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August 30, 2026

Romans 12:1-5

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.

Good morning! It's good to be together again here at UMC. Today is our final Sunday of our summer theme, reflecting on *Why we believe what we believe*, and we've tackled a lot of core information over the past few weeks. We began all the way back in July with discussion about who we give our allegiance to at the first Church Around the Table gathering of the summer, before moving on to the foundational subjects such as our Christ-centered reading of scripture, intentional community, believer's baptism, and peace and nonviolence. Today we're talking about non-conformity – perhaps the most challenging of the core values we have talked about.

I went through a phase in my middle school years where I *felt* different but it wasn't by choice. I felt this way primarily because I was picked on and bullied by some of my classmates at school. This was unintentional non-conformity - perhaps some of you got to experience this too - and it meant that I really wanted to figure out how to *conform* and find my place to belong. During my first year of high school I found a good group of friends, turned my back on that old crowd, and embraced a new space. It wasn't with the cool kids, it was some of the youth group crowd from the large Baptist church in town. (SLIDE) Almost at once I felt like I belonged in a space beyond my family or small group of friends at my home

church. (SLIDE) That pale awkward kid pretending to have facial hair is me, if it isn't obvious.

We sat at the same lunch table, shared CDs with each other - mostly picked up from the local Christian book store - and got into good trouble together at youth retreats and family cabins. (SLIDE)

We were different in that we didn't smoke on the corner of the school parking lot, and didn't go to the parties where everyone got wasted. We were non-conforming in that we rejected the general idea of what it meant to be a part of the popular crowd at high school, choosing instead to create a smaller crowd of our own. We went to youth group together on Wednesday and Friday nights, and hung out a good amount of time beyond the school day as well. I wonder sometimes, if in creating an alternative space to belong we wound up building our own walls; creating our own ways to exclude.

Generally speaking, when Mennonites talk about non-conformity, we typically use the phrase, "in the world, but not of the world" (SLIDE) - a dynamic that suggests that while we are part of society, we are separate from it in distinct ways. For Mennonites and the broader Anabaptist tradition, the history of non-conformity dates all the way back to the radical Reformation of the sixteenth century, just as all of the other core values we previously discussed. Refusing to baptize infants was part of non-conformity. Refusing to resort to violence was part of being in the world but not of it. Standing firm in your beliefs, even under the harshest persecution was a deep part of our non-conformity.

Early leaders like Michael Sattler, a primary author of the Schleithem Confession of Faith in 1527, (SLIDE) articulated a clear separation between the church and the coercive power of the state, rejecting traditional understandings of Christianity of the day in favor of a *voluntary* faith community - a community with freedom of choice. Over the centuries, this commitment to being distinctive primarily meant resisting political requirements such as military drafts or pledging allegiance to empires, in order to maintain a primary allegiance to the kingdom of God. Still today our Mennonite Confession of Faith has a whole article on refusing to swear oaths - one more way we officially refuse to conform.

The other major historical element of our non-conformity has been living in a way that sends a message that we are *outwardly* different and distinct. (SLIDE) For

many years, and still in old order Mennonite and Amish contexts, society understood that our people were different because of the clothes they wore, or their refusal to embrace technological advances. The way a man wore his beard, or the way a woman wore a prayer covering on her head, visually made us distinctly different, while plain clothes and muted colors also helped us stand out in not conforming to trends and cultural dress of any given time. I've had older folks share with me throughout my life that in some communities they were chastised by the churches of their youth for their worldly activities - things like roller skating, going to the movies, or even bowling. Those were dangerous spaces that were thought to be too worldly, and Mennonites were supposed to separate themselves to be distinct and different.

Often those intentional decisions to separate also created walls that defined who was in and who was out. I've definitely lived in Mennonite communities - even those who no longer wear defining clothing or hairstyles - where there is some unspoken undercurrent defining of who belongs and who doesn't. Perhaps you've lived in an area where there is a generally assumed (SLIDE) Mennonite grocery store, Mennonite bank, Mennonite school, or even a preferred Mennonite mechanic.

Our human desire for community and connection means non-conformity isn't easy. The irony in all of this is that in creating communities that are separate from the world, we create a different kind of exclusive subculture.

As people committed to a Christ-centered reading of scripture, it is interesting that Paul's letter to the Romans would be historically used to build a Mennonite theology of non-conformity. (SLIDE) But there are also texts from the Gospels that have been foundational. In Matthew chapter 7 Jesus talks about "the narrow path that leads to life," urging his followers not to simply blend into the crowd. In John chapter 17, Jesus stated that his disciples are in the world, but they do not belong to its worldly system. In Romans, Paul is simply borrowing from those teachings of Jesus.

But this Romans passage from Paul felt to early Anabaptists and Mennonites like it embodied this idea that we are unique and somehow separate from the dominant culture when we follow the way of Jesus.

In our college town, of course, we don't have to look very far to see examples of when people conform as a way to belong to an exclusive subculture. (SLIDE) Penn State has done an amazing job over its history at creating an identity that values being part of a group bigger than the individual. If you choose Penn State you are reminded that you are part of one of the largest University systems in the country, and when you graduate you'll be part of one of the largest alumni networks. Want to belong at a major sporting event? (SLIDE) Just head to Beaver Stadium where its temporary bleachers will make it the largest stadium in the country for the 2026 football season. What to serve or lend a hand? Just connect with THON, (SLIDE) the largest student philanthropy movement in the world. Is the individual what makes Penn State? No... *WE ARE*. There is something that feels secure in conforming to something so substantial.

So what does *non*-conformity look like when humans have this natural tendency to find community and connection when we conform? And how do we do it well so that our efforts to reject conformity don't become an exclusive conformity of its own?

(SLIDE) Mennonite churches like ours who no longer look different in appearance, who attend movies and go roller skating or bowling without thinking twice, rarely experience what it means to intentionally and distinctly separate ourselves from culture. Although I should point out that those of us who attend larger Mennonite gatherings (SLIDE) might be able to briefly experience this when we're a part of a large group of Mennonite folks all wearing lanyards, carrying tote bags, and sporting Mennonite college t-shirts.

Instead, in our modern era, Mennonite non-conformity has evolved to be a bit less about outward appearance, and a bit more about our core values.

We've shifted from visual reminders, to active ones - striving to offer a way of living that provides a counter-cultural critique of empire. (SLIDE) We look around and notice that our nation has a tendency toward unchecked capitalism and consumption, (SLIDE) and so we strive to live more simply and communally, sharing when we have something to share. We observe that our culture has a tendency to work to the point of burnout, (SLIDE) so we try to build in practices that offer space for relationships, reflection, and self-care. We notice the ways our society alienates and "others" those who are on the edges of society, (SLIDE)

and so we seek to create spaces of belonging for those who do not have a voice, and push back at systems that oppress those very people. We watch the ways that militarism has become an addiction, (SLIDE) and so we strive to create and support movements for peace at the local, national, and global level.

Perhaps most challenging for us as American Christians today (SLIDE) is that our fellow siblings in Christ claim that the Gospel message is one that tolerates and sometimes even embraces individualism, nationalism, homophobia and transphobia, white supremacy, and wealth hoarding. How is it that so much of Christianity has become so wrapped up and intertwined with the evils of empire?

Again, the irony of non-conformity is that it is really difficult to do it all alone. (SLIDE) We need each other to remind ourselves that this is important work - even when it feels lonely. And perhaps due to the backwards way that Christianity is being expressed, we are discovering that our allies in this peaceful Jesus movement come in surprising places. Who would have guessed that trying to create a more Christ-centered world would mean speaking out against our fellow *Christians* and standing in solidarity with people of other faiths and non-faith when we confront the biggest challenges of our time?

What I appreciate most about the words from Paul's letter to the Romans that we read today is that in refusing to conform to the world, we get to offer ourselves as vessels to be used by God, in our own small ways using our gifts to become part of the body of Christ. In this way we get to circle back to those core beliefs that we've been reflecting on this summer. Does our non-conformity come from a place of allegiance to God's peace? How about a Christ-centered, community reading of the Bible? Is our non-conformity born out of a deep commitment to personal conviction rather than a handed down faith, and do we pursue the peaceful way of Jesus when we move about the world? If so, we're leaning in to this value of non-conformity. And perhaps if we do it well, it becomes an invitation for others to join rather than a wall of exclusion, inviting all who we connect to join us as we continue this journey.

As we conclude our summer series on *Why we believe what we believe*, (SLIDE) we can remind ourselves of our core values, and continue to reflect on what other things are foundational for each of us. We can remember that that

non-conformity is not a call to withdraw from the world, but a call to active, loving resistance.

University Mennonite Church, as we prepare for another new academic year, as we transition to a series on spiritual practices that center us, let us commit to being a counter-cultural, non-conforming community of peace, justice, and faith. Let us resist the pressure to conform to the empires of our day, and instead remember that we belong to one another as one body in Christ - even when it means standing up to our Christian siblings in offering a more meaningful alternative.

May we go out into our campus, our schools, our neighborhoods, and to our world, not to define who is in and who is out, but to simply be present, to listen, and to live out the radical, transforming love of God.

May it be so. Amen.