

**“No Other Foundation”**  
**1 Corinthians 3:4-11; Hebrews 11:8-11, 13-16, 35-40; 12:1-2**

**Goessel Community Worship Service Commemorating  
150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Migration to Kansas**

**November 24, 2024, Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church  
Peter Goerzen, Bethel College**

**DRAFT**

**Celebrating 150 Years!**

Grace to all of you and peace from God, and from our Lord Jesus Christ!

Well, this has been a good, rich, full year of commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the migration of the founders of this community to this place, and we are coming now to the end. These events have been dreamed about and carefully planned for a long time, and these past months, we’ve been remembering the lives of the saints who have gone before us and have passed along their testimony to us. We’ve been celebrating families and telling stories, reuniting, walking through pastures, searching out roots, feasting together, telling our history, thanking God for the foundation laid for us!

This is a gift – one that not all have – to know where you’ve come from. To know the larger story in which your life is caught up – the saga of “faith and courage and action,” even of hardship and at times of failure. It’s a gift to have a culture and a community to help give meaning and structure and even delicious carb-and-dairy-laden flavor to our lives.

And just as God has been faithful in the past, so is God faithful in the present. To be sure, our congregations are active in studying the Bible together in various settings, in serving together through the MDS cabinet shop, the food pantry, and Bethesda Home. And we serve our wider community and world through involvement with the homeless shelter and with Mennonite Central Committee (meat canning, tying comforters, participating in the relief sale) and other organizations, and much, much more. Our congregations have many strong, devout, gracious, and wise leaders. There are lots of beautiful moments when people support one another in time of need and celebrate in times of joy and learn and grow together and worship and pray together. And this is all evidence of the Spirit’s work here among us, and we thank God for this as well.

But we don’t gather to give thanks because of what we have done currently or in the past.

**Unsettled about Settling**

And I don’t know about you all, but I’ve also been feeling a little unsettled these past months as we have commemorated the migration. I’ve felt a little unsettled that our ancestors, who themselves knew what it was to be pushed off their land and to suffer under unsympathetic and oppressive regimes, seemed often to give little heed to the process of pushing people of these lands, which made way for cheap homesteads.

I’ve felt a little unsettled because I wonder if our commemorations are creating bridges of belonging or walls of exclusion for folks whose families have more recently joined this community.

But most of all, I’ve found myself unsettled by the fact that 150 years ago our ancestors, for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ and their discernment of his calling to a life of

yieldedness, obedience, and peace, became sojourners, foreigners, and immigrants – a people on the move – twice in one century! And now we’re commemorating staying put for 150 years.

For our ancestors, both migrations in the 1800s were the direct and indirect result of their refusal to bear arms. Now if you read about our ancestors, all the way back to the very beginning of the movement in the 1500s, you’ll find that we have ever imperfectly pursued Christ’s calling to love our enemies, to lay down the sword and take up the cross, to wield only the weapons of the Spirit, and to speak words of peace.

But at their best, our spiritual ancestors didn’t refuse to bear arms because they believed them to be ineffective (though they believed they were), nor only because to do so would be disobedient to Christ (though they believed it surely was), nor finally because to do so would be to conform to the world around them (though that was true too).

At their best, they refused because, at a fundamental level – a foundational level – they had been changed, reborn, by the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, into the image and likeness of Christ, and they *could* not bear arms.<sup>1</sup> They could not conceive of the possibility of bearing worldly weapons, when they had been armed with weapons of the Spirit. The thought of firing a bullet into the body of one whom Christ came to redeem – even often another Christian – was unimaginable because at their best their imaginations were taken by another kingdom and allegiance and they couldn’t see the world the same way.

And I have to confess I’m a little unsettled because I wonder if I – if we – have opened ourselves up to, have yielded before, have been so captivated by the gospel of Jesus, so transformed by the Holy Spirit, that we would leave behind 150-year old farmsteads and ancestors’ homes, and beautiful and sacred spaces of worship, and bear only the weapons of the Spirit even in mortal peril and follow Jesus call together into a risky and uncertain future.

I guess I’m saying that I’m feeling a little unsettled about a settled foundation.

The book of Hebrews gives a role call of the ancient heroes of the faith – Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and all their family and Moses and Rahab David and all the prophets and many more, who were “persecuted and tormented” and “wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”

These spiritual ancestors are people on the move – sojourners, not settlers.

### **Processes of Settling In and Settling Down**

Of course, there’s never been any kind of ideal age of the church, no matter how much we idealize the past. In every age, individuals and families, even churches and communities can become settled. In fact, just 20 years after they arrived, this immigrant community was feeling a bit unsettled about their peace witness, and they hosted a consultation in which they discussed how many had seemed to have settled for mere words on a page outlining their refusal to bear arms, without a deeper understanding of the biblical foundation on which it’s based, and without the spirit’s inner transformation made evident in *everyday* peaceful living in their relationships and words they spoke.<sup>2</sup> This just 20 years after this community had unsettled itself to move to a foreign land for the sake of the gospel of peace.

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1 Karl Koop’s discussion on this point is particularly important: Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2003), 99–100, 102; Karl Koop, “A Complication for the Mennonite Peace Tradition: Wilhelm Mannhardt’s Defense of Military Service,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (2016): 37–38.

2 See S. S. Haury, “Die Wehrlosigkeit in der Sonntagschule: wie lehrt man sie: nur so im Allgemeinen oder direkt nach unserem (mennonitischen) Bekenntnis?” (Sunday School Convention, Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, August 1894).

It took less than five years after their founding for the folks at Corinth to settle into factions and begin to build on something other than the foundation of Jesus Christ. Some were flaunting their gifts in flamboyant worship. Some were breaking the church apart with legal disputes. Some were using their new-found freedom to hurt others. Some who were wealthier were indulging, while those who were poorer went without. Some tried to build on their founder Paul, some on the traditionalist Peter, some on the mighty preacher Apollos.<sup>3</sup> But “what is Apollos,” Paul asked. “What is Paul?” (1 Cor 3:5)

How easy it is to settle down and to be drawn into division and disregard, to build on status instead of service, on splashy worship instead of transformational discipleship, or traditionalism that already has the answers, or on the founders of old, or on charismatic leaders! So What is Paul? What is Apollos? What is Buller or Wedel or Voth?

“Servants,” Paul said, “as the Lord assigned to each.” “For [one] planted, and [another] watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:5-6).

Indeed, many congregations experience bedrock shifting beneath their foundation, as distractions and divisions start to prevent our vision from focusing on Jesus, and soon the foundation settles into the patterns of the world, and the salt loses its saltiness.

Our forbears wrestled with these tensions in Prussia. With German nationalism on the rise following the Napoleonic wars,<sup>4</sup> many Mennonites were looking with hope to generals and princes for the “rescue of our threatened fatherland, the preservation of our country, our property, our families, our prosperity.” And thus they called upon Mennonites also to join the “battle for the honor and the right of the fatherland, ‘with God, for king and fatherland.’”<sup>5</sup>

Unsettled by such a settled nationalism, Wilhelm Ewert from Prussia, who would join the delegation to North America with the representatives from Alexanderwohl, and who I believe is Pastor Brad Penner’s great-great-grandfather, was so disillusioned with the rising nationalism and militarism among Mennonites that he finally wrote a letter to the editor of the Mennonite Newspaper in 1872, just before leaving for North America. “Were [our enemies] not also created by God and redeemed by the precious blood of Christ? Is waging war on them, even if they have been deceived into hating us, the brotherly, universal love that Christ commanded?” he asked.

In order to settle, Mennonites had agreed to arrangements in which according the Elder Ewert they “ceased to win souls for the kingdom of peace and the gospel of peace of Lord Jesus. ... [no longer] built from living stones gathered from all nations to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, but rather ... physical descendants of Mennonite parents.”<sup>6</sup>

What mattered was heritage, not faithfulness, not transformation and new birth, and for Elder Ewert, the only hope was to be found in the sojourner spirit, with new congregations

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3 Issues discussed at various points in 1 Corinthians.

4 See discussion in Mark Jantzen, “Vistula Delta Mennonites Encounter Modern German Nationalism, 1813-1820,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78, no. 2 (April 2004): 185–212.

5 Jakob Mannhardt, “Können und dürfen wir Mennoniten der von dem Staate geforderten Wehrpflicht genügen?,” *Mennonitische Blätter* 19, no. 6, 7, 9 (August 1872): 43. The slogan goes back to 1813 and was frequently employed by the Prussian military. Though Mannhardt wrote 50 years after the Przechovka group left Prussia for Alexanderwohl, his sentiments reflect those of earlier Mennonites as well. By the 1820s, when the Przechovka group emigrated, there were almost no Dutch Mennonite pacifists left (some even fought in the French Revolution), some northwest German Mennonites were fighting by 1816, and some Prussian Mennonites fought in the Napoleonic wars. See Koop, “A Complication for the Mennonite Peace Tradition: Wilhelm Mannhardt’s Defense of Military Service,” 30–31.

6 Wilhelm Ewert, “Wilhelm Ewert Responds to Jakob Mannhardt, 1872,” trans. Mark Jantzen, *Mennonite Life* 78 (2024), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/2024/07/08/wilhelm-ewert-responds-to-jakob-mannhardt-1872/>.

emerging in distant lands and with those who were preparing to emigrate. Meanwhile in the German lands that nationalist spirit only grew over the subsequent and tragic decades.

And we know the challenges before *us* to remain as settlers as we continue to build in *this* generation. We know how easily the church becomes co-opted by secular allegiances and forgets to pray for God's kingdom. Temptations to put trust and loyalty in nation instead of in Christ and his *cross-national* body aren't going away any time soon.

We know how we're surrounded with instant gratification that so often makes Jesus' call to commitment to costly, life-long discipleship seem quaint; how sometimes it seems that every advertisement and TV show is praising promiscuity over God's vision for covenant fidelity;

How movies and cartoons and news reporters rehearse the myths of retributive justice and redemptive violence and subtly lead us to forget our foundation of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies and practice forgiveness just as he had, or perhaps, we are simply embarrassed by that foundation;

How we're so overloaded with instant sound-bytes and slogans and snippets of Scripture that it is easy for the Bible to become "simply one more piece of competing input in our culture," and "we reduce Biblical truths to sound bytes rather than immersing ourselves in the stories, psalms, wisdom, instruction, and prophecy."<sup>7</sup>

It's so easy to settle into the patterns of the world around us, especially when they reward us so quickly.

### **A Chain of Witnesses to Christ Our Foundation**

Sensing the congregation's flagging faithfulness, sensing their willingness to settle into their own ancient heritage, the author of Hebrews develops an image of a long line of faithful witnesses who lived out the story of God's faithfulness generation after generation, amid peril and persecution, mockery and martyrdom (Heb 11), faithful witnesses who had held fast to the foundation.

"Yet all these," the preacher proclaims, "though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made complete" (vv. 39-40).

Heritage that is a thing of the past and some kind of badge of honor is little more than the dead weight of a field of headstones, but heritage that humbles us, that draws us into its story, that is for the sojourner, for it builds with living stones (1 Peter 2:1-6).

We know that our foundation isn't delicious verenike or quilts or winter wheat; nor is it gravestones or family names and genealogies; nor is it the beautiful worship spaces we have shared over the years; not even Anabaptist and Mennonite History or what happened in Europe two and three and four and now nearly five centuries years ago; nor the witness of the martyrs of our history; nor the bravery of migration nor even the determination and faith of our ancestors in the faith.

These are all wonderful, good things, amazing evidence of God's grace and faithfulness over the generations, of the Holy Spirit's work, of Christ's ongoing presence in the world through the life of his church, yet none of this is why it's worthwhile to commemorate what happened 150 years ago.

But if commemorating what happened in the past and keeping up our connection to it *can* unsettle us enough that we too "confess that we are sojourners and foreigners on the earth, ...

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7 Spoken to Mennonite Church USA delegate assembly by Patty Shelly, July 2011.

thinking not of what we might leave behind but desiring a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one” –

Commemorating 150 year is worthwhile if it draws us into the story to make complete the faithfulness of our forbears – if it draws us ultimately to *the* Faithful Witness, the Firstborn of the Dead, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, the Ruler of the Kings of Earth, the Prince of Peace, the Word of God, the Light of the World, the Lamb who was Slain and Lives Again, God’s own Son, our Savior, Teacher, and Lord Jesus Christ, for there is no other foundation. This is why we celebrate and give thanks for our past this day, to become humbled, unsettled, and to hold fast to that foundation by joining the chain of witnesses.

Following Jesus, joining the chain of witnesses, as of old, may we still seek to be a people of reconciliation and forgiveness (Matt 5:21-26, 38-48; 6:12-15; 18:21-35) in a culture fraught with division and infatuated with retribution.

Following Jesus in a world still clinging idolatrously to its weapons and dying by them, may we still bear *God’s* armor of truth and righteousness, of proclamation of the gospel of peace, of faith and salvation, and the only sword any follower of Christ has ever needed, which is the word of God (Eph 6:10-18; cf. 2 Cor 10:4).

Following Jesus, may we still seek to be a people of plain and honest word and action (Matt 5:33-37) in a corrupt world of asterisks, small print, and half truths.

Following Jesus in a world still aching for good news, may we still seek to declare the gospel in word, in truth, and in action.

Following Jesus in an age still consumed with things of momentary significance – wealth, power, homes and cars, legacies, passing pleasures, may we still set our minds on things of eternal value and fix our eyes on Jesus, the “author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

Surrounded by powers still vying for our allegiance – politicians and nations and corporations and brands and schools and entertainment and sports teams and even churches and denominations – may we still say with Jesus, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone!” (Matt 4:10)

Constantly lured by settler securities – wealth and walls and weapons – may we still seek the sojourner paths of relationship and justice and hospitality and ultimate trust and dependence on God security and our future.

Following Jesus in a disoriented culture still repeating Pontius Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38), we look to Jesus as our foundation, and know that we have seen the Truth in the flesh (John 1:14).

When we’ve got so many questions that we’re struggling to know what to think, when our faith is swallowed by the fog doubt and uncertainty and it’s so hard to see God, we look to Jesus as our foundation, and we hear his gracious words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:6, 9) and we fix our eyes on Jesus, by loving Jesus, by following him, by keeping his commandments, by worshiping him.

And in moments of fear, of pain, and of loss, may we again turn to Jesus as our forerunner, who weeps with us, invites us to come to his embrace, who is here, dwelling among us to comfort and to heal, and in time, to fill us with new hope and purpose.

Linked with the ancient chain of witnesses, sisters and brothers, our foundation is the good news of the incarnation, ministry, cross, and resurrection of Jesus, who announced the coming reign of God, who offers generous forgiveness and healing, who calls and sends us as his Body, the Church.

There are still builders named Paul and Peter and Unruh and Schmidt – and also Lujano and Martinez and Smith – but it is God who still gives the growth in each case.

This coming year and beyond, by God's grace, I'll keep walking the land of the old Voth-Friesen farmstead, and I'll keep enjoying verenike and zwiebach and cherry moos, and I'll sing "Nun Ist Sie Erschienen" this Christmas. My prayer is that it won't keep me settled and stagnant, but that it will keep me connected to and unsettled by a tradition whose foundation is Jesus Christ, and to those who would leave their life behind to follow Jesus.

In Hebrews, the long chain of witnesses – all those who have run before – file into the stadium and surround those who struggle to run in the present with their stories, their testimony. Sisters and brothers, as "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," let us become unsettled, "let us lay aside every weight and the sin that slows us down," and "let us run with perseverance the race that is set out before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2). Amen.