



Congregations and Polarization

Listening Tour

ANABAPTIST MENNONITE BIBLICAL SEMINARY

Listening Tour Overview

The Congregations and Polarization Project is learning how a climate of political and cultural polarization affects the work of pastors and their congregations. While polarization is never only about politics, the most polarizing issues are highlighted in an election year, especially a national election year. Abortion, human sexuality, guns and crime, climate change, American foreign policy, immigration, and so on—if it's a divisive issue, the 2024 campaigns have probably shined a bright light on it.

The best way to find out how this is affecting pastors and their congregations is to go out and ask them in person—so we are. We are traveling to sites across Indiana. These include: Elkhart County, The Region (the counties nearest Chicago), the Indianapolis suburbs, downtown Indianapolis, Boswell (near the Illinois border), and Ogilville (between Columbus and Seymour). All told, we will share meals with pastors in 10 different events involving a total between 80 and 100 pastors. These meetings are in addition to the dozens of monthly focus groups we hold with our dedicated team of pastors and the dozens of interviews we conduct across the state.

For this Listening Tour, we asked certain pastors to bring together small groups of their peers to create a welcoming, secure environment where people could speak their minds.

What follows is a very brief summary of one of these ten meetings. Our project's analysis will compare and contrast the meetings to describe the situation in its full context, but each of these meetings had value in its own right and deserves its own brief recounting.

Mennonite Pastors in Northern Indiana

The first stop on our listening tour was lunch with a group of Mennonite pastors from the area around Elkhart, Goshen, and South Bend. These pastors represent the “liberal” wing of the Mennonite tradition, so they were very tuned-in to the political values of their congregations' members. We met in a beautiful conference room on the campus of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS).

As expected, issues surrounding gender identity play a role in their congregations. Mennonites have historically been traditionalist in many ways, but they have also been progressive in others, notably peace and justice issues. More progressive congregations within the tradition now affirm diverse gender identities and sexualities. Some congregations have gone through a formal discernment process and become open-and-affirming (O&A), meaning they welcome LGBTQ+ people into full communion with the ability to hold leadership positions and get married by the church. There are several different conferences within the Mennonite tradition and they do not all take the same stance on human sexuality. Congregational realignment among those conferences was inevitable and is still underway.

We ask all the pastors on our listening tour which issue most energizes or alarms the members of their congregations. For these Mennonite pastors, that issue is America's role in supporting Israel in its war in Gaza (or Palestine—pastors used both terms). When it comes to living out Mennonite values in the political sphere, the inclination toward peace, and specifically against war, is unifying for Mennonites in a way that gender-identity is not.

Mennonites are a small group in the United States and are relatively small even in Indiana; they are a “peace church” widely known for simple living. It would be fair to call them counter-cultural and most would happily describe themselves that way. After all, there are deep, historic ties between Mennonites and the Amish, two wings of the Anabaptist tradition, and the Amish are certainly counter-cultural by any measure. But there are places in Elkhart County, especially around Goshen, home of a leading Mennonite university, where Mennonites are mainstream.

Our lunchtime discussion provided a helpful reminder that even for people who are homogeneous in many ways, there is plenty of room for division. Mennonites are a group whose members are nearly unanimous about America’s role in the Middle East, but are far apart on human sexuality. It is not that any are unwelcoming to LGBTQ+ people, but they have different opinions about marriage or about leadership in the church.

And sexuality is not the only kind of tension caused

by diversity. One pastor told the story of their congregation’s very successful outreach efforts toward recent Mexican immigrants. The immigrants were so fond of the outreach pastors that they started attending the church sponsoring the outreach. This was welcomed by the existing members until the number of attending Mexican immigrants got larger, leading to more of the worship service being spoken in Spanish and the worship music becoming louder and faster. Many of the original congregation members were made uncomfortable by the change—though as Mennonites, they also felt bad about being uncomfortable. They wanted to be tolerant and welcoming, but worship has a “feel” as well as a message.

The lunch also provided a reminder of the incredible diversity among religious values and priorities. What Mennonites see as crucial to a Christian witness is not necessarily what other Christians see at all. For example, when this piece was written, six Listening Tour meals had been held and Israel/Gaza/Palestine was only mentioned one other time, only in passing.



A group of pastors gathers at the campus of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) to discuss the current state of polarization and how it affects their ministries and congregations. September 2024