

# Conference Minister's Corner

**Of mafia territory, Zen Buddhism, auto racing, and Jesus:  
Pastor Brian Hanneken retiring from prophetic ministry**

*By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman*



When he studied biblical literature at George Fox Seminary, Brian Hanneken was particularly drawn to the historical figure of John the Baptist.

“John the Baptist was an interesting character,” says Brian. “I was always fascinated by the missing pieces—the detective work we have to do to infer what he must have been like. He may have escaped oppression and grown up in the desert wilderness. And any guy that eats bugs [laughs]...well, I still maintain my interest in him.”

By that point, in the 1990's, Brian had already started following in the prophet's words, learning for himself what it meant to “repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” But the journey to get to that point in his life was a bit like a wilderness—anything but smooth.

Brian grew up in Massachusetts and New Jersey in the Unitarian Church that his parents embraced after leaving their Roman Catholic and New England Congregationalist traditions. He describes coming of age in a neighborhood that was part of mafia territory. The air was filled with “stoic postwar paranoia” where Americans were expected to fear “commies and the H-bomb, and suck it up and press on.” But Brian was a skeptic from his youth: “I didn't buy into a bit of it!” he says.

Brian ended up dropping out of high school to pursue motor racing, and spent a couple years on the fringes of professional success. He went back to finish his senior year in 3 months and then begin college, but describes what happened: “About 80% of the way through college, tragedy struck, my life fell entirely to pieces, and out I flunked,” he says. “Many years of substance abuse, ill-advised choices, and unsuitable relationships ensued. Through all of this, I know that I was craving – wanting – seeking – *something*.”

Brian then got involved in anti-war political activism and found his way into the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. He was simultaneously searching for both the revolution and for enlightenment.

He eventually realized that enlightenment comes from knowing God, and was drawn to Jesus, especially his words in John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.” Brian was enthralled, and recalls thinking: “An approachable, knowable God! Found nowhere else! The answer!”

Soon after that realization, Brian started dating Twila, a single mom with four children (who later became his wife). They attended church together, and one weekend they heard from Gary Wright, an evangelist from Ohio. When Gary got word that his own mother had passed away, he—surprisingly—continued preaching rather than immediately leaving to be with family. Gary invited folks to be disciples of Jesus, and Brian knew what he had to do. He says, “When the invitation came at the end, the Spirit had me out of that pew and down to the altar, welcoming Christ fully into my life...It was cold, there was snow on the ground, but I do not believe I made any footprints on my way out that night. Life literally has not been the same since. The ‘before’ trip was over; the ‘after’ trip was beginning. And I know all heaven rejoiced, having welcomed a dear sister home and a long-lost sheep into the fold – within hours of each other.”

Since that life-changing night, Brian has served the church and the academy in various contexts as someone who didn't want to keep his spiritual findings to himself but worked so that “all humanity will see God's salvation” (Lk 3:6). In church settings, Brian has been an elder at Greensburg Mennonite in Kansas, a pastoral caregiver at Community Mennonite in Grand Junction, the pastor at Walsenburg Mennonite, and the pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite in La Junta, from which he is retiring at the end of August 2021.

In the academy, he helped establish a School of Graduate Studies at Barclay College in Kansas, and has been a registrar, associate dean, and instructor of Biblical studies at Barclay and at Lyell College in Arkansas. He's also worked in Christian publishing at DaySpring Cards and as a media editor for Gospel Ministries for the Deaf.

Through the years, Brian's ministry has been one of calling all of us to "prepare the way for the Lord" (Lk 3:4), which has held within it tensions: tensions between collaborative community and the aloneness the often comes with his prophetic voice. In the stretch of a few minutes, Brian switches from calling himself a "lone wolf" to describing the deep camaraderie he's felt when pastoring at East Holbrook Mennonite: "I'm not a leader, I'm an accompanist. We all walk together on this journey. Some farther ahead, some farther behind—we're in different stages. But being on this journey with these people—this marvelous, diverse group of people: that's what makes my little bunny beat the bass drum."

And in 2020, he acutely felt the deep love of a broader conference community as he recovered from Covid. "I had an epiphany when I had Covid," Brian says. "I have never felt *less* alone in my life as when I was isolated with Covid and a prisoner in my own house. The conference was there: prayers, texts, expressions of wellbeing, anonymous notes—thinking of you, praying for you. I'd encourage the conference to continue that community."

But Brian's prophetic edge often comes through as well, and when thinking of our collective life, he has words of warning: "We face an awful lot. We are destroying ourselves with our divisions and hatred. We're feeding the Covid pandemic by not inoculating ourselves. One rumor has it that God is going to destroy the world with fire at the end of days, and the thing is: we're doing this to ourselves." Or as John the Baptist would put it: "He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Lk 3:17).

And yet, Brian says, that's not the full story. There's good news to be preached as well, of rough ways made smooth, mountains made low, and humanity seeing salvation: "Do I have hope for the future? The answer is YES. God is at work. Despite everything, I do feel hope."

And now as Twila and Brian move to Kansas to be closer to community there, he plans to rest some. But those who know Brian Hanneken are a little skeptical that he'll hang out quietly and simply revel in that community. He still has his voice, and he is particularly interested in the prophet John the Baptist, after all.

**Brian Hanneken retired from ministry at East Holbrook Mennonite Church at the end of August. Here are some tributes from his colleagues as we send him on his way:**



"Over the past number of years I've been the lucky recipient of Brian's wisdom and wit. I will miss him, and I wish he and Twila all the best as they embark on a new adventure."  
- Jordan Farrell

"Thank you, Brian, for faithfully tending to our East Holbrook Mennonite sisters and brothers in Christ. May the gracious welcome you offered me when we first met be the gracious hospitality you receive wherever you go. Blessings and Peace!"  
- Pastor Randy Spaulding

"For Brother Brian: In all of our ups and downs as pastors, together we have found joy, humor, and the distractions from our "useless encyclopedia of facts". Often a good run chasing these squirrels – cars, cuisine, chimera, followed by a good quote from the Jersey Mafia – is just the distraction we need... especially when it happens over BBQ. I've sung (there is a song for everything!) and prayed you into two pastorates. Each time I've seen you put your academic rigor, prayer, and deep love for the people into God's hands with faith and hope that God can accomplish even more than we can imagine. And I know you've got quite an imagination. It has not been only your congregations who have been blessed by your care. I know you and your amazing love and prayer partner Twila have faithfully held me in prayer through church issues and health issues. I know that partnership will continue to anchor your future. Blessings as you take this next step in your journey."  
- Dave Foncannon

"I'll always remember Brian from our SECOMP pastors gatherings and his ability to hold the weight of one situation while also carrying the joys of another. In the same way, Brian carries a deep wisdom of life and ministry experience along with the ability to ease a room with a New York drawl to bring us all to a good laugh. I'm grateful to have spent time with Brian and MSMC has been blessed to have him as part of our circles."  
- Mike Martin

"Brian is one of the smartest, wittiest persons I know, with a great sense of humanity and the presence of the Holy Spirit. I have always felt better having spent time with Brian, encouraged and renewed. May these coming days be days of wonder and beauty as he retires."  
- Vern Rempel



# ZING!

## Pastor Brian Hanneken Retires

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Parting/retirement gift to Brian: Brownies from Dave Foncannon and a pear sculpture from Mountain States Mennonite Conference, Amy Zimelman, and Dave Foncannon (created/sculpted by Dave himself). Pears symbolize good health, future happiness, grace, and immortality.