might it help your own community to redefine or renew your own community’s central vision.

Chapter 11

1. Often the terms “missions” or “doing service” conjure images of far-away places and unknown “others.” For Sarah Thompson, the Jubilee House in south central Elkhart was a context of “dynamic locality.” What do you think she means by that?
2. In many intentional communities a shared set of intentions draws members together. This can differ slightly in the Mennonite Voluntary Service model, where volunteers may come into community unknown to each other, each serving with different organizations. What threads connect Jubilee House members to each other and to others in the Elkhart community? Similar to the Mennonite House in Atlanta, Jubilee evokes an image of open doors, a hospitality that draws others in from the outside, sometimes simply to be there. What factors—tangibly, systematically, spiritually—make this kind of hospitality possible? What makes it challenging? What makes it contagious?

Chapter 12

1. When have you experienced some people being “more equal than others” in the “priesthood of all believers”?
2. How do you respond to the questions Urban Village poses: “How have we been priests to each other? How have we been priests to the rest of the world?”
3. Bert Newton concludes, “Community is never what you expect it to be.” Jesus led a life of the unexpected—entering the world in a barn, turning water to wine, communing with outcasts, radically commanding love of one’s enemy. If this is our church’s heritage, our gospel, is *the unexpected* a thing innate to faith communities who follow the Jesus way?

Chapter 13

1. What does Mark Van Steenwyk mean by a “domesticated Jesus and his gospel”? What does it look like?
2. How does a “domesticated Jesus” relate to the “myth of the American Dream”?
3. How might you be challenged to confront and resist the benefits of the Empire?
4. How are yieldedness and repentance re-imagined in Mark’s story? Why are they necessary for a life of *Gelassenheit*, for loving in ways that transform systems of oppression?
5. Do you want a life of *Gelassenheit*? Why or why not? Are you comfortable?

Chapter 14

Indigenous activists once said, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”² Jesus famously said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” With these statements in mind, respond to the questions of Andrea Ferich:

1. If we truly see ourselves connected in struggle and in liberation, how does that reshape an understanding of justice? Of the communion cup? How does it challenge us toward a “widening in the circle of solidarity”?
2. How does actively loving creation impact our choices of what we produce? Consume? Throw away?

A Breathing Exercise

Use this meditation in a group with a reader or read it silently by yourself. Begin by naming your circle. Have each one say their name aloud as a way of honoring each one present.

Close your eyes.

² Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s. Often attributed to Lila Watson, she has said she is “not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process” and therefore the attribution here is the one she accepts.

Become aware of your breath.

Become aware of where your breath is at.

Be aware of how your breath feels as it moves into your body.

Be aware of how that same breath feels as it exits your body.

Allow your breath to deepen, filling the lower core of your body.

Allow your breath to find its own rhythm with each inhalation and exhalation.

Continuing to breathe deeply, be aware of any pain or tension in your body.

Send breath to that place of pain, and for this moment, let it go.

Continuing to breathe deeply, be aware of any pain or tension in your mind or spirit.

Send breath to that place of pain, and for this moment, let it go.

Continuing to breathe deeply, be aware that this same breath is shared by those around you.

Breathing deeply, be aware that this same breath is shared by those far from you.

Be aware of all the living things that breathe and share this same breath.

Be aware of the wind.

Imagine that wind is the breath of the earth, the spirit of life.

Be aware of the spirited breath that connects all living creatures on earth.

As you inhale, breathe in the interconnectedness of life.

As you exhale, breathe out that which does not give life.

Breathe in the connection of life; breathe out that which does not give life.

Continue this for a few breaths at our own pace.

Begin to draw your attention back to the place you are in.

When you are ready, open your eyes.

As you close, open your palms to receive that which is life-giving from this time of meditation.

Extend your palms to send the connection of life to a person or place who needs it. May it be so.

Chapter 15

1. Seth McCoy writes that he was “born again.” What did this look and feel like for him? How did his church at the time respond?
2. What theology shapes a kin-dom of God in the future versus a kin-dom of God now? How do we embody this heaven on earth?
3. Who are you called to be in the world? How does that fit into “the story that God has been telling from the beginning”?

Chapter 16

1. What commonalities are shared by the Franciscan and Anabaptist traditions? What vows, what commitments? What spiritual practices do they both uphold?
2. Jamie Arpin-Ricci writes about difficulties in engaging and integrating in existing Mennonite communities for those who share Anabaptist values but not German Mennonite cultural heritage. How do you respond to the two main difficulties he names?
3. How are Anabaptist communities or churches responding to these challenges? What gets in the way of Anabaptist communities choosing to offer a “significant gift” to the wider body of Christ?

Chapter 17

1. Anton Flores-Maisonet’s story and the formation of Alterna reflect the notion of an evolving vocational path. It depicts faith as a risky, not-always-known venture. When has following the way of Jesus looked to you like the frayed and knotted backside of a tapestry, as Anton describes? In what moments on your journey have you seen pieces of beauty woven together?
2. Spend some time imagining the divine Artist, our Creator. What is being created around you that you may not yet recognize? Use paints, crayons, markers, or collage materials to depict this image.

Chapter 18

1. What does Calenthia Dowdy mean by “informal community living”? What makes this different from “voluntary poverty”?
2. How might this distinction change the way we perceive sacrifice for new life? Or the sacrifices of intentional communal living?

3. Calenthia poses questions through an anthropological lens. “Is it any wonder [that] the large majority of people seeking, shaping, and choosing to live in intentional communities are white, young, suburban, and middle class?” How do you interpret the dynamics of race and class and their impact on intentional community living? Do you agree that “humanity is simultaneously attracted to community and repulsed by it”? How might this tension relate to self-identity, communal identity, and the ability of a community to change shape when “someone new sits down at the table?”

4. *Web of Interdependence Activity*

The purpose of this activity is to help participants “see” formal or informal ways in which people are connected. It encourages participants to think broadly about resources—tangibly and intangibly—and recognize the interdependence of relationships.

Experiment by drawing a web of people with whom you are connected. Write your name in the center. Draw lines between your name and the names of others with whom you are connected, listing along the lines the resource(s) that you share. Think broadly about these resources. It could be anything from sharing a car to sharing a child to sharing hope. Identify both formal and informal kinds of communal living.

Chapter 19

1. “A story is being told through our breath, life, ashes, and dust,” writes Jesce Walz. What story is being told of your life? How is it new and old? Where is there nuance?
2. Jesce says that she shares her story because the fruit of her experience exists in intimacy and meaningful relationships that have been built over time. Set aside time to write or speak your story. What makes you the person you are? How did your story become part of whatever community you call yours? How does it fit into the Creator’s story of shalom for the world?

Making Connections

Faith and Following

1. “The great word of the Anabaptists was not “faith” as it was for the reformers, but “following.” We see these words of Harold Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision* echoed through the stories and practices of the communities in this book. How did these communities emphasize a “following”? How is the practice of faith tied up in following? Are faith and following different? Can one exist without the other?
2. What if faith is imagined as a river, as Elaine Enns and Chad Meyers describe in the introduction—a faith and practice “deep and broad enough to swim in.” How does this resonate with your understanding of faith? If you could name or color an image for faith, what would it be?

Calling

1. The notion of following is reminiscent of being called. How does a sense of call differ among the contributors to this book? What words do they use to describe their calling?
2. Many of these authors describe their sense of call, in terms of discernment, response to a movement, or action for a cause. What is your understanding of this language?
3. The authors speak of both inner and outer calling—urges to extend beyond the immediate community, but also nudges to draw inward and nurture one's own self. Described by Hedy Sawadsky as "contemplative activism," how do you achieve this balance of the inner and outer? Could there be an "active contemplative"?

Identity

1. How and where do you see the shaping of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity in these communities? When did this involve folks without that identity? Who were they?
2. What are the blessings of ecumenical communities? What are the challenges?
3. Can we work together with people who share our values but who do not necessarily share the motivation behind those values? If so, how? Can we share a gospel vision with people who do not believe in the same gospel? How?

Imperfection

1. Celina Varela reflects on imperfections of Reba Place Fellowship and the choice she made to stay. All of these stories of living community hold nuance, since none of the communities was perfect. Have you experienced this kind of embodied imperfection? When have you chosen to stay or leave? Why?

Justice

1. What makes the pursuit of justice distinct from the pursuit of charity?
2. How might these stories of justice-work challenge our understanding of charity? Of Christian service? When is "doing good" not "doing right"?

Faith in Deed

1. How is "faith in deed" put into action by these communities?
2. For many, doing justice and building peace look like "resisting the Empire"—recognizing the Empire and a participation in it as North Americans of privilege, dismantling oppression. What sources of strength do these communities and individuals draw upon to do this work? Is this only the work of intentional communities?
3. Does living in community make doing radical justice easier? Does it make living the alternative reign of God, easier?

Experiments

1. The subtitle of this collection calls community an “experiment.” Why do you think this term was chosen? What does it imply?
2. In what phases of life and at what junctures were contributors to this book choosing to live in community?