

January 12, 2020
Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
Mennonite-Anabaptist Heritage Month
"The Power of a Question"
Susan Gascho-Cooke
[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Today we continue our January series of looking at the origin stories of several Anabaptist-Mennonite organizations or communal efforts from the 20th century. In that vein, I'll be telling some of the story of Christian Peacemaker Teams.

One of the pieces of the Mennonite Central Committee story Ken Sensenig shared last week, is how quickly MCC came to be. Basically, within one month of identifying a need of fellow Mennonites back in Russia, a group of Mennonites had begun to respond, and that was the start of MCC. One month, he said!

Christian Peacemaker Teams, or "CPT," took more than a month to get going, but similarly to MCC, you can track a particular time and place that inspired its creation. In a "speech presented by Ron Sider to those gathered at the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in the summer of 1984, his call to active peacemaking sparked study groups in Anabaptist churches all over North America and ultimately gave rise to the formation of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in 1986."

As CPT describes it, the 1980s were a time when "members of the historic peace churches (Church of the Brethren, Mennonite, and Friends/Quakers) were seeking new ways to express their faith. 'Low-intensity' wars had broken out in many places including Central America, and the U. S. government usually sided with the elite groups and oppressive systems in these conflicts. Also emerging in that period was a consciousness that by using the creative energy of organized nonviolence, ordinary people could stand in front of the weapons and encourage less violent ways for change to happen."

Then, in 1984, Ron Sider [challenged the Mennonite World Conference](#) in Strasbourg, France with these words: (what follows is just an excerpt)

Over the past 450 years of martyrdom, immigration and missionary proclamation, the God of shalom has been preparing us Anabaptists for a late twentieth-century rendezvous with history. The next twenty years will be the most dangerous—and perhaps the most vicious and violent—in human history. If we are ready to embrace the cross, God's reconciling people will profoundly impact the course of world history. . . This could be our finest hour. Never has the world needed our message more. Never has it been more open. Now is the time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace. If we still believe it, now is the time to live what we have spoken.

We must take up our cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. We must be prepared to die by the thousands. Those who believed in peace through the sword have not hesitated to die. Proudly, courageously, they gave their lives. Again and again, they sacrificed bright futures to the tragic illusion that one more righteous crusade would bring peace in their time, and they laid down their lives by the millions.

Unless we . . . are ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we never really meant what we said, and we dare never whisper another word about pacifism to our sisters and brothers in those desperate lands filled with injustice. Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent

attempts to reduce conflict, we should confess that we never really meant that the cross was an alternative to the sword . . .

“Sider’s call spoke directly to this cultural moment in the historic peace churches, and contributed to vigorous conversations in churches across North America. In 1986, these discussions culminated in a gathering of 100 persons. From this gathering, a call went out for the formation of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Representative denominations appointed a steering committee to hammer out basic directions, and invited Gene Stoltzfus to begin work as the first staff person in 1988. By 1992, CPT had put together a series of delegations to Haiti, Iraq, and the West Bank.”

They then developed a two tier system of a Christian Peacemaker Corps of 12 people who would have a stipend, and for whom this would be their full-time work. These core corps members would be support by “reservists” who would donate their time and resources on a more part-time basis.

What exactly do these CPTers do, you ask?

“CPT places teams at the invitation of local peacemaking communities that are confronting situations of lethal conflict. These teams **support and amplify the voices of local peacemakers** who risk injury and death by waging nonviolent direct action to confront systems of violence and oppression.

CPT work includes:

- Accompanying our partners as they work nonviolently to defend their rights and communities.
- Advocacy: amplifying the stories and voices of those experiencing violent oppression.
- Human rights observation and reporting.
- Solidarity networking: partnering with individuals and organizations to work toward change.

CPT understands **violence to be rooted in systemic structures of oppression**. We are committed to undoing oppressions, starting within our own lives and in the practices of our organization.

CPT **enlists spiritual communities and individuals in an organized, nonviolent alternative to war**. CPT’s initial roots among Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and Quakers have spread into a broad multi-faith network that supports spiritually-centered peacemaking, creative public witness, nonviolent direct action, and protection of human rights.” (<https://cpt.org/about>)

I was a college student at Eastern Mennonite College (soon to be University) from 1993-1997, when CPT was just fully getting rolling. I was a religion major with a peace & justice minor, and very active in EMU’s student Peace Fellowship. So during those years we were going to peace conferences along with other peace church college peace groups, where the folks who were starting CPT were also attending. It felt very near, very tangible, very exciting.

I greatly respected, and probably also romanticized the work of CPT at that time. The example that best illustrates how I viewed CPTers admittedly sprung directly out of my

family's Star Wars binge over Christmas. In *Rogue One*, which is kind of episode 3.5 out of 9 in the Star Wars canon, there's a character who is blind, but clearly guided by a deep belief in The Force. At one point he is tasked with activating a device in a field the middle of a shootout between Imperial and Rebel Alliance troops. He holds his staff, point-down, in front of him and simply begins to walk, calmly, straight out into the field toward a device he cannot see. He speaks to himself as he walks, unscathed, through laser beams and *pew pew pews*:

"The Force is with me. I am one with the Force."

"The Force is with me. I am one with the Force."

If you cross that with image of the brave young Chinese person who walked out in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, you'll get a little bit of an idea of how I pictured the work of CPT and CPTers. It's what Ron Sider's invitation sounded like to me.

If I have a critique of Sider's words now, in retrospect, it lies in the phrases like "this could be our finest hour," and implying that Anabaptists have the key to save the world, if only we'd be brave enough to use it. While I believe in peace and non-violence wholeheartedly, and believe we should live out our beliefs in it and that would make an impact on the world, I don't think Anabaptists have the corner on the creative nonviolent resistance market.

If you read his entire address to World Conference, though, there are a lot of profoundly valid questions, even for the current day. "Too often," he says, "we fall into an isolationist pacifism which silently ignores or perhaps profits from injustice and war as long as our boys don't have to fight."

He calls for a third option: to "prayerfully and nonviolently place ourselves between the weak and the oppressor." Which is a profoundly Christ-like, and Jesus-modeled positioning — standing between the woman at the well and the stones others were threatening to throw at her. Hanging from the cross, hoping to save us from ourselves by modeling a refusal to continue the cycle of retributive violence."

But such a positioning was dangerous for Jesus and would be dangerous for us now, he said. And the words are still true today.

"Do we believe Jesus enough to pay the price of following him? Do you? Do I?" These were his closing words — his closing question. And people took up that question. All over Mennonite and Church of the Brethren congregations, folks engaged Sider's questions, and out of that was born Christian Peacemaker Teams.

When I chose my sermon title, I was enamored of the idea that a speaker's question could have such resonance that groups of people would gather to ponder it. And then create such a brave and creative endeavor as CPT. I thought it lined up so nicely with the story that Marty put together, telling the story of the bucket of coins — because the coins were all gathered at the invitation of Malinda

What power the right question must have, I mused.

And I think there is power in the right question at the right time. But I really think the thread that runs through and between the story of Ron's question that produced CPT, and Malinda's question, and the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 was the belief of the asker

that the question *could* be answered — and that those being asked had the capacity to respond.

Ron Sider believed that there was capacity to respond in the audience to whom he spoke at Mennonite World Conference. My guess is neither Marty nor Malinda dreamed that we could collect \$750 in December from congregational loose change, no less, but they thought there was capacity to respond, so they asked.

In the story of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus doesn't even ask. But when the disciples say to him, "there are all these people, surely you'll tell them to go away and find food at the nearby village, right?" Jesus says, yes, their hunger is a problem. But the story doesn't have him multiplying the loaves and fishes. Jesus says, "Surely they don't need to go away. *You* give them something to eat."

Then he asks them to bring the few loaves and fishes, and he blesses them. And somehow after the distribution of the still-few loaves and fishes, there was enough — more than enough — there were 12 baskets leftover.

What was the miracle?

I've heard it said that the miracle is that Jesus' blessing created loaves and fishes out of nothing. I've heard it said that the miracle was that in the distribution, folks miraculously felt generous enough to share what they had with them, and it all added up to way more than needed.

Both are miracles. One perhaps a more Random Act of Kindness, one-off, miracle that is so impossibly divine that we may as well not bother to try to replicate it. The other is a more complicated kind of miracle. Let's be honest, though, any task is always more complicated when it becomes a group project, which is what Jesus made it in this understanding! The second miracle-understanding is one in which people who did not believe, or who were at least deeply skeptical, responded to a need anyway, responded to Jesus' invitation to pass out what they had. And in their willingness to *start*, and keep putting one foot in front of the other, to keep reaching into a basket that must surely be empty by now! they kept having the capacity to continue the miracle.

My husband, Teman, told me he thinks the miracle is that Jesus got a crowd of people to stop following the empire's rules of ownership. To look at the provisions that are actually around and simply distribute them. In our world, at least for now, there is actually enough for each person to eat. But food is in the wrong place. Or it's in the right place, but we all communally acknowledge that it is owned by some individual or group or entity, and we willing conflate its unavailability with scarcity.

We allow others to go hungry, because we believe that ownership is to be honored above all.

Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5,000 would have terrified the Roman occupiers, because it was reminding people to see differently, and to remember and prioritize human dignity, human bodies, human hunger.

However you want to interpret it, this story is a story of responding to a need. Being asked by someone who believes there is enough, and believes in our capacity to give, to act, to respond.

In Congregational Council at CMCL this year we are developing CMCL's new 5-year goals for 2020-2025. One thing came through clearly in all of your responses, which is that you/we don't just want to gather together, and believe things in common, we want to *act* together. I think there's an implicit belief that in acting, in responding together to need around us, needs will be met AND we will have deeper community and belonging.

Jesus believed in his disciples and in the crowd that day. Ron Sider believed in Mennonite World Conference, Marty and Malinda believed in us here at CMCL. Do we believe in us? I think Jesus believed there are miracles waiting to happen. Do we?

And hey, we're from an extended cultural family that does things like this: Your barn can't stay where it is, but needs to be moved 200 feet away. No need to demolish and rebuild — just invite 250 friends over, pick it up, and walk it where it needs to go. Yup, they carried the dang barn by hand. ([Watch it here](#)).

We may not be able to move mountains, but we come from a family that moves barns ... and builds them. ([Watch a time-lapse barnraising here](#)).

And finally, having just come from the Laurelville Music & Worship Leader's Retreat, I'm reminded of something else. In the Mennonite Community Cookbook, by Mary Emma Showalter, you can find the ingredient list and recipes to feed a community for a barnraising. After all, you don't build a barn, or move a mountain, or stop war, on an empty stomach.

Jesus knew that — he said, "Feed the people, duh!!

Being at Laurelville singing together, and praying together, in one voice and yet many, was another form of nourishment for the work. Gathering together here, again and again, singing together, breaking bread together, sharing with one another, praying together, making sense of this ancient sacred text and holding it up to the world in all its beauty and its brokenness: this is nourishment for doing the work together.

May we be seers of the need. Askers of the obvious questions — motivators of one another to respond. Expecters of the good and the capacity in one another. And let us be responders even to impossible attempts to build and fix and repair and feed and stand between people and the violence we abhor.

Who knows what might happen, if we give ourselves to the person and peace we believe in?