

Erin Kauffman, New Future Anabaptist Leader Intern

Welcome Erin Kauffman, the current intern in the Future Anabaptist Leaders program. The program is designed for 18-30 year olds to explore leadership roles in churches and passion ministries throughout Mountain States conference. Erin's application stood out as someone who is curious about the intersection of faith and agriculture, and she already walks the talk as a full-time farmer/rancher in Alamosa.

As part of the internship, Erin has been reading multiple books and having sacred conversations with Alice Price, the pastor of her home church, and Conference Minister Amy Zimbelman to explore these interests. She will be preaching at some of your congregations, making site visits to places like La Junta and Taos, seeking spiritual direction, and planning next spring's Faith & Life Forum. And **be on the lookout for a book study that Erin will be leading this winter that the whole conference will be invited to.**

We're excited to have Erin's thoughtful, industrious, equanimous, kind leadership presence serving and learning throughout the conference this academic year!

Here are Erin's own words of introduction:

I'm guessing many of you are familiar with the first recorded word of Jesus' ministry: *metanoieite*. It may be one of my favorites. Richard Rohr writes that it "literally translates as 'change your mind' or 'go beyond your mind' (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, and Mark 1:15)" and further describes that it "is talking about a primal change of mind, worldview, or your way of processing." I hope that I will experience *metanoieite* in the Future Anabaptist Leaders program with Mountain States Mennonite Conference this academic year.

For those of you I haven't met yet, my name is Erin. I grew up in Lancaster County, PA, and I first came to the MSMC region when I moved to Fort Collins to attend Colorado State University in 2016. For the last 2.5 years, I have lived in the San Luis Valley, first as a volunteer at the Rio Grande Farm Park through Mennonite Voluntary Service and now as a farmer/rancher in training on an organic farm/ranch.

As they say, change is the only thing you can count on in life, and I would say that has been true for me. It wasn't until fairly recently that I imagined I might become a farmer. Now, looking back, I can see that the seed was always there. Growing up, I would frequently complain to my parents that it wasn't fair that they had both grown up on farms and I didn't get to! Visiting my Grandpa and Grandma's farm was one of my favorite activities, and to direct that agricultural energy in my weekly routine, I started riding horses in sixth grade.

When it came time to choose a college, I picked Colorado State for its strong equine sciences program (and the fact that there was a Mennonite church in town!). But I quickly found that the program wasn't a good fit. So I switched my major to environmental sciences, but I discovered that to me, the most interesting and practical thing they were talking about was agriculture. That's when I first came face to face with the beginnings of my calling to farming and ranching, a significant change from the uncertainty I had been feeling about my vocation up to that point.

So it was many changes of mind that guided me through college, and I discovered that having followed such a winding path, I was living in some interesting and quite paradoxical middle ground. I found myself with friends and family members who farm/ranch with a wide variety of contradictory worldviews. I completed one internship where pesticide use was a major focus of the organization's research, and I've worked on a strictly organic farm. I'm a lifelong vegetarian, and I currently raise sheep, many of whom will be sold for meat.

In many ways, my education and our culture trained me to have the answers and pick a side: these are the right ways to farm and ranch and these are the wrong and outdated practices. However, my practical experiences and conversations with farmers and ranchers have shown me that in agriculture, it is arrogant to think I could apply the same "right" answer to highly diverse and context-dependent operations.



Erin and her horse.

The work of agriculture is deeply complex, emotional, and spiritual. There are no easy answers, and there is an abundance of paradox. As Canadian farmer Doug Dyck writes, “Farming to me is about tension, and that’s not a negative word. ... It’s never ‘either/or,’ but it’s about the tension of making them work together.” It requires the opposite of arrogance, which I define as wanting something to change without being willing to change myself. When I come to conversations or decisions with humility and openness, I am better able to connect with and understand the land and the life it sustains.

The deeper I go into agriculture, the more that I find that it is made up of acts of faith: faith that the sun will shine and the rains will come, faith that the plants and animals will grow and thrive, faith that other people are also doing their best to care for life and land, and faith that God is present in all of the struggle and beauty that comes from caring for creation.

Through the Future Anabaptist Leaders program, I am excited to dig deeper into the conversation between faith and agriculture. I have a long reading list (but recommendations are always welcome!), and I am excited to talk with many of you. I hope to visit many of your churches this winter and host a book study on Zoom early next year around this topic. Here are some of the questions shaping my exploration:

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-ERIN KAUFFMAN

- As people of faith who are related to the food system in many different and overlapping ways, how do we stay faithful to each other, to the earth, and to God?
- What wisdom does the Bible offer around food and its complex entanglement with so much of our lives?
- How does our identity as a faith community ask us to live in response to the challenges of our food system?
- What does it look like to be church in rural spaces?

Spoiler alert: I don't know. No one knows! But I believe the road to faithfulness with food lies in what David Whyte calls "the conversational nature of reality." And I'm excited to start having this conversation with all of you.

My prayer is that as I have experienced *metanoie* in big and small ways already, God will continue to transform how I understand the entanglement of food and faith. I hope you will join me!

1. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 92.
2. Doug Dyck, “Land Stewardship,” in *Germinating Conversations*, ed. Marta Bunnett Wiebe, 42-45.
3. Anika Reynar, “Entangled in Our Space,” in *Germinating Conversations*, ed. Marta Bunnett Wiebe, 21-25.
4. David Whyte, “Life at the Frontier: The Conversational Nature of Reality,” TEDxPugetSound, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ss1HuA1hIk>