

Starting a Third Life: Pastor Dave Darling on his journey from the Catholic priesthood to pastoring Emmanuel Mennonite

By Dave Darling, Emmanuel Mennonite Church Pastor

“You sound like a Mennonite to me,” Bob Thelin told me. Bob, a Mennonite development worker who had served in Africa for 30 years, repeated that I sounded like a Mennonite every time we discussed theology, the nature of the Church, or social justice. I, Catholic reared, educated and ordained, found our hours in the La Junta County community garden a wonderful bonding experience. Bob became an admired and treasured friend. “You know our founder [Menno Simons] was a Catholic priest,” Bob would tell me, which, as we gardened, planted a small seed in my mind.

During the 25 years after leaving Catholic ministry to the present, I have had a varied and interesting career. I was a social services coordinator for a Migrant Head Start program in South Central and Southeastern Colorado; I was a regional coordinator for missionary education and development for a Catholic missionary group; I was a worker at Costco. At different times, I volunteered as a hospice visitor, took a unit of pastoral education, prepared food for the homeless, delivered groceries to seniors near downtown Denver, and, most importantly, became friends with a homeless man who had a great impact on my life, Darren. And I continued reading books on social issues, scripture, spirituality, as well as popular authors like John Sanford, John Grisham, and Nelson De Mille.

Then last April, I phoned a friend and member of Emmanuel Mennonite to see how she was doing. Toward the end of the conversation, I asked, “How is that little Mennonite church doing?” Sara sighed, “Oh, it’s been over 16 months without a pastor.”

The Scriptural quote, “And they were like sheep without a shepherd” crossed my mind . . . then Bob’s prescient words, “You sound like a Mennonite to me.” Recalling Bob’s words about Menno Simmons, I asked Sara, “Do you think they would take a retreaded* Catholic priest?” They did. So in my 70’s I start a third life--as a Mennonite.

The first, was in a family of seven: 4 boys, one girl. Typical of the 1940’s and 50’s: dad worked at an auto plant, then as owner of a family-sponsored service station, where all the boys worked as soon as we were old enough.

My second life began when I entered seminary and ended 40 years later when I left priestly ministry. During that period, I served in rural and urban parishes, taught high school, and recruited candidates for my Catholic religious order. A long-time friend and a Catholic priest for nearly 60 years responded to my news about becoming a Mennonite pastor. “The Mennonites are peace-oriented and stress holiness. I’m sure it will be life-giving for you and for them.”

I pray his words are true for me and Emmanuel Mennonite. Thank you, Bob Thelin. Thank you, Menno Simmons, for leading generations to a simpler church, a peace church, and thank you, Emmanuel Mennonite members for accepting my call and providing a spiritual home.