

Becoming a Peace Church

The Study Guide

An Anabaptist Network study course

Introduction

Becoming a Peace Church

“Becoming a Peace Church” is one of a number of short courses for local churches that have been developed by the UK Anabaptist Network.

The leaflet that comes with these notes explains more about this network, its aims and core convictions. The network is not a denomination or institution but a resource agency, offering fresh insights from the radical Christian tradition on discipleship, church life and mission.

A free copy of a special issue of *Anabaptism Today*, the network’s journal, introduces the Anabaptist movement – its history, values and significance for Christians today.

In the UK and many other nations Christians are facing the challenges and opportunities of following Jesus in a changing culture, and churches are coming to terms with being on the margins rather than at the centre. Things look different from the margins!

In Europe the church has been at the centre of society for so long that we need help to look at things differently. One source of inspiration and guidance for churches on the margins are earlier marginal Christian groups, such as the Anabaptist movement, which for nearly 500 years has been exploring discipleship, lifestyle, mission and church life from the margins.

Growing numbers of Christians and churches (from many denominations) are drawing on the Anabaptist tradition and looking to the Anabaptist Network for resources. As well as running conferences and study groups and publishing *Anabaptism Today*, the network has now developed some short courses for local churches.

Other courses now available are:

- After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins
- Taking Jesus Seriously

For further information about these or about other activities of the network, please contact:

Anabaptist Network: 14 Shepherds Hill, London N6 5AQ. Or visit our web site and contact us by email: www.anabaptistnetwork.com

Becoming a Peace Church: the book

The five chapters that comprise the book *Becoming a Peace Church* started life as separate articles in the Anabaptist Network's journal, *Anabaptism Today*.

Four of the chapters were written by Alan Kreider, the fifth by Eleanor Kreider – both of whom now live in Elkhart, Indiana, but were for 30 years Mennonite missionaries in England.

Due to popular demand for these articles, they were collated, updated and turned into a book, published by the Anabaptist Network in March 2000.

Copies of the book are available at £2.50 each (with reductions for bulk orders).

This study guide is intended primarily for group discussion, but it can also be used by individuals. It offers additional resources and suggests questions for discussion and ideas for action.

We suggest that you first read the whole book through in one sitting (it is only 43 pages long) and then follow the pattern indicated in this study guide – reading a short section of the book and pondering (together or alone) the questions raised about this section.

Notes

Session 1: The Biblical Mandate



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp1-2

1. Check out the claim that many of the New Testament letters begin by blessing readers with both grace and peace:

- How many instances can you find?
- Are there significant variations in the way this greeting is given?
- It has been suggested that this is no more than a standard formal greeting – do you agree or do you think it is as significant as Alan claims?

2. Do you find the image of a one-legged man helpful? How does this relate to your experience of

- Churches?
- Christian organisations?
- Mission strategies?
- Other Christians?
- Your own commitments?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp2-3

1. Alan asks: What do you say when someone says, ‘Tell me about your church’? How would you reply? If you are studying in a group, you might each write down one or two comments on a piece of paper and pass them to the next person, who reads aloud what you have written and invites you to say more about this.

2. The quotation about peace churches from Justin is one of several examples from the early church. Other references are listed in the notes on **page 41**. These passages are included in the appendix to this study guide. Read them now and ask what they add to your understanding of the early church as a peace church.



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp3-5

1. How well do you know the story of Peter and Cornelius? You may want to pause and read it again now. In fact, since Luke regards this incident as so significant that he tells it twice, it would be good to read it twice too: as Luke tells it in *Acts 10:1-48* and then as Peter reports it to the church in Jerusalem in *Acts 11:1-18*.

2. Here are some further questions to consider:

- How to understand the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Jews in Acts 2 and on these Gentiles in Acts 10 has frequently been a point of contention between Christians who have different views of charismatic gifts. But both passages point to these as peace-creating incidents. Why have they become contentious?
- Are we too far removed from the realities of life in occupied Judea to feel the shock of this incident? What other incidents from Acts or the Gospels do we also fail to read against this background? What have we missed seeing?
- How did Jesus relate to centurions? Check back in the Gospels, starting with *Matthew 8:5-13*. Was this the basis for Peter's courageous response to Cornelius?
- How do you think the Jerusalem church did here? Remember – they were not there. They only had Peter's report to go on. And this was pushing them well beyond their comfort zone.
- What would be a contemporary equivalent of this peace-creating missionary visit? Try to imagine the unimaginable (an Iraqi evangelist visiting the Pentagon?).



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp5-8

1. Ponder the various references in this section to the link between the gospel and peace:

- Why have we so often interpreted these passages as referring only to internal, psychological or spiritual peace?
- Is this a legitimate interpretation in some of these passages?
- Read *Ephesians 2* again: what are the implications of being called into 'the household of God'?

2. Alan writes that the early churches ‘did not have peace committees, which socially concerned members might attend on Monday nights, or peace fellowships on the fringes at church assemblies.’

- Is there a ‘peace fellowship’ associated with your denomination? What do you know about it? What are its main aims and activities?
- Are special interest groups of this kind a help or a hindrance in getting peace on the main agenda of the church?

3. Already in this first chapter there have been two references to Jesus bringing division rather than peace (Luke 12:49 on *page 4* and Matthew 10:34 on *page 7*).

- How does this square with the church being a peace church?
- What is the relationship between peace and justice?
- Why is pacifism sometimes confused with ‘passivism’?
- How risky is it for a church to get involved in peacemaking?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp9-12

1. Alan suggests we pose the question when we meet other Christians: ‘Where have you seen God making peace recently?’

- Have you tried asking this question?
- Do you know any stories to pass on?

In the appendix you will find some stories of this kind.

2. Consider the five objections to putting peace on the church agenda listed on *pages 9-10*. If you are studying in a group, you could invite pairs to debate each objection, with one person arguing for and one against, trying to put a persuasive case whatever your own views. What do you learn from this exercise? How significant are these objections?

3. In the appendix you will find an extract from Walter Wink’s book, *Engaging the Powers*, where he explains what he means by the ‘myth of redemptive violence.’ As you read this, think about how you could explain this to someone in your church.

Session 2: The Church's 'Domestic Life'



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp12-13

1. In the appendix is a copy of the engraving mentioned here. Ponder this and the story of Dirk Willems. Why do *you* think Dirk did what he did? There is also a copy of an article from *Anabaptism Today*, in which the writer also ponders the meaning of this story.
2. Do you agree that 'reflexes are important'? How do you respond to the question about who shapes you and trains your reflexes?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp14-16

1. What is the difference between a 'moral majority' and a 'prophetic minority'? Imagine your church was concerned about the policy of your local council, perhaps on ethical grounds. You decide to speak out about this. How would what you say differ if you chose to adopt a 'prophetic minority' stance?
2. Read carefully through *Matthew 18:15-20*. Is this kind of process operative in your church? If not, how might you introduce it? If it is, how effective is it, and how might it be further developed? (For further reading, Stuart Murray: *Explaining Church Discipline* can be obtained from the Anabaptist Network for £2 per copy).



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp16-18

1. 'It seems a rule that where people are serious about life and issues, differences are inevitable.' Do you regard conflict as 'normal' and 'inevitable'? Do you agree that conflict can be good and that it is unacknowledged conflict that causes problems?

2. If you are studying in a group, can you tell each other stories (without breaking confidences) of where conflict was

- Avoided and/or denied?
- Handled badly?
- Handled well?

What can you learn from these examples?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp18-21

1. Alan highlights here four skills of peacemakers:

- Truthful speech
- Expectant listening
- Alertness to community
- Good process.

Read *Acts 15:1-33*, which records a crucial meeting in the early church to resolve conflict between those who held strong views on what should be required of Gentile converts. How well do you think they did? Are the four skills of peacemakers evident?

2. This might be a good point in your study to sit quietly and reflect on the four attitudes of peacemakers (and on what you have learned thus far), and then to turn this reflection into spoken or silent prayers.

Session 3: The Church's 'Foreign Policy' – Worship



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp21-28

1. Reflect for a while on your recent experiences of worship or, if you are studying in a group, talk together about this. Try to identify both exhilarating and frustrating examples. To what extent have you experienced the 'peacemaking worship' described in this section?

- Have you acclaimed Jesus as Lord?
- Have you affirmed solidarity with God's family?
- How have you told God's story?
- Have you cried out to God for the world?
- What kind of theology have you sung?
- Have you experienced reconciliation and forgiveness?
- Has communion shaped you for peacemaking?
- Do you value the cycle of worship and mission?

2. Design (individually or together) a worship service, or series of services, that will enable participants to experience 'peacemaking worship'.

3. In the appendix are a number of resources from the Anabaptist tradition that might be helpful, either as you design a worship service or as components in the worship services of your own church.

Session 4: The Church's 'Foreign Policy' – Work, War, Witness



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp28-30

1. In the appendix are further stories of Christians bringing 'peacemaking imagination' into the workplace. Consider your own sphere of work: in what way might 'peacemaking imagination' inspire fresh initiatives in this context? Or how might peacemaking skills be helpful at work?
2. David, mentioned on **page 30**, gave up his job in order to pursue a new vision of peacemaking. Are there some jobs that Christians simply should not do because of their commitment to the God of peace? Or is it important, as many claim, that there should be Christians as witnesses in all spheres of life? Where, if anywhere, should we draw the line?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp30-34

1. Alan writes: 'It's helpful for Christians to ask themselves: what would you do if someone attacked you?' Have you thought about this question that is often thrown at pacifists as a way of demonstrating their lack of realism? How would you respond to it? The book mentioned in the notes on **page 43** is very helpful here: John Howard Yoder: *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question* (available from the Anabaptist Network).
2. Read the summary of the Just War position in the appendix. These are strict criteria (or at least they would be if they were applied properly). Can you think of three examples of wars in the last 200 years that meet these criteria?
3. In the appendix are further stories of Christians taking action for peace. Is there some action for peace that you or your church might take?



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp34-37

1. In the past many churches assumed that the normal order for people joining them was 'believing before belonging', but increasingly today this order is reversed: people start to belong before they are sure what they believe. Why do you think this is? How does this relate to 'a world that is post-Christendom and postmodern' (*page 34*)?
2. If this is so, the issues of character, relationships and actions highlighted in this section are more important than ever. Alan quotes Robert Warren as saying about churches that handle conflict well: 'When people come near such a community they will instinctively know how real the relationships are.' What do people find in your church? Would it be good to ask visitors or those who have joined recently?
3. What might 'fascination evangelism' look like today? In what way might your church act surprisingly (not through gimmicks but out of its deepest counter-cultural values)? In what way might peace be missional in your community?

Session 5: Praying for Peace



Read *Becoming a Peace Church* pp37-41

1. What might be done to put peace on the agenda of your church by the use of visual aids, notices or symbols in the building where you meet?
2. Do you agree with Eleanor that ‘intercessory prayers are a necessary part of corporate worship’? What part does intercessory prayer play in your church?
3. Read *1 Timothy 2:1-2* and search for other biblical injunctions to pray for those in authority in our world. How do you do this, and for what are you praying? Do you share Walter Wink’s conviction (quoted on **page 25**) that ‘history belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being’?
4. Read (together if you are studying in a group) the Lord’s Prayer (*Matthew 6:9-13*), reflecting on each phrase and discussing the connection of each with the gospel of peace:
 - Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name
 - Your kingdom come
 - Your will be done on earth as in heaven
 - Give us today our daily bread
 - Forgive us our sins, as we forgive others
 - Lead us not into temptation
 - Deliver us from evil
5. Consider the practical suggestions with which this chapter ends. Choose at least two of these that you (or your church) are not already doing and think about how to implement them.

If you have questions about anything you have studied on this course, if you have ideas to share or suggestions to make, please do contact the Anabaptist Network. You can also find further resources by visiting www.anabaptistnetwork.com

Appendix

The Just War Criteria

The pacifism of the early churches did not suit the new Christian empire once the church had come in from the margins to the centre and felt responsible for maintaining and defending this empire. A new and more “realistic” approach was needed to issues of war and peace.

This was provided by Augustine, late in the fourth century, whose towering influence on medieval Christianity ensured that on this (as on many other issues) his views would prevail over earlier, more radical approaches.

Augustine lived in the period when church and state were now partners in a society that was regarded as fast becoming Christian. Christian citizens owed obedience both to the church and to the state, whose interests generally coincided. So if the Christian state declared war, Christians were expected to fight.

But the memory of earlier hesitations about fighting and killing were too strong to ignore. A new theology or theory of warfare was needed that permitted participation but recognised concerns about peace and justice. Augustine outlined what in time would become the Just War theory, which (in the form it took after other thinkers had worked on Augustine’s ideas) has six main components:

1. War must be for a just CAUSE: in self-defence, in defence of others, in response to a deliberate act of unprovoked aggression.
2. War must be with a good INTENTION: to rectify evil and establish good, to bring about a more just order, to restore peace as soon as possible, not for vengeance or to establish supremacy over others.
3. There must be a reasonable EXPECTATION of success: that more good than evil will result.
4. War must be waged by proper MEANS: proportionate rather than excessive, so that the results of victory outweigh the suffering caused to achieve this. Civilians must not be harmed, no intrinsically wrong means used, and terms of surrender equitable and merciful.
5. War must be the ONLY possible way of removing evil: the last resort after trying all other ways of responding through negotiating or sanctions.
6. War must be declared and fought by a legitimate AUTHORITY: normally this is the state, though in situations of civil war this is less clear.

This new approach was based on a mixture of Old Testament quotations and the classical pagan tradition of thinkers like Plato (Greek) and Cicero (Roman), though the principles owed far more to paganism than to biblical perspectives. Augustine dealt with awkward New Testament material by distinguishing attitudes and actions (so killing can be loving) or personal and political spheres (loving personal enemies but killing state enemies).

The Just War theory does not glorify war (as the crusade theory does). It regards war as unwelcome but sometimes necessary, and attempts to spell out the conditions that need to be met if Christians are to participate. It is based on certain presuppositions:

1. Nothing in the Bible precludes Christians participating in war: Jesus' call to peace is eschatological.
2. War is sometimes the lesser of two evils and necessary to achieve justice.
3. War is a form of extra-territorial policing, a legitimate extension of government.
4. Pacifism is unrealistic and irresponsible in a sinful world – passivism.

Augustine was clearly not fully at ease with his approach to war but, as with his teaching on tithing that replaced the earlier radical approach to economics, he could not imagine that the earlier pacifism was feasible in this new context. He looked back wistfully but presented this theory as a grim necessity, advising soldiers to repent in advance.

But it has been adopted as the orthodox view of war by almost all denominations. It has been tweaked and interpreted in various ways by theologians and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Hugo Grotius, Jean Calvin, John Locke and Reinhold Niebuhr. Some have been enthusiastic advocates, some have indicated this is a compromise position – for example, Aquinas excluded monks and clergy.

How do we assess this approach?

1. Are the presuppositions correct? Can this approach be reconciled with the Bible and especially with Jesus? Is pacifism unrealistic? Is war a form of policing?
2. Is the history encouraging? How has the theory been used? Which wars has it actually prevented? When has the church declared a war unjust? Why is church history so full of religious wars between supposedly Christian states?
3. Can the criteria actually be applied? Are they too vague – what is appropriate? Can any individual or congregation know enough facts to judge?
4. Can modern forms of warfare ever meet these demanding criteria? Why has the church opposed each new weapon of war before accepting it?