

Contributing factors for why some folks from non-Anabaptist background leave Anabaptist and similar churches ...

(Reasons given by the folks themselves)

1. **“We will never belong”.**
 - a. Cannot seem to penetrate the ethnic Anabaptist (EA) culture.
 - b. So much revolves around family and extended family that they never feel like they truly belong. EA’s have large families to interact with on holidays, and NAB’s often have no spiritually minded people to interact with outside of the church.
 - c. Children from non-Anabaptist background (NAB) homes are sometimes laughed at, pushed to the side, or even picked on by EA adults and children.
 - d. Some feel like they are an Anabaptist “project” rather than a brother or sister in the Lord. Some feel like they are living in a fish bowl for every curious or nosey NAB to peer at, ask questions of, and hold up as a trophy.
2. **“We can never measure up.”**
 - a. Cultural expectations: Housekeeping, Culinary arts, Upkeep of properties
 - b. Values: Child training, Bible knowledge, Work ethic, Thriftiness, Discipline, Cross-gender reserve
 - c. Community expectations: Submitting to a group (feels like giving up convictions), Attending lots of church functions (seems to compete with family), Open accountability (feels like sanctioned gossip)
3. **“Ethnic Anabaptists are partial to their own families and those of their ethnic background.”**
 - a. NAB’s sometimes feel they are held to a higher standard than EA’s. Minister’s children and other EA’s sometimes get preferred treatment, etc.
4. **“Ethnic Anabaptists have inconsistencies that they are unwilling to look at.”**
 - a. In some Anabaptist settings, men have no problem asking women to wear homemade clothes while they themselves wear store bought clothes which allow them to blend with society.
 - b. EA’s often expect NAB’s to disregard their parent’s values as they apply for membership in an Anabaptist church; yet EA’s will highly regard their own parents values, even if those values are a spiritual drag or detriment to the spiritual life of the congregation.
 - c. EA’s often think of themselves as having one of the best expressions of Biblical Christianity and this attitude causes them to defend their inconsistencies and short comings.
5. **“Many ethnic Anabaptists don’t appreciate their spiritual heritage even if they outwardly conform to it. Many are running away from their heritage.”**
6. **“Too many ethnic Anabaptists are not on a spiritual quest.”**
 - a. NAB’s sometimes surpass EA’s spiritually only to discover that EA’s have reached a plateau and are not interested in journeying further as a congregation
 - b. The NAB is expected to grow spiritually but it is assumed the average EA does not
 - c. One NAB says that his biggest critique of conservative Anabaptists is that they live out of the past rather than collectively seeking how the Holy Spirit wants to guide their church and their movement in the present.
7. **“Anabaptists too often confuse personal preferences with Biblical injunctions.”**
8. **“Being a disciplined Christian is just too hard for us!”**
9. **“The church was not ‘biblical enough’, ‘conservative enough’, ‘spiritual enough’, etc.”**
10. **“The conservative Anabaptists at the church I attended couldn't get along with each other.”**

Church Planting Questionnaire

- 1) Why are there so few “non-cultural” Anabaptists/Mennonites in our churches today? In other words, members who weren’t raised in an Anabaptist congregation of some sort?
 - a) Plain Ethnic-Anabaptists (EA) are used to being different from the world ever since they can remember. They have always thought of themselves as a sub-culture within society. Most Plain EA’s have no idea what it feels like to be a non-Anabaptist background (NAB) seeker who was previously accepted by society and relatives, only to become unaccepted by society and relatives whenever they start associating with people who do not participate in politics, or adopt head-covering for women and modest garb. Not all seekers can handle this kind of negative peer-pressure from relatives and friends.
 - b) In most plain Anabaptist communities, the majority of children join a Plain church for at least some of their teen and young adult years. The pressure to join the church is stronger than the pressure of not joining. There is little cost or persecution for those who join the church. They may actually get less flack from their peers if they join. Consequently, Plain churches have many members who are simply cultural Christians, rather than true-hearted followers of Jesus. When NAB seekers discover this, they are often ready to exit.
 - c) Plain Anabaptist congregations are typically comprised of people from the same ethnic background. People find it hard to penetrate and integrate into very different cultures, in the same way we as Americans would find it difficult to penetrate or integrate into an Asian-American, or Russian Christian church with a very different culture. Ethnic groups communicate in different in ways, have their own set of values, etc. For a NAB to join an EA church often results in many cultural misunderstandings and little appreciation for the values a person already had before joining the church. *(This is also why many EA’s who leave a Plain Anabaptist church, end up joining a mainstream Anabaptist church or an Evangelical church that is comprised of many former Anabaptists. The culture shift is not nearly as difficult.)*
 - d) According to one report I read, only 3% of the world’s population enjoys interacting with people of other cultures and making them their closest friends. 97% of the world prefers being around people who think and act like they do. As you can imagine, NAB seekers are not going to feel very welcome at a church where 97% don’t want or don’t care to be their close friend. Some of the 97% percent do go through a personal metamorphosis, whenever they gain a vision for the kingdom of God, or whenever they by accident become friends with a person of a different culture. But unless a congregation goes through this metamorphosis, NAB’s will feel like they never truly belong.
 - e) Only about 25% of NAB folks who join or attempt to join an EA church, stay with a Plain church long term. The above points give some reasons for this. One final reason is the bar for inclusion in the church is often set too high by EA folks.

- 2) Why is the greater conservative Anabaptist/Mennonite community losing so many of their own people to liberalism, the world, or other denominations, when at the same time the oft-stated goal is to “win the lost”?

Churches who lose the most people to the liberalism, the world, or other denominations, are the “transitional Anabaptist churches”. Transitional churches who are frequently relaxing practical standards without putting spiritual disciplines in their place often lose more than they gain. Typically, transitional churches are changing identity by taking on the beliefs and ideology of other churches, and often this ideology is incompatible with their current standards and practices. Who wants to be part of a church that is losing its identity, and one that is losing more than it is gaining? Many young adults don’t see any reason to stick with a church that is 20 years behind-the-times and they go ahead and join the churches

that model the ideology. Then there are churches that are not transitional but are sort of fossilized. Entrepreneurs don't see any future in such a church and they go looking for something that appears more alive and spiritual. Often folks leaving fossilized church pick the wrong church, out of a reaction to their past.

- 3) What do you see as the key to a church community faithfully, practically living daily lives as part of the Kingdom of God while surrounded by the kingdom of this world?
I think we need more rigorous screening of applicants, particularly youth from EA homes and EA's from other churches. A church should discern, "Is this applicant willing to suffer for Jesus, or are they just going with the crowd?" Waiting to accept EA applicants into the church until they are young adults may help assess which ones are truly willing to suffer for their faith.
- 4) What would you see as the biggest challenges to a Kingdom-focused church taking root when planted in the middle of a typical non-Anabaptist community, e.g. an urban setting?
 - a) Insufficient relational and spiritual development among those starting the church.
 - b) Insufficient cultural awareness or preparation.
 - c) Influx of people from outside the area moving in to be part of a church - people who are looking for a different kind of church experience.
 - d) Incompetent, overwhelmed, or ill equipped leaders and team members.
 - e) Trying to attempt too many things at once - thereby burning people out and taxing relationships
 - f) Becoming in love with ministry at the expense of loving people – being ministry focused instead of people focused.
- 5) What "stumbling blocks" may a genuine seeker encounter in a church plant that could keep them from wanting to become a part of that local church? See number 1, As well as Appendix A at the end.
- 6) What in your mind is the most effective way to make disciples, as Jesus instructed His followers just before His ascension? Preaching/teaching, small group Bible study, small group accountability and prayer, mentoring (particularly in the context of shared life experiences).
- 7) In considering a church plant, what will make the gospel as powerful, attractive and life-changing as it was in the book of Acts? Or are those days simply past?
Fervent love for God and people, flexibility, appreciation for diversity, prayer, sincerity, willingness to suffer for Jesus, commitment to the apostles' doctrine.
- 8) To what extent can a church plant "rub shoulders" with other professing Christians or denominations who may not apply Scripture to daily lives in the same way (e.g. nonresistance, head covering, modest dress, divorce and remarriage, etc.) without creating fog and confusion for sincere seekers?
Treat them with respect. Acknowledge the ways they are following Christ. Be willing to learn from them if they are doing something well. Don't belittle them. Don't be in competition with them. Don't give them platforms for influence in the church. Don't meet with them frequently for prayer as "close friends". Don't commune with them.

- 9) What would you suggest is most important in preparing to be part of a church plant, for each individual, and as a group?

Individual: Accustomed to prayer, fasting, and seeking the will of God. Develop a love for all people. Be able to team with others. Learn to value the minority rather than push them to the edge. Learn how to work in harmony with Christians who think differently than me, rather than pressure them to think like me.

Group: Develop a good understanding of pilgrim church planting and missions; Assess team compatibility. Assess the worldview and direction that each team member is headed. Pray for a continual infilling of God's spirit.

- 10) Any other thoughts, words of wisdom or advice?

- a) Keep your ideals high and your expectations low. This may save you a lot of grief and disillusionment.
- b) Follow the example of Isaac. If someone in the church or community "steals your well", be willing to "dig another well".
- c) Be mature enough to help someone find another fellowship, if someone doesn't think they can flourish at your fellowship.
- d) Be so committed to the Kingdom of God that you don't care who gets the credit as long as people find their way into the Kingdom.
- e) Sometimes different visions emerge in a church plant. Rather than view this as a threat, view it as an opportunity. Be mature enough to bless multiple visions.
- f) Novices with dynamic personalities can often make good first impressions, and there may be a tendency to put these folks in positions of leadership too early. The novice may be lacking humility, relational skills, and basic leadership skills. When this happens, the congregation may wish a few years later they hadn't put these people in leadership positions. If a person's relational and leadership track record is unknown, it is better to give them an "apprentice position" for a few years to see whether they are really qualified for the position.
- g) I believe that spiritual unity is necessary if large numbers of NABs to come into our churches. Many people do not know the difference between "a spirit of unity" and "the unity of the Spirit". (Any group of people, spiritual or not, can create a spirit of unity but it may not be something that pleases God.)
Many people who like to talk about unity, and the power of unity are really saying, "If everybody would think more like me, we would have more unity, and then we would be more effective." I believe that true spiritual unity as described in John 17, can be achieved wherever there are low cultural hurdles (more appreciation for diversity), strong principled living (rather than following a person or going with the flow), vibrant Christian living (which includes personal walk with God as well as good community dynamics), fervent love, and fervent prayer. When all of these are pursued by a church community, I believe that the oneness and unity pictured by Jesus in John 17 can be realized to a greater extent.
- h) Whatever you attempt for Christ, make sure that it is not relying on human wisdom and human persuasion to succeed. Structure your initiative in such a way that it will not succeed unless God is in it.