

Quiet In the Land No Longer: Mennonites Raising Our Voices in Solidarity

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Introduction

My name is Jonathan Smucker. I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at University of California, Berkeley. I have also spent my adult life—nearly three decades—working as an organizer, campaigner, and strategist in social movements and political campaigns in the United States. And I’m a Mennonite. My work for social justice has been almost entirely outside of the Mennonite church. Until the past year and a half, that is. I will draw heavily today from an already published paper, in *Anabaptist Witness*, with coauthors Tim Nafziger and Sarah Augustine. That paper is titled, “Give Us the Courage to Enter the Song: Reckoning with Mennonite History and Theology through Public Action.” And I want to start by showing you a short [video](#).

In late November of 2023, a handful of Mennonites put out a call for a mass zoom meeting of “Mennonites for a Ceasefire.” An estimated one thousand individuals joined the call, and from there a movement was launched that includes Mennonite congregants and congregations across the United States and Canada. Since then *Mennonite Action*, has carried out more than 150 actions to date, in which Mennonites and friends hold a kind of “worship service protest,” singing hymns in four-part harmony, offering prayers, and donning banners stylized to look like traditional North American Mennonite quilts — wielding symbols of Mennonite faith, tradition, and identity in the public sphere. Mennonite Action presently maintains a few hundred active volunteers, a few thousand participants, and dozens of local chapters and affiliated congregations. Over the past year and a half, through Mennonite Action, Mennonites have been the most politically active, vocal, visible, and organized Christian denomination—at least in terms of public protests—in the United States and Canada in response to the unfolding events in Gaza.

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

Vincent Harding & the Quiet in the Land

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

Harding’s debates and struggles with institutional leaders was a key moment in a wider conversation between Mennonites increasingly asking questions about justice and those committed to an interpretation of nonresistance that separated them from the world. World War II had played a big role in many US Mennonites’ emergence from relatively cloistered enclaves.

Prior to this time, Mennonites had earned a “Quiet in the land” reputation. In our article we talk in terms of Mennonite *quietism*.

By *quietism*, we mean the tendency to keep quiet and to stay out of the way when it comes to political issues and world affairs—essentially to abstain from politics. North American Mennonites have often been described with the phrase, “the quiet in the land.” Fleeing intense religious persecution in Europe during the Protestant Reformation, Mennonites sought a new beginning in the “New World.” Grasping the liability that their religious pacifism (including their refusal of military service) posed to colonial political authority, they sought to ingratiate themselves and make themselves indispensable as exceptionally productive agriculturalists. A hand-to-plough mentality took hold, and the theology of *nonresistance* articulated by founder Menno Simons was interpreted to mean a complete withdrawal from worldly conflicts and politics.

In reality, Mennonite *quietism* is more complicated, and full of contradictions. It’s uneven over time and geography. Different lineages of Mennonites and Anabaptists had very different relationships to politics and the state. Eighteenth-century Dutch Mennonites actively participated in a revolutionary movement and held public office. In terms of contradictions, Mennonites in the United States who claimed to refuse political engagement regularly found themselves (or their leaders) advocating politically for the community’s own interests (for example, for the right of conscientious objection).

This hypocrisy was at the heart of Vincent Harding’s frustration with Mennonites. Mennonite leaders argued with Harding that active involvement in the nonviolent, but assertive and confrontational, Civil Rights movement did not fit with Mennonite nonresistance theology. Harding saw clearly that Mennonites had been politically engaged in all sorts of ways, but this engagement was typically limited to asserting the Mennonite community’s own interests. This pattern extended back to the first North American Mennonite settlers, who turned a blind eye to the genocide that effectively awarded them the fertile lands upon which they could keep quiet.

So our critique of Mennonite quietism in the Anabaptist Witness article—which you should read!—follows Harding’s critique: we want Mennonites to take responsibility for the social, economic, and political systems we are part of and that, often, we benefit from. We think it’s time for Mennonites to go further in examining what it means to be Mennonite while also being citizens of first-world nations (and, in the United States, a global military superpower), or to be white Mennonites who live in a white supremacist social system.

The Radicals: Early Anabaptists

What’s interesting is that early Anabaptists were *anything but quiet*. They lived, breathed, and actively *intervened* in an extraordinary historical epoch.

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

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

early Anabaptists were very much attempting to *intervene in and shape this world*. The reality is not only that early Anabaptists *did indeed pose a threat* to existing religious and state authorities, but also that they *meant* to do so.

The reason Anabaptists earned their name was subversive: state-church authorities saw re-baptism of adults and refusal to baptize babies as theologically heretical and politically seditious, as baptismal records were used for taxation, military conscription, and general civil administration. Similarly, early Anabaptists' refusal of oaths threw a wrench into the political and legal gears of the feudal system. The practice of local congregational autonomy and the idea of a "priesthood of all believers" was a clear affront to centralized church authority, undermining both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastical hierarchies. The challenge to centralized power was not merely incidental to Anabaptists' new theology; movement leaders were frequently unrestrained in their scorn for authority.

And then there was the remarkable challenge to the feudal economic order. Important strands of the early Anabaptist movement were deeply intertwined with the Great Peasant Revolt of 1524-1525. The revolting peasants launched an unruly challenge to the feudal social order. They interpreted Acts chapters 2 and 4 as an injunction for a radical egalitarian redistribution of land and wealth. The movement suffered a crushing defeat, with upwards of 100,000 killed by the better trained and more heavily armed military forces employed by the aristocracy.

The radical Anabaptist movement likewise suffered incredible repression and persecution across much of Europe over the next two to three centuries — for roughly half of Anabaptism's entire 500-year history.

Mennonites Showing Up (and in greater numbers)

Since World War II, Mennonites have been shifting away from our "quiet in the land" mentality, but slowly and unevenly and with a great deal of cultural, theological, and habitual residue from that long era. But looking back on the decades that followed Harding's time with the Mennonite Church, we can see a slow and uneven shift toward his vision of a publicly engaged Mennonite church that seeks to be, in Harding's words, a "front light"—instead of a "rear light"—in the social justice struggles of our time.

The new wave of explicitly Mennonite protests focused on Gaza marks both a continuation of a long "transformationist stream" of Anabaptism and an important acceleration or next phase, further shifting the public and self-perceived relationship of Mennonites to collective political action. Thousands of Mennonites across the United States and Canada are finding our full-throated protest voice, bringing elements of our Christian faith and Mennonite traditions into the public sphere, and seeking along the way to reconcile who we are—our values and our ways—to the times we are living in and the suffering we are witnessing in a broken world.

I want to elaborate a little on this "next phase" or acceleration. Because there have been many important organizational vehicles over the past half century that have helped to move Mennonites into greater political responsibility and engagement: from Community Peacemaker Teams, to Pink Menno, to the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery - to name only a few.

All these efforts have pushed Mennonites to better embody Jesus's heart for the marginalized and oppressed. Some of those doing the "pushing" have wondered where to go next—specifically how to deepen our engagement and scale it. Even in sympathetic congregations, it often feels like social justice is relegated to a small peace and justice committee

or the congregation's one or two "usual suspect" activists. How might we give work for justice a more central role in our congregations?

This question led Mennonite Action to make an intentional and vital choice to show up in the public sphere *as Mennonites* and, related, to make protests into worship services. This tactical choice—which takes great care in designing and disciplining message, tone, visuals and optics, and more—defines the movement, for participants and observers alike.

In my research interviews, I ask about the impact of bringing elements of Mennonite faith and tradition—particularly hymn-singing—into public protest. I ask movement participants to reflect on both the external impact (e.g., on decisionmakers, the news media, and the broader public) and internal impact (on movement participants and other Mennonites). Participants describe this choice as personally meaningful and strategically advantageous. Some discussed the element of surprise, or the unexpected; a "messing with" the dominant script about what a protest is supposed to look like, sound like, and feel like, and who a "protester" is. The song-filled and prayer-filled program leverages a kind of "Mennonite mystique" to the broader public. And Mennonite Action's "worship service protests" do not fit neatly into negative stereotypes of angry, shrill, jargony, and counter-cultural protests and protesters. Several interviewees have been self-conscious about not wanting to play into a game of "good protester / bad protester." At the same time, many have also indicated their own strong affinity for Mennonite Action's worshipful style of protest.

This choice seems to have borne fruit, in terms of the scale of individual and congregational involvement. While many movement participants have participated in protests prior to Mennonite Action, hundreds have been on-boarded to protest for the first time through Mennonite Action. The movement brings the familiar and the sacred into a venue that had felt unfamiliar and intimidating—even scary—to many Mennonites. Importantly, in relationship to a long history of Mennonite aversion to politics, this choice takes something that has felt *unMennonite* and transforms it into something that feels very Mennonite.

The tactics of attending protests, meeting with elected representatives, and writing letters to the editor, to name a few, may not be new to many Mennonite Action participants. But the way that Mennonite Action articulates doing those things *as a Mennonite collective* feels noteworthy and perhaps instructive. Providing a way for more Mennonites to take collective action visibly and vocally alongside fellow Mennonites as an extension of their faith tradition has resulted in the activation of thousands of new participants.

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

Conclusion

Looking back at Mennonite inaction concerning genocide and settler colonialism in North America, many of us feel shame, wishing our forebears had done something. How will our descendants look back on Mennonite action or inaction in this moment?

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

In his July 1967 address to Mennonite World Conference, Harding described Mennonites as “huddled behind the barricades of the status quo.” At a second address at the same gathering he said: “We cannot escape such questions by saying that we do not believe in violence when we participate in the violence of the status quo.”

Mennonites have wrestled with organizing for political power for some time now. We have a long road ahead, but many of us feel that, at the very least, perhaps we are actually on that road.

Pertinent to the conference theme this year, I believe that the Mennonite Action movement shows a powerful example of church *renewal*. Its public rituals have breathed new life and meaning into familiar hymns and scripture; its social and political relevance has brought many disaffected “cultural Mennonites” back to church; the news coverage and social media attention it has generated has inspired at least several Christians who were disillusioned with rising Christian nationalism to join and start worshipping with Mennonite congregations and communities; and it has brought us visibly and vocally into the public sphere.