

## **Threads of Mission in the Fabric of Shalom**

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As two early participants in this congregation, Ruth and I have been asked to speak about how this congregation has worked at being a part of God's mission in our world. We will briefly sketch some history and draw out some patterns of how we have gone about addressing the call to mission.

We began as a house fellowship of mostly young couples and singles, all from Mennonite backgrounds. We were in a different time and place than our parents' generation. The time was 1974, an era of social change, when authority and conventional thinking were questioned early and often. The place was—still is—a college town, a more urban area than the rural and small town settings many of us were raised in; a place where one could live less connected to family and church origins.

We had been raised with the idea of being 'in the world, but not of the world.' We were going out into the world, but took with us some imprint of this sensibility of our heritage. We coalesced around an explicit desire for a community. More implicitly, we held an allegiance to our Mennonite/Anabaptist roots. A house church with shared leadership and no professional pastor was the form we settled into in 1975. In the ethos of the time, we were fine with this very elemental model.

We were shortly joined by several households of people with Church of the Brethren/Anabaptist roots. The partnering seemed to fit, and we formed a group that claimed both identities.

One of the tasks we gave considerable time and thought to was the writing of a covenant. It evolved somewhat over the years, but provides an incisive set of points that described our values and ideals. Among the 10 or 12 points made in various versions of the covenant, several speak particularly to our sense of mission. These include:

1. The application of Jesus' life and teachings to our lives
2. The spiritual formation of our children
3. Identifying and responding to needs in our community and our world
4. Claiming our peace church heritage and addressing social injustice in our community, nation, and world.

Around 1990, we reached a point at which the house church, the "basement church," became too limiting, and we began exploring the possibility of evolving from a house church into a 'regular' church; which is to say, calling a pastor, meeting in a public building for worship, and having a Sunday School hour. We invited other Anabaptists in Ann Arbor to join the conversation, and had several lengthy meetings of exploration. In our final meeting, we laid out what we thought would be the likely financial requirements for such an endeavor. We needed to know if we were anywhere near having the capacity as a group to meet these projected expenses. We took a little time for each household to privately write on a piece of paper what they thought they could contribute monthly towards these costs.

We then collected the commitments and added them up. The total of the annualized commitments was the same amount as what we had listed as our expected annual expenses. We were moved and awed, and were very grateful for this sign that we should, that we could, move forward with our vision.

The move to becoming a church included the need for a new name. We don't remember the various ideas that surfaced, but we do remember that there was uniform agreement that the word 'Shalom' captured our understanding of God's purpose for the world, and we wanted to claim that abundance and justice for ourselves and others.

The choice of the term 'Community' fit with our Anabaptist tradition; but, at that time, it was also a contemporary term being used by churches to indicate a desire to be open to the people living in its location.

Having taken on this new form, we went about a search for a half time pastor, which led to calling Kathy Neufeld Dunn as the first pastor of Shalom Community Church. Paul Versluis followed, and served us for the next 15 years.

Taking a stance of greater visibility and openness to others finding us and joining us led us to consider where we might meet. Renting such a place fit our budget priorities, and schools were an obvious choice for space and availability. Over the years we have met in three schools, a church, and now here at Oak Valley. A number of years ago, when the limitations of rented space pressed in on us, we had an opportunity to work in a joint venture with 2 (and briefly 3) other partners for building, owning, and sharing a facility. Ultimately, this venture foundered on zoning issues. But it remains in the minds of many of us as a model that might effectively address our desire to be a more visible Anabaptist congregation, provide the atmosphere of being gathered in a place of our own, and yet avoid the onerous financial commitment of sole ownership.

Throughout our history, this congregation has recognized the Anabaptist call to the mission of Shalom by actions that show the “love, peace and justice of Jesus”. In the house fellowship days, we moved furniture for Family Social Services that had been donated for those in need. We also delivered food to seniors in Detroit through the Peace Mennonite Church’s food pantry. This latter activity was particularly formative for our children. In more recent years, we’ve participated in opening Ann Arbor’s 10,000 Villages store, hosting for Interfaith Hospitality Network, doing highway pickup, providing supplies to the Tent community, and working to bring restorative justice practices to Washtenaw County. You heard several specific stories about these activities last Sunday in worship.

Finally, a few words about language. We spoke earlier of the Covenant, and its importance in claiming our Anabaptist identity and to shaping how we sought to live. The congregation has written other statements that you may recognize, and that we think distill what we have been about. Two statements we came to use in more recent, Shalom CC years, are “Doing the work of Jesus in our time and place,” and “Doing the work of Jesus, simply, peacefully, together,” the latter a Church of the Brethren formulation. Our most recent articulation of this calling is found in the Welcome statement written just over two years ago. It speaks to us each week from our Bulletin, reminding us to claim God’s mission of Shalom for our world.