

Anabaptist Common Practices

From convictions to practices

For over twenty years the Anabaptist Network has offered as a ‘centre of gravity’ seven core convictions, an attempt to summarise and contextualise distinctive features of the Anabaptist vision. These are not intended to be a comprehensive theological statement, nor do those who associate with the Network ‘sign up’ to them in any way. But they provide focus, inspiration and ongoing challenge. They are not regarded as fixed and have been revised on occasions. They provide the framework for *The Naked Anabaptist* book.

Over the past three or four years we have been investigating ways in which we might move on from identifying core convictions to common practices. In order to avoid becoming or appearing prescriptive, we have chosen to speak of ‘common’ rather than ‘core’ practices. Another helpful term, coined by philosopher Albert Borgmann, is ‘focal practices’. What kinds of things do individuals or communities shaped by the Anabaptist vision do, and how do these practices shape those individuals and communities?

As the new Anabaptist Mennonite Network takes shape and explores opportunities both for planting Anabaptist churches and resourcing existing churches that want to become explicitly Anabaptist, this conversation about common practices has become more significant and more urgent. A small group has been discussing this for some time, but we want now to open this up more widely and welcome insights and suggestions from across the Network.

As we do this, it might be helpful to clarify three provisos:

1. Many of the practices adopted and valued by Anabaptists will be shared widely with many Christians from other traditions. There will be distinctive practices or emphases, but there will also be much in common.
2. Some of the practices may be identifiable in and derived from the history and experiences of the early Anabaptists, but this was not a uniform movement, so there will be no standard checklist to be discovered or adopted. For example, some early Anabaptists, but only some, practised foot-washing or formed common purse communities.
3. Some of the practices may not be traceable to early Anabaptism but may be associated with the evolving tradition or with contemporary expressions of Anabaptism. For example, hospitality and shared meals often characterise Anabaptist communities, but it is difficult to find resources on this in the early documents.

Four starters for discussion

It is probably helpful to continue this discussion in conversation with suggestions that have already been made, rather than starting again from scratch. Below are four tentative lists to stimulate further thinking.

A. Tom Yoder Neufeld

Tom and Rebecca Yoder Neufeld, Canadian Mennonites, spent several weeks in the UK a few years ago interacting with the Network in various ways. When they returned, we invited them to offer their perspectives on the question of common practices. Tom responded:

Much of what constitutes Anabaptist core practices is reflected in what Christians who use the Bible as a guide for corporate life would also list. It is important to recognize that “Anabaptist practices,” especially if that is understood to reflect the movement from its beginnings, have to do with a commitment to do church in a way most faithful to the Scriptures. So we would counsel a full-orbed list rather than only “distinctives,” which then sometimes take over as the whole list.

These have not been put in any weighted or intentional order nor fine-tuned for wording.

- Following Jesus in life as informed by the gospels and the descriptions of “walking in Christ” in the epistles.
- Regular gathering for corporate worship
- Bible reading/study/meditation/discernment, individually but also for community formation and decision making
- Prayer
- Mutual accountability or giving and receiving counsel – both community discernment and permission to speak into each other's lives
- Mutual aid (practical and material)
- Reconciliation practices within the personal sphere, but also in and for the broader world
- Public peace witness – peace with God through Christ and peace within the human community (e.g., evangelism, church planting, as well as peace activism and advocacy)
- Communion (Lord’s Supper) grounded in both our participation in Christ and our reconciliation with one another
- Baptism on confession of faith (or other practices that allow persons to claim their infant baptism as adults – this is an important pastoral adjustment in our time but we are not of one mind as to whether it is a core practice alternative which should be listed)
- Truth-telling (refusal to swear in obedience to Jesus’ teaching, but also resolute integrity in communication within the community of faith and in the wider world)
- Service (examples: foot-washing as symbolic rite, taking on humble tasks, service in and to the wider community).

B. Steve Kriss

Steve is a regional leader among American Mennonites who has visited the UK on several occasions and responded to a request to suggest, from his experience of US Mennonites, what might be regarded as common practices. This is his list:

- Anabaptists pray without being flowery
- Seek the shalom of their city without bowing to its idols
- Speak words of good news even in the face of death

- Forgive their enemies by working to eliminate barriers of injustice personally and communally
- Study the Bible and the words of the great cloud of witnesses
- Gather for worship regularly sharing in multi-voiced community
- Share what they have from food to finance to artistic and intellectual resources
- Steward all of God's gifts of creation.

C. Stuart Murray Williams

As he has pondered this issue over the past few years, Stuart has gradually constructed a list, which is offered here (in no particular order) as another contribution for further reflection:

- Simple/gentle/uncluttered living
- Hospitality and shared meals
- Lifestyle and verbal witness
- Mutual aid
- Women and men in partnership
- Non-hierarchical leadership
- Consensual decision-making
- Community hermeneutics
- Multi-voiced and multi-gifted worship
- Baptism with emphasis on accountability
- Communion with emphasis on the community
- Foot-washing
- Active peacemaking, exploring alternatives to violence
- A restorative approach to justice
- A transformational approach to conflict
- Truth-telling, avoiding oaths

D. Residential Weekend

At the AMN residential weekend at the beginning of March 2020, the group that has been working on 'common practices' offered a number for discussion, and during the weekend some other practices were suggested:

1. Believers Baptism
2. Community Action
3. Dispersed Credit Union
4. Common Purse
5. Anabaptist Catechesis as preparation for Baptism
6. Discipleship mentoring
7. Community Meal
8. Community Meal with liturgy
9. Communion
10. Prayerful protest at an Arms Fair (or similar)
11. Personal financial accountability

12. Attending a Christian Peacemaker Teams (or similar) delegation
13. Foot washing
14. Jesus-centredness
15. Conflict resolution/peace-making
16. Plural and non-hierarchical leadership, unrelated to gender
17. Consensus decision making