

Ben Wideman
August 2, 2026

Acts 2:42-47 - Common English Bible

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Good morning, friends, thank you for being here this morning as we continue to reflect on *Why we believe what we believe* here at University Mennonite Church.

Last Sunday evening, Paul McCormick and I went to the State Theater with a friend to watch a band perform. *The Lone Bellow* are far from the biggest band in the world, but they've been around for over a decade, and have a reputation of putting on a great show. But on the day of the performance the available tickets on the seat chart were still wide open. (SLIDE) Expecting things to fill up in advance, I had reserved our tickets in the front row of the balcony. Unfortunately, just a few hours before the performance, we were some of the only people sitting up high. And down low wasn't much better.

Making matters worse, as we entered the State Theater, an usher that Paul knew pulled us aside and informed us to sit wherever we wanted due to the fact that there were many empty seats expected.

As the opening act took the stage, the theater was still feeling relatively empty. He was an up and coming solo artist named Walker Burroughs who thanked us for coming and being such a great audience... I looked around with a bit of surprise given the size of the crowd, but he shared that he had recently played a house show to just four people. As his set wrapped up, we decided to move down to empty seats in the third row for the main act. The others in attendance seemed to have the same idea, and by the time *The Lone Bellow* took the stage there was a fuller crowd in the first several rows.

Still, I could feel that sinking feeling of unmet expectations.

The first song they played was fantastic, (SLIDE) the second one was too. And the band's banter between songs was lighthearted, humorous, and fun. It was bittersweet knowing that we were a handful of people who were getting to witness something amazing. The way my mind works is rather than enjoying the show, I began thinking of friends I should have invited who would have also appreciated the show. But it was also clear that those in attendance understood that they were experiencing something special, cheering especially loudly, and shouting out requests.

A few songs in, as they transitioned to the next song, the lead singer paused... "I just want to thank you all for being here tonight. This feels really special. We've been on the road supporting an artist who is now playing 5, 6, and 7000 seat venues. Sometimes those are just too big. It's nice to be able to connect with you all tonight."

Woah, talk about a paradigm shift. All of a sudden my unmet expectation thoughts were gone, replaced by the reminder that sometimes community connections need to be able to be felt. Numbers don't tell the whole story.

I share that story for a number of reasons... the first is to admit my own humility in assuming that I know how others are feeling, to let go of assumptions that suggest that a situation is good or bad without actually knowing how others are feeling about the situation. The second is to remind myself (really, all of us) that going to see live music in a venue where I can walk or ride my bike is never a waste of time - I should really try and do that more.

The third reason I share that story is to remind us that a real authentic community is not based on making sure we have a big enough group of people, but rather a group that has the capacity to connect. In hindsight what could have been more meaningful than audience members being able to ask for specific songs because of the way that they moved them? What could be better than the band asking *why* a song had been requested and then sharing the back story for its creation?

Our passage from this morning is taken from Acts, an account of the early church as it is taking shape, (SLIDE) but it may as well be taken from some kind of utopian experiment - shared everything.

It's easy to look at this verse with some skepticism - how big was that early church community? Did they really share everything, and if so, what happened when there were disagreements? How did they function without holding property, and did those in need start to take advantage of this community that was caring for anyone in its midst? Many have speculated, but we'll probably never know the full details.

Despite not knowing the full details, these verses from Acts have sparked something in Christian traditions throughout the ages. Desert Fathers, Benedictines, and later Franciscan or Dominican orders modeled their shared property and vows of poverty on the early church's practice of holding "all things in common." Some more charismatic movements, including some dangerous cult-like Christian communities throughout the centuries have used these verses as inspiration for a more socialist understanding of wealth and possessions.

As we discussed last week, Anabaptists and early Mennonites were a small community, labeled as heretics and wanted by regional powers. Community connections became essential for survival, and care when a fellow believer was captured or tortured.

Our early Anabaptist siblings, the Hutterites, (SLIDE) still practice intense and intentional shared communal living. The Hutterites are a communal Christian group, who are also pacifists, and grew out of the radical reformation movement. Originating in the 16th century in Europe and led by this guy, Jakob Hutter. (SLIDE) To this day, roughly 50,000 Hutterites still live in communities across Canada and the northern USA where *all* property is shared.

We might dismiss the Hutterites as backwards folks who are disconnected with the complexities and realities of living in society today, but they do so because of a core conviction, and community connectivity is how they best follow the Jesus way.

Our Mennonite Confession of Faith (SLIDE) is another good example of a core community-focused value, following a long tradition of theological statements based on consensus. We are a tradition of collective statements, dating all the

way back to 1527's Schleithem Confession, (SLIDE) an early Anabaptist attempt to summarize the community beliefs of the time.

Our current Confession of Faith, published in 1995, was an effort to update a similar document from 1963. (SLIDE) Made up of 24 Articles, or statements of belief, (SLIDE) its pages attempt to outline our core values. While it begins with things like our understanding of the trinity or scripture, (SLIDE) it quickly moves beyond to tackle community, stewardship, church structure, peace and nonviolence, and even our relationship to national governments.

Denominational leaders moved to create this newest version to address cultural shifts, provide inclusive language, and clarify church identity regarding contemporary social and lifestyle issues. Unlike Christian traditions where the leaders would hand down theological statements and convictions, our tradition polled the people to hear their voices.

Because of this unique approach, it took about *15 years* to develop. It began with a five-year survey, followed by ten years of drafting by a joint committee representing the two largest Mennonite denominations of the time - the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church - who merged nationally a few years later to form first Mennonite Church of Canada, followed by Mennonite Church USA.

Throughout the years, our Confessions of Faith (SLIDE) have been created not as rule-bound structures, but as guiding documents. They don't prescribe how we are required to live, but rather to try and summarize the general idea of what we thought at the time it was assembled. It's why, now more than 30 years after the fact, there are articles that still resonate, but others that perhaps do not, given new understandings of scripture and the direction of the church and society.

It's also why efforts throughout Mennonite denominational history to try and create systems with hierarchy and top-down leadership have mostly been dismantled. In other denominational traditions when churches move in directions counter to the denomination they tend to leave for other affiliations. Whereas in our tradition those congregations or conferences who leave are often the ones trying to hold on to an old rule, system, or structure. We have decided

communally that the ever-evolving voice of the collective church is far more important than a rigid or dogmatic attachment to old structures.

It is interesting to note that in the last few months news broke that denominational leaders (SLIDE) decided *not* to pursue a new Confession of Faith at this time - perhaps understanding the weight and complexity of this task as our denomination continues to see churches leave and new ones arrive, we're still trying to figure out who we are going to be moving forward. It is no small undertaking, even for a tiny denomination like ours to try and capture the heartbeat of the entire ever-shifting community.

Community continues to be a core value that draws people to the Mennonite tradition. (SLIDE) As I have met one-on-one with dozens of you over the past two months, I continue to hear a central theme of the importance of community and a sense of belonging and welcoming that you feel here at UMC. We are not a church that mirrors the Acts 2 community - as far as I'm aware we have never required members to sell everything to contribute to a collective purse - but we do still have an understanding that sharing with each other, and sharing beyond our congregation is also an important value. Whether it is Vonda and Doug's backyard pool, Marvin's wood shop, the Spicher-Schonberg's fresh donuts and baby animals in the spring, Mary's coordination of refugee resettlement items among other things, Sam's handyman skills, Molly's frog pond expertise, the lending books and puzzles in our library, our potlucks and meals for those in times of additional need, our food bank collection each month, even hosting groups with Church Around the Table... we make sure that we continue to imagine more ways to share in each other's lives.

The community at UMC has shifted from its foundation as a small group meeting on campus in a classroom (SLIDE), to our first owned building (SLIDE), to our current location. (SLIDE) Along the way we've said hello and goodbye to hundreds of people, community has been shared and then blessed to go out into places beyond. Some of us have been here, then left, a few more times, only to wind up right back here. Our attendance has ebbed and flowed, and it is tempting to point to when we were at our largest to say that we were at our best. But it is also true that no matter our size, we have tried to continue to welcome each other and be there for each other.

Last Sunday I mentioned that our original charter (SLIDE) outlines that we have a communal structure here. It also references how we navigate our differences. Community isn't always easy - especially when disagreements happen - and we have not been immune from interpersonal conflict here at UMC. If you've ever lived in intentional communities, you know the importance of structure to navigate community conflicts, a church is no different. Sometimes it works well, sometimes it is really complicated. There is an entire other sermon waiting on how we have historically navigated church conflict as Mennonites - plenty to talk about, both good and bad.

An emphasis on community isn't just drawing people together here at UMC. In his book, *The Naked Anabaptist*, (SLIDE) Stuart Murray identifies community as something that should be a foundational core conviction for all, calling for churches to be committed, multi-voiced fellowships of discipleship and mission. Murray envisions communities rooted in friendship and mutual accountability where young and old are valued, rather than structures defined by status or wealth. In this framework roles are determined by individual gifts rather than gender or status, and an egalitarian environment is centered on embodying Jesus' teachings together.

That's just it, right? (SLIDE) Community at its foundational best. And why we continue to believe in its importance and value. We know that we still have ways to be better, but in that admission also means we hope we are continually looking for ways to be more inclusive and community connection that is more meaningful and expansive. Our scripture from this morning says that as the early church community came together and cared for each other, a sense of awe came over everyone. I hope we continue to aim for a community that gives us a sense of awe here at UMC, and that it spills over to our community at large. May we also remind ourselves of that lesson I learned at the concert last week - that a real authentic community is not based on making sure we have a big enough group of people, but rather a group that has the capacity to connect.

It feels appropriate that we get to share in the communion table this morning. (SLIDE) In addition to sharing its belongings, that early church in Acts broke bread together around the table, beginning the practice of communion that has lasted for more than 2000 years of church history.

This communion table is not a place for us to perform or present our perfection, nor is it a validation of our right beliefs or our success in building the perfect community. It is, instead, a place of radical grace.

As we move to the table, let us lay down the transactional versions of community and structure that we sometimes cling to - the rules, the hierarchies, and the need to have it all figured out. Instead, may we open our hands to receive the one thing that truly sustains us: the invitation to be remade, restored, and welcomed back into the path of love, faithfulness, and trust.

Please join me in a confession this morning, here on the screen, and in your bulletin:

One: At the table of Christ,

All: we eat this bread and drink this cup
to remember the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,
to be united with Christ and with one another as the church,
and to look toward a time when all will be one.

One: As we eat and drink with thanksgiving,

All: Jesus Christ is present with us
and we are empowered by the Spirit
to follow Jesus' way of love
as the body of Christ,
broken and blessed for the life of the world.

I invite our communion servers to join me up front.

On the night he was betrayed...