

(Re) Stitching Creation Care into our Peacemaker Identity

Outline:

- Good morning and thank you for allowing me to pre-empt the lectionary and talk at you about quilts and creation care.
- For those of you don't know, I recently joined Mennonite Church Canada's Sustainability Leadership Group, which is an advisory group that helps MC Canada's Climate Action Coordinator, Sandy Plett, implement her program. I met Sandy when we both studied at CMBC in Winnipeg, but I last **saw** Sandy while visiting Julie's niece south of Morden. Julie, I and the kids were walking through the Pembina Hills towards a cabin that Julie's niece built when out of an adjacent quarter section walked Sandy. Her and her family live just a mile or two away in a place, near Morden, called Tinker Creek on a yard that looks fitting for someone with the job title of Climate Action Coordinator. Think big garden, comfy home and alternative heating sources.
- The reason I'm telling you about Sandy and her job is that she wrote the sermon that I'm going to try to deliver. It was her quilt metaphor that I'm adapting to our church and our work. I read it and I liked it so much and thought it explained so well to me how climate action fit with my own faith and culture that I asked to borrow what I could and adapt and so here we are.
- The core metaphor or symbol for the sermon is the quilt which is why I brought this visual cue (unfold the quilts)
- It has been a while since I've spoken in church. These days, the closest I get to sermonizing is an annual lecture I give to about 60 USask students in an Arts Building Hall at 8:30 am on a random morning in January. They are riveted! Without fail, I speak from a PowerPoint presentation which always has a title slide, an outline, a bunch of slides about the Nature Conservancy of Canada and then a final slide with a buffalo on it. I almost never follow what I've written in the PowerPoint (good luck to the keeners taking notes in the front row), but I do generally follow my outline which is a shortened version of the whole thing and today's outline is:
- God loves us and the whole planet. Right now, humanity and all of creation are suffering from brokenness. Caring for creation and taking action in response to climate change (the impacts and the causes) are integral expressions of faithfulness for us as Anabaptists, who call ourselves a peace church.

Introduction

- The quilt my mom made with Emmett is a testament to genetics. Originally it was this big (partially unfold Emmett's blanket), mom and Emmett added a couple of rows when it became clear Emmett was on the fast track to being asked how tall he is (sorry buddy, you are in for some repetitive questions and being asked to reach things off of shelves by total strangers).
- And then there is our pandemic quilt made with t-shirts, masks, comfy blankets and all the things that kept us safe or reminded us of why we took precautions.
- And of course, the kilim that hangs in the foyer tells another part of the story of OMC
- And let's not forget the 100 or so quilts OMC makes and then ships to MCC every year from our multi purpose room
- But why am *I* talking about quilts when many of you have so much more experience? I want to invite you today to use your embodied knowledge of quilting/sewing/stitching/fabric/thread/patching to consider with me our identity as Anabaptists. A stretch? Perhaps! But bear with me.

This morning, I invite you to think about our Anabaptist/Mennonite identity as a quilt:

- It's an old and beautiful piece, created over time from the experiences of generations. Rough spots, patches, sparse and threadbare spots, vivid colours, tight binding and spots where the batting is coming out. Beautiful and beloved. Faded and patched. This is who we are.
- It has pieces that highlight our understanding of baptism, discipleship and pacifism, among other things.
- Our identity can be warm and comforting.
- Many of us can fit under it, and it is being expanded to make room for more.
- It's beautiful. It has history and meaning. Every patch represents something of who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be.
- And it's visible. Just like us. We have buildings and projects with our identifiers on them. What we do and who we are in the community shows up on our quilt.

I hope by this point you're buying my metaphor of our anabaptist identity as a quilt, because I'm not stopping. I'd like to suggest that we are living in a time and place **where it's important to be intentional about our quilt (our identity.)**

- This intentionality is not just about how beautiful it looks. It's also but about what it does, what it stands for, who it shelters and how far it can stretch with comfort and healing or maybe be expanded for some of that growth.
- As Mennonites, we are not known for being flashy (reminds me of Weird Al's Amish Paradise (I'm a million times as humble as thou art) We like to be the quiet in the land, and I, personally, tend to shy away from disagreement or conflict as my commitment to being Mennonite. But here we are – somehow, we're the lucky ones facing this exact moment in history. A moment of great upheaval. A moment like no other. God is with us!

As a member of MC Canada's Sustainability Leadership Group, I, along with representatives from BC, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario support Sandy. As a congregation, our main interaction with her has been the emissions reduction grant that paid for our new water heater but she also listens for and encourage congregations and regions towards responding faithfully to the climate crisis.

- This means she hear lots of stories and shares them with the committee and with MC Canada. As part of her climate action work, **new blocks are appearing on the quilt** of our Anabaptist/Mennonite identity:
 - Churches are doing emissions reducing projects. MC Canada has offered grants of up to \$3000 to 15 congregations across the country for such projects in the last two years, and will offer the same to another 8 congregations this winter. During the process of reaching out to MC Sask churches I heard from several that had already completed projects that reduced their emissions without the encouragement of any grants
 - Our youth group held a fundraiser to contribute to a green project that included contributing to the new tankless water heater, reducing energy use significantly.
 - In Kitchener, Burning Bush Forest Church worships exclusively outdoors. This wild church practice is taking hold and helping our community become more connected to the land, our kin.
 - Forest church at Shekinah
 - Rosthern Mennonite Church is planting trees on a congregant's land

- In Winnipeg, Home Street Mennonite Church sets aside 1% of its annual budget for reparations toward reconciliation with Indigenous neighbours– but additionally has committed to land-sharing. This means that any Indigenous groups who want to use their building, will be offered use of the space free of charge. Which has led a local non-profit offering cultural enrichment through beading classes to meet in the church.
- Youth Pastor Aaron Thiessen, from River East Church in Winnipeg speaks about how he’s working to build a new narrative for the young people in his congregation – one of hope rather than of despair. He compares the diet of bad news stories that we are consuming to the diet of sailors who died of scurvy in the early days of ocean voyages. Hope is the Vitamin C of our day – if we want to survive this voyage in treacherous waters for long stretches, we need stories of hope to hold off the scurvy of overwhelm and despair. AMEN!
- These are the kinds of blocks showing up in the quilting room these days. And these are just the ones that I’m aware of! These new blocks joining the multitudes of blocks that have come before. They are demonstrations of our identity. The visible patches confirm for us and for others who we are and how we are in the world. These are our witness!

In talking to Sandy and being in Mennonite circles, I have learned that **not everyone is completely convinced of the connection between Climate Action/Creation Care and our identity as followers of Jesus. Not everyone thinks these patches really belong on our Anabaptist quilt.**

- I hear this doubt come up in questions like “what does Climate Action have to do with Jesus?” and another, “Is this just another social justice concern?” And sometimes it’s apparent in the blank look I get when I tell people about the work Mennonite Church Canada is doing. “Climate Action... and the church? “
- One of Sandy’s fundamental roles as MC Canada’s Climate Action Coordinator is to stitch these colourful blocks of climate action right into our identity as Anabaptist Mennonites, or to encourage us to, I guess. Sandy’s not making anyone do anything – not her style.
- And part of that work is to show that this work is not “just another social justice concern” or “politics in the church where it doesn’t belong.”

And I, too am convinced that it's pretty important to firmly attach these blocks to our identity quilt. And I'm going to tell you why!

- For us to sustain this difficult and counter-cultural work overtime, we need to **know** that they are not just “Christian extras” or to use the quilt metaphor – scrap projects for practice. Or the extra flaps Kathy put on Emmett’s blanket that don’t do anything. We need to understand that responding to the injustice and suffering caused by climate change is as essential to who we are as followers of Jesus as is prayer and scripture, generosity and hospitality. It might feel like we’ve added them, just like the extra foot of blanket was added when Emmett grew a bunch, but they are fundamental to being a complete blanket.

So let's extend the quilt metaphor to explore how these climate action/creation care/pursuit of justice blocks really to belong in the quilt!

- Let's start by talking about the backing of the quilt. The quilt is backed with this one piece of fabric, holding all the pieces together. Everything is stitched to this backing. Let's say that Scripture is the backing of our Anabaptist Identity Quilt.
- In the Old Testament we read prophet after prophet calling the people to pursue justice, to proclaim freedom for the oppressed, to feed the hungry and set prisoners free. To return land and resources for fair distribution, to share food and alleviate suffering.
 - Climate change is predicted to be the major cause of future wars, future famines
- In the New Testament there's Jesus. Jesus stripped away the nit-picky rules, exclusionary traditions and power-over tendencies to say simply, “Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourselves.” Jesus walked straight towards suffering, called out injustice and said outright that the most important commandment is love. The pursuit of justice is love in action.
 - And love **is** an appropriate motivator and the perfect context for the response of the church to the climate crisis.
- If this is our backing, climate action ministry fits well into our Anabaptist Mennonite identity quilt.

Now on to the Batting.

- If you've ever snuggled under a quilt, you know that the part you never see is one of the most important parts - the batting. Let's extend our metaphor yet again and see how the theological work of our wide and beautiful Anabaptist family provides structure and substance for our quilt.
 - Back in 1977, (this would be the point in a story when my dad would say, "well, you remember that, right – and then I would have to point out that I was only just born that year, so no) when our denomination was called the General Conference Mennonite Church, they put together a document called "Christian Stewardship of Energy Resources" This document pointed out in 1977 that we humans are not above or outside of nature:
 - *The biblical text reminds us of this by indicating that humankind does not have a separate day of creation, but shares the day and the table that has been prepared for them with the animals (Genesis 1:19-26).*
 - They go on to say that:
 - *Since we now know that our spaceship earth is a closed system with finite (limited) rather than infinite (limitless) resources, it becomes apparent that the present generation has a responsibility to all future generations to so use and conserve the limited energy resources of the earth, that future human habitation of this planet will not be either impossible or else greatly impoverished (Isaiah 45:18-20).*
 - We were sounding a warning already then. Talking about responsibility to the next generations already when I was a baby.
 - In 1989, just 12 years later, the same body, the General Conference Mennonite Church put out a Resolution called "Stewardship of the Earth: Resolution on Environment and Faith Issues." This document begins this way:
 - *From every side we are made aware today that the Lord's earth--the natural environment that sustains us all--is suffering serious degradation at human hands.*
 - And then they stated:
 - *To date most churches have given low priority to environmental problems. We believe this is a serious mistake because all of*

these issues relate to Christian faith and lifestyle and to the Christian's desire to be an earth caretaker and peacemaker and to exercise stewardship of the earth along with stewardship of money and stewardship of the gospel.

- If we were writing this resolution today, we might almost be able to cut and paste this statement.
- More recently - in 2007 the delegates of Mennonite Church Canada approved an affirmation statement entitled *Caring for Creation is the Will of God*, from which the following excerpt was taken:
 - *“We believe that God longs for the well being and health of the whole world, for all of creation is bound together and belongs to God, who creates, preserves, and redeems all things. Therefore, we are called to commit ourselves to be good stewards of the earth. Our concern for faithfulness and discipleship should lead us to care for creation.”*;
- Fast forward 15 years and we were still working at this. The language has gotten stronger and the vision broader.
- In 2024 Mennonite Central Committee articulated the connection between climate action and peace. This is from MCC’s Peace Sunday resources of 2024
 - *In order to untangle the web of climate change, resource extraction, inequality, racism, colonialism and corruption, we must seek to be in right relationship with one another. It is imperative that affected communities be involved in making policy decisions to ensure that rash actions do not cause unintended harm.*
 - *We can be climate peacemakers if we approach changemaking with an attitude of love, humility and listening, restoring right relationships as we restore God’s Earth.*
- In 2025 the global Anabaptist church received a word of encouragement from the Mennonite World Conference Faith & Life Commission and the Creation Care Task Force in the form of an article entitled “God so loved the cosmos – The environmental crisis and our mandate to care for creation”
 - *Care for creation in our day calls for us as the body of Christ to call out injustice and violence in solidarity with the vulnerable. Creation care and seeking justice are inseparable.*
- Creation care and seeking justice are inseparable. Let that sink in.

- These statements are more than enough to serve as batting for this quilt of our Anabaptist identity. And for the designers among you, I'd say they strongly suggest that **these quilt blocks we're talking about fit right into the section of our quilt that celebrates and proclaims the Peace part of our identity.** If you're partial to crazy quilts this doesn't really matter, but if the pattern and organization are important to you, there is a place for these blocks in the order of this beautiful chaos!
- I'm so grateful to the words that MCC and Mennonite World Conference are providing us, the church. **These writings are a form of collective action that can bolster our confidence and help us to find words to express what we feel is the call of God in our lives.** It can be so hard to articulate why this work matters to us! We may need it when we face interrogation or opposition from other Christians with opposing viewpoints. We may need this batting to serve as a foundation to push back against encounter theologies or rhetoric that permit Christians to commit violence against the marginalized, the vulnerable, and the world we all live in.
- And we will need to be able to articulate the connection between our actions and our identity for ourselves when the going gets tough. When we're tired or discouraged and hope no longer springs forth from our successes. That's when we need this to be built right into our identity. So that we can continue this work of climate peacemaking or creation caring or whatever we want to call it – journeying together on a path of faithfulness because it's who God calls us to be. Not because of our wild success or the warm fuzzies it brings us. We need this strength, this language, this “batting” to sustain us.
- **So back to the quilt blocks! In this metaphor, these are the stories, the evidence that we are living out this vision of peace.** In a recent article in “Anabaptist World” about God's love for the cosmos an American Anabaptist named Shirley Yoder Brubaker wrote:
 - *By installing a compost bin, drying clothes on an outside line, turning down the heat, riding bikes to church or checking our carbon footprint, we are not just joining the bandwagon of woke folks. We are participating in the redemption of the world.*
- I love that she directly connects these actions to participation in the redemption of the world! That gives our recycling efforts a little more weight!

- Now, you might hope that this metaphor has met its end, but as I got to this part, I realized that **I haven't talked about the thread.**
- This is a quilt we're talking about. It's got layers that give it body and strength – this is no flimsy news printed identity! Thread is what holds the whole thing together. Layers of backing, batting and blocks. Imagine this thing is hand-quilted – hours of needles and thread, thimbles and scissors, faithful and focussed hand work that holds all of this in place with love and care. I wonder if maybe the communal life of the church is like these threads. The communal life of the church – our worship, our committees and task groups, our education and mentoring. This is the thread that strengthens and shapes our identity and capacity for work that faces outward.
- Three things came to mind as I pondered this thread idea:
 - First, I wondered if there are places where climate faithfulness can be written into our job descriptions, committee mandates, the use of our spaces/buildings and vision statements so that it shapes our work in an ongoing way?
 - Second, I thought about our kids and the next generation. Are we practicing climate faithfulness in ways that will help our children find their way into this joyful practice too?
 - This be story-telling where we share our climate peacebuilding efforts, where we share about sticking our necks out and being courageous. Maybe we share our fears and regrets. And definitely, we listen as our younger generations dream new dreams and share new visions for healing and redemption of the world they are inheriting.
 - And third; How is our worship and fellowship adding thread to this identity? How do we care for each other in ways that build right relationship and prioritize wholeness right here among us?
- The challenges of our day, of this moment in history are great. I am so grateful for this quilt of comfort, for this place to belong. May God bless our dreaming and our acting. And may our quilt stitches hold and strengthen us as we respond faithfully to the climate crisis.