



Better Together, Part 2

What if our theology could get up out of our armchairs and into the real world? That would be something worth talking about. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

*Father, we've forgotten
that you've called us together
to bear each other's burdens
and worship you as one.*

“Community loneliness - that might be the great evangelistic opportunity of our time, the great wound in the world that needs healing.”

“Mixing our faith with a political party is like mixing ice cream and horse manure. It doesn't do much damage to the manure, but it really messes up the ice cream.”

“It's very early. It's very primal. It's very deep within the human community, is that we are people who do not want to be alone.”

“I'd love to see us stand more in solidarity with one another, not looking down on one another, but together finding that level ground at the foot of the cross of Jesus and sharing in the hope of the resurrection.”

*One church,
One light,
One body,
Found in Christ.*

Introduction

Jesse Penner: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. I'm Jesse Penner.

Andrew Dyck: And I'm Andrew Dyck. This episode is a continuation of the conversation we started in episode one. This is Better Together, part two.

JP: So in that first episode, we opened up with a very general question, which was simply: why is this an important thing to talk about? Why do we want to be talking about community or why is it necessary to talk about community when we think about looking at what it is that God is calling us to as the church.

In the second episode, what we're going to do is narrow in a little bit. This podcast is of course called The Armchair Anabaptist. And while we're looking at things that we believe are universal to the church, the things that we're talking about here, peace last season, and now community, these are of course things that the church the world over is grappling with.

We also recognize that these are things that have been specifically important to the Anabaptist community over the years and historically to the Anabaptists. And so we want to zoom in a little bit and specifically ask the question now as we continue to sort of set the table for the themes of this season, how have Anabaptists specifically displayed or lived out or understood the importance of community?

AD: Yeah, Jesse, and I know that when we were talking and dreaming and trying to be creative with this season, this became a really important question to us because for many people familiar with Anabaptist history, community and how this community has acted and reacted throughout the different situations that they've found themselves in, has been a real important piece of how people even understand Anabaptist thought and theology today.

So in many ways, as we zoom in, we're also going to cast an eye back. We're going to look at some of the history, just in broad strokes about community and maybe some of the ways in which Anabaptist communities have related to the world around them. And also, again, not just for the sake of looking behind, but really bringing this forward into how this still impacts our community and churches today.

JP: One of the interesting things about this episode that didn't really occur to me until we started to really get everything organized is the fact that of our four speakers today, and these are going to be the same people you heard in that first episode, three of them are not originally from an Anabaptist background. They are people who have entered into Anabaptist faith in one way or another, or are Anabaptist-adjacent, people who would have some awareness of Anabaptists but wouldn't necessarily put that label on themselves.

AD: Right? If you want to know who those three are, just look at the last names of our guests and you'll be able to figure it out on your own.

JP: So we are going to be talking with – here you go, one of these things is not like the other – Layton Friesen, Stuart Murray, Meghan Larissa Goode and Steve Bell. And we'll hear what each of these has to say about this question: how have Anabaptists traditionally displayed the importance of community? We're going to start off here with Layton.

How Have Anabaptists Traditionally Displayed the Importance of Community?

Dr. Layton Friesen is the academic dean of Steinbach Bible College, as well as the former conference pastor of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference in Canada. His most recent book is called *Secular Nonviolence and the Theo Drama of Peace*. Here is Layton's response to that question: how have Anabaptists traditionally displayed the importance of community?

Dr. Layton Friesen: Anabaptism was a movement that began back in the 16th century that sought to wrestle with community as it had been defined by the Middle Ages coming up to that point. The conclusion that many of the Anabaptist leaders came to was that the community that they had inherited from the medieval church, was a community that was too humanly defined.

It was humanly enforced. It was not the sort of thing that was created by Jesus. It was the sort of thing that was created by politics and philosophy and violence, essentially. And so the Anabaptist movement was an attempt to recover a community that was truly centred around Jesus, and that had a few really quite practical implications, I think.

One of them was that the community was entered into through baptism, and so that becomes a huge cornerstone of the original Anabaptist movement, was that these people who are believing in Jesus as adults, who are repenting of their sin, who are resolved to follow Jesus, they're baptized into this community.

It's not a community that you come into by birth. It's not a community that you come into through political intrigue or manipulating or buying your way into. It's a community that you come into through baptism. And so that was a big assertion of the anabaptist movement. It's one that they suffered a lot for as well.

And then secondly, the Lord's Supper was a big part of the Anabaptists' understanding. This is where having come into the community through baptism, brothers and sisters now fellowship together around a table in the presence of the Lord and that was that was the essential act of fellowship. Baptism was the way to get in, come around the table. The Lord's Supper was the fellowship that you then had around that table, sharing.

The third thing that I see happening in the anabaptist movement and it's first, it's baptism, secondly, it's the Lord's Supper, but then church discipline is also really important.

We tend to think of Anabaptist church discipline as rather kind of severe, something that they had a bit of an obsession with, but that's not how they saw it obviously. They saw church discipline as an alternative to violence. Instead of using the sword to enforce community or to defend community, they were going to use a nonviolent means which had been given to them by the scriptures, which was church discipline.

Basically, this meant admonition to brothers and sisters who were who were falling into sin. And if that admonition wasn't followed, then excommunication from the community. This was seen as a nonviolent way to create community or maybe the better word would be defend the community that had been established through baptism and the Lord's Supper.

So that was the core I think. It was an attempt to be a Jesus-centered community that you entered into through baptism, into Jesus, that you participated in the Lord's Supper, and that was defended by church discipline. This didn't mean that it was only fellowship on Sunday, so to speak, that was Anabaptist community. This baptized, disciplined, Lord's Supper-eating community went on then to live together. They played together, they started farms together. They had children together, they started schools together and so on.

And so it became a much bigger thing as the life of anabaptism became the life of Mennonites going forward. And so Mennonites have always started with baptism, but it hasn't ended there. It's gone on to very practical human ways of being married, having

families, starting schools, starting businesses, running farms, playing together, whatever, but it always has had this sort of Jesus-centered vision at the at the very center of it.

JP: Next, we're going to hear from Steve Bell. Steve Bell is an award-winning singer, songwriter and storyteller from Winnipeg, Manitoba. He's been performing for over 30 years. And in 2022, he was inducted into the Order of Canada. He's also an author and has released seven book series on the spirituality of the Christian calendar year called *Pilgrim Year*.

Now, Steve isn't an Anabaptist historian, and when we sat down to interview, I actually gave him the chance to skip this question, thinking maybe it wouldn't be something that he would want to contribute to but he said he'd take a crack at it and I appreciate his perspective here, the chance we have to see through his eyes what Anabaptist community emphasis looks like. Here's Steve.

Steve Bell: Well, you know, in a previous question, you know, you're asking me about community and I was talking about going to this intentional church community in Winnipeg that was largely people from Anabaptist tradition that started that church in the first place, so it was part of their psyche. It was part of how they understood church, how they understood faithful witness. Right. And so for them, it was literally a matter of we need to share life. So it was, again, very, very practical.

But where you see it actually, showing up later is in Winnipeg, and I've talked about this with business guys and musicians, there's a collegiality in Winnipeg amongst musicians, amongst business people, that you don't see in other towns. Musicians here share gear. We celebrate each other. We also know that when we need help, we can go to the business community. The business community understands their obligation to the arts. And, you know, there's a collegiality.

And I was actually talking to a friend of mine about this and saying, why does Winnipeg have this in a way that Toronto doesn't, that Vancouver doesn't? All my musician friends from other towns really envy the collegiality here. And we thought, it's the Mennonites.

It comes from that barn-raising mentality that on Saturdays we get together and help each other out. Yeah, we have our own lives. We have our own responsibilities. Yeah, we have our own bank accounts. But we do have an obligation to help each other flourish. And it's kind of in the DNA of Winnipeg, and I suspect it's the deep Mennonite heritage of Winnipeg. Of course, there'll be other things there, but I bet you that's a big piece of it.

So when you have that theology as the backbone of a prominent community, that has long-term reach, you know, that creates all sorts of possibilities that people will probably forget had Christian roots. And that's okay. You know, it's fine. We don't need the credit, you know, we just need to keep on being faithful witnesses.

AD: Interestingly, Layton Friesen and Steve Bell took some very different directions in answering this question. Layton really did begin this historical perspective of what

Anabaptist movement looked like when it began, and this highlight of the acceptance into this community through baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whereas, Steve mentioned a lot about his current and recent experiences as a musician here in Manitoba and in Winnipeg.

And so, Jesse, I'm going to ask you, how did these two things connect? What do you see is this thread of thought in between these two answers?

JP: Well, just like you said, it is interesting how they very much come at it from different perspectives and, of course, very different contexts in terms of how they answer this question, with Layton being somebody who has taught courses on Anabaptist history and engaged with this in a deep and meaningful way, an intentional way from an academic perspective and a theological perspective for much of his life.

And Steve Bell, who is somebody who kind of lives in the water of anabaptism, given that we're sort of in Mennonite heartland here in Manitoba, but hasn't necessarily grappled with those questions in such an intentional way, how they come at this from one side and then the other. And with Layton, you really get this sort of foundational perspective of what is it that that makes us tick. What is the engine that drove Anabaptist? And what was the thing that lit a fire in their hearts such that in the process of the Protestant Reformation, they felt they needed to take it to this other sort of place and establish themselves as a separate community.

And then 500 years later, you have Steve Bell going, Winnipeg sure is a friendly place.

What exactly is the reason for that? And a recognition of the way in which one sort of flows into the other or an understanding of the ripple effects that are created by the choices of our forefathers hundreds of years ago across the ocean. And how the results of that, the harvest of that, has been, in some ways, a community here which for whatever reason, from an outsider looking in, they go, there's something special here, there's something unique here that I can't quite put my finger on.

AD: And I think when we have to look back and celebrate some of the best things, we also recognize that any tradition, any group, anabaptists or otherwise, are going to have some things that are real strong suits. And I think community brings out some of this, but also some other things that are not as maybe admirable and don't have the intended effect.

And we're going to see some of that, even in the next few guests who are going to contribute as well, really kind of showing us that there's two sides to this coin. There are some things that really make a difference in a positive way with community throughout history in anabaptism and some of the things in which it actually has had not the intended or desired result.

JP: We're going to hear from Stuart Murray and from Meghan Larissa Goode.

AD: The question we have been asking and considering in this episode is how have Anabaptists traditionally displayed the importance of community. And we asked this question to Meghan Larissa Good.

Dr. Good is lead pastor at Trinity Mennonite Church and the theology chair of the Jesus Collective. She is also the author of several books, including *Divine Gravity: Sparking a Movement to Recover a Better Christian Story*. Here's what she had to say.

Dr. Meghan Larissa Good: Well, if you look over a kind of long anabaptist time scale, back to the beginning, much of the history of anabaptism has been the history of a community that's relatively isolated, that has done a lot of being on the run and hiding and staying out of people's way and out of their attention.

And anabaptists have experienced what most groups do in those kind of circumstances, which is that kind of relative isolation, whatever the reason for it, tends to produce very strong internal community. People care for each other well, they raise the barn, they make the pie.

I remember being so touched that the first church I pastored, which was an anabaptist church, when I was visiting someone's house and I saw the woman had a magazine on her table that was about M.S., the disease. And I knew this woman didn't have M.S. So I said, "Why are you reading this magazine?" And she said, "Well, two people at the church just got diagnosed and I wanted to understand their experience better." And I thought that was such a moving testimony to the strength of the community bonds that form internally to anabaptist communities.

Even groups like Mennonite Central Committee, some of your listeners might be familiar with, have formed because of a sense of care for people who are part of this kind of group, this community, across great distances. The challenging part of it, I think, for anabaptists, given that history is the external, the very same forces that create strong internal bonds make it hard for outsiders to break in and become a part of that community.

And they make it difficult for people inside the community to even be aware of what is their kind of ethnic culture or group culture, and what is the culture of the kingdom of Jesus? One of the results is even to forget the language that other people speak and to make it harder to communicate with people outside the kind of in-group.

So, you know, those are two sides of the same coin, not separate things. That very strength of the internal is one of the challenges of the external.

AD: It struck me in Meghan Good's response how she highlighted the fact that a lot of these forces or factors that make our internal community so strong and significant and a blessing are often the same factors that can make it feel so isolated and hard to break into from the outside.

So I asked her the following question: how can we celebrate strong internal community that also allows people from the outside to enter in?

Dr. MLG: Yeah, well, I think we could start by recognizing that the strength of that internal community is one of the gifts we most have to give to the world in an era of profound loneliness and isolation.

A people that know how to be in relationships, that know how to stick with each other through hard times, that know how to practice forgiveness. You know, that often strikes me in anabaptist communities of a level of grace for each other that has to exist to allow communities to cohere over time. Those are all really profound and not that common gifts in this time.

So beginning by recognizing that those are the gifts that God has given us and that they're not just for us, those are gifts for the world. And beginning to ask ourselves specific questions, like what would it look like for us to deliberately open this table where, you know, we love eating together? What would it look like to open the table to people who are eating on TV trays alone? Where would we meet them? How would we invite them to the table? What would it look like for us to bring this ability to bear with each other, this grace for each other into relationship with people who haven't experienced that anywhere else in their lives?

So I think the beginning of it is awareness and an active conversation, like where are the bridges? Where are the points of contact? If these are the gifts, what are the opportunities?

I have a friend who's pastoring a community right now that's doing this really well. And one of the things that really strikes me about his stories is, this is how people are actually coming to faith. You know, that's a really tough nut to crack for a lot of us in Western culture is, how do you start, you know, with someone who has perhaps no conviction of God at all and bring them into a Christian story of a God revealed in Jesus.

And the most common answer that his church is experiencing by extending relationships really well is that people exist among them as a church community and are captured by the story after finding the relationship, which is a much different model than people thought of historically, which is basically you convert and become part of the church. But in churches that are really doing this well, it's extending relationship and people experiencing Jesus, and God seeming plausible as the community's life together makes God's love seem plausible.

JP: The last guest we have for you today is Dr. Stuart Murray. He is the co-founder of the urban expression and the Anabaptist Mennonite Network. He's also the director for the Center for Anabaptist Studies in Bristol. He is the author of about 20 books, including *The Naked Anabaptist*, and a new book coming out now called *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities*.

We asked Stuart Murray the same question: how has this idea of community or principle of community been lived out specifically within our Anabaptist circles? Here's how he responded.

Dr. Stuart Murray: Yeah, and I think this is probably something which is important for all Christian traditions rather than just the Anabaptist tradition. I think many traditions would be emphasizing this, but it has been something which Anabaptist historically have majored on and have seen as being really important.

I think there is something about our cultural context which makes it even more significant at the moment. Individualism is rampant and yet a yearning for community seems to be particularly in the rising generation. This mismatch between wanting to be individual - nobody can tell me what to do, I make my own choices, and yet loneliness and a desperation for some form of meaningful community, and a community that is more than just some kind of formal membership, of a community of friends, a community of fellow travellers.

And I'm a little bit wary of the term fellowship. It's very familiar, but it just often seems to be quite insipid. I wonder whether we need to recover something about friendship as the root of community.

Something else which many traditions have discovered that doesn't fit easily into the Anabaptist approach, but I think it's really quite important is the relationship between belonging and believing, as so the traditional Mennonite and Free Church approach has been that you believe all the right things first, you begin to behave differently and then you can belong to us. So there's quite a high bar in terms of entry, and I think what many churches, mission churches particularly are discovering, is that in a culture that is post-Christendom, where people know very little about the gospel, most people need to hang out with the Christian community for a while before they decide what they believe or make lifestyle changes.

And so being an open community, a community of belonging, a community, a welcome, seems to be very important, but doesn't diminish the need for commitment, for baptism, for a more wholehearted membership at some point. But it's an open-aged form of community, and I think that's going to be really important.

And I guess the other thing is that's certainly in the UK context, we are very much a minority community. That may not be quite so obvious in the Mennonite heartlands, but it's certainly true in the post-Christian and European context. And as a minority community, we need each other. We need the kind of countercultural support of minority communities. How do we avoid being simply suckered into the values and the priorities of our surrounding culture? And so I think community is important not just for friendship and support but also for discernment and what do we make of our culture? How do we understand what's going on? How can we support each other in pursuing alternative possibilities?

JP: I think those were two more articulate, well-thought-through answers when it comes to wrestling with or trying to understand how this has been lived out in anabaptist communities. And it's interesting to me, again, recognizing that, of course, this episode has been heavily weighted towards those who come from outside of the Anabaptist movement, from outside of this community, and moved their way in, that they both sort of carried with them, Stuart and Meghan both carried or gave us a little bit of a challenge, I think, to consider how it is that we are creating community together and how we think about those things as Anabaptists.

AD: In particular, I just love this notion that the community that we have, that we appreciate, that we benefit from is not just for us, it's for the world. There's an invitation here of making sure that we are not hoarding it. I get this picture in my mind, like we ought not to be like, Smaug the dragon who's sitting on top of a pile of treasure just because it's his and only his. And we can make fun or we can make light. But I think there is a bit of a directive here where the church ought not to behave this way.

And if we truly believe that there's something spiritually and emotionally, relationally significant with the community of the church that's designed by God and held together by God, then of course we want to extend that out to the world around us, knowing that there's this epidemic of loneliness.

And then I think both Stuart and Megan also brought out this notion that if we are able to share this wonderful Christ-like community that we have, that that can really be a part of the process of God's love and the gospel becoming realized.

JP: Right. There's this very intentional shift in thinking where maybe traditionally anabaptist thinking has been very focused on behaving a certain way in order to be accepted into a community, both Stuart and Megan pushed to say, let's flip that narrative around and instead say, come be a part of our community and through that belonging within our community, we can begin to turn each other into people who look and act and sound more like Jesus.

AD: Which is not to say that believing rightly is not important. I mean, if that was something that would be the case, this podcast wouldn't exist at all. We really do want to behave and believe rightly, but I think it is to really acknowledge that the good news of Jesus just becomes real. We put flesh on bones when we express that in community and relationship with one another, and so why wouldn't we want to express the good news in that way so that ultimately, yeah, we like you said, Jesse, we can spur each other on to live and behave and believe more and more Christlike all the time.

JP: Right. There's that lovely line that Megan said, I think I'm going to try and get it right here, but it was the idea that potentially being a part of a loving community is something that makes the love of God plausible. It's something that as people come into a church community, potentially the way we lived with Holy Spirit-infused community can draw people in in a way that makes them maybe understand the love of God in a way that they haven't before.

That's a high calling for us as churches.

AD: It's a big question to ask. In the way that we are treating each other, the way that we are treating the world around us, are we making God's love plausible?

JP: Our closing song today, I think, hits on some of these themes in a beautiful way. It's a song called *Strange* and it's by Brandon Post. Brandon is a worship pastor at the Steinbach EMC. He wrote this song when he arrived at a new community and didn't quite understand

how it was that he fit in. He felt lost and alone in a new place. And I think as we consider community, what it means, why it's important and how it's been lived out in anabaptist circles, and maybe especially as we consider these challenges from Stuart and Meghan, these words are good to keep in our mind as we think about those who are wanting to enter into community, desperately looking for a home in the midst of this epidemic of loneliness that we find ourselves in and understand how we can make our churches and our Christian communities a place that is safe for those who are feeling strange.

Strange, Brandon Post

I am strange
I am out of place
There's a lot of change
I have yet to face

My world
Is on its head
Some days are as if
I'm gone or dead

Do you see me?
Do you know who I am
Or am I, just a means
Of getting it done?

My instincts
I don't trust them anymore
In this new town
At this strange door
My new friends
I keep expecting them to be
Just as close
As my old ones are to me

Well I guess that I feel tired
Of proving I'm worthwhile
In each new space

And when the damage is done
You know your heart is still on the run
To each place

A Thought to Leave With

JP: As we think about these conversations that we've had, the interviews that we've had, we want to be a bit more intentional this year about throwing out a bit of a challenge or a bit of a thought for you to leave with. We start the episode by asking what if? What if our theology could get up out of our armchairs?

And now we want to simply take a moment at the end and ask, how does that look? What would that look like? How do we take the things that we've talked about, the hypotheticals and the ideas, and translate that into something that can actually go out and have boots on and walk around in the world that we live in?

So, Andrew, do you have thoughts?

AD: I always have thoughts. That's not the problem. It's wanting to make sure the thoughts make sense. The thing that really has stuck out to me as being the directive from this episode in particular has been treating our community as a gift to be shared. And so I think that's just a great question to ask ourselves. For those of us who are listening, who are part of a Christian community and a church: how do we ensure that this is not just for us? How do we be intentional about looking for opportunities to share this community, to show people that the good news of Jesus is possible, is plausible, is persuasive because of the way that we live and treat one another and the way that we can treat others.

I just to encourage all our listeners to look for opportunities to share this. Don't always look inside the church walls, but to really consider how this relationship extends outside and to really kind of put flesh on bones for the gospel.

JP: There's something that you can kind of think about on a personal level in terms of how is it that you're engaging with these things. Are you living a life that is open to sharing the good news of Christ with the people around you and inviting others into this community?

And then you can also think about your churches and ask the question, what sort of things are our church doing? What sort of programs do we have, what sort of events do we have that make it easy for people who are outside of our community to find a way in? What is that process for inviting people who may not currently be a part of our Christian communities to come and find a seat and feel like they've got a home here with us?

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast, and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. You can check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca, where we have several additional resources available for you, including links to our guests, websites and more information, as well as full transcripts of all of our episodes. Find us on iTunes, Spotify and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today. That was Layton Friesen, Meghan Larissa Good, Stuart Murray and Steve Bell. Our intro song is *Making Us One* by Shades, and our closing song today was *Strange* by Brandon Post.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr. Our producer and audio engineer is Jesse Penner, and our administrative assistant and social media manager is Betty Ramones.

I'm Andrew Dyck, and I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist.

We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought, but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue this conversation with *In The Beginning*, as we take a look at the first few chapters of Genesis to give us insight into God's original design for community. That's next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.

Edited for clarity.