

Already Happening: Reflections on Climate Jazz, Holy Participation, and the Essential Work of Collaboration

By Marnie Klassen
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Climate Jazz: Beginning

A freelance writer, an Executive Director, and an “apprentice peasant” walk into a conference room.¹ That’s exactly what happened this past November 15, 2024, in Kitchener, Ontario at 50

Kent Avenue (the sustainably designed building shared by several Ontario-based Anabaptist organizations, including Mennonite Church Eastern Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Ontario). The gathering was called “Climate Jazz: Anabaptist Improv and Collaboration.” Many participants were invited directly by the organizers, while others, like me, invited themselves when word got out of such a gathering happening.² The gathering focused on those who work for North American Anabaptist organizations and have climate, land, or environment within their professional or volunteer portfolio. I am a freelance writer and preacher, and while I have many curiosities and subjects that I work on, I am consistently drawn back to the intersections of faith and climate. There were around 30 of us there, and while the group lacked some cultural diversity, I was grateful for the diversity of experience and vocation. From the time I arrived, I knew I had much to learn from and with these people.

Once folks had arrived and been caffeinated, we filed outside into the drizzly grey day, through the 50 Kent parking lot, and down a short path lined with trees. There, we were led in worship, prayer, and reflection by Wendy Janzen, pastor of Burning Bush Forest Church and former MCEC Eco-Minister.³ Worship may bring to mind instruments playing hymns or praise songs, a simple liturgy, and rows of seats facing the front of a sanctuary. These images are good starting points for imagining what wild, outdoor worship can look like. There was singing (sans instruments), a simple liturgy (with no bulletin or PowerPoint in sight), and we gathered (in a



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¹ This is how writer, farmer, and Climate Jazz participant [Theo Wiederkehr](#) introduced himself at the gathering.

² Climate Jazz was organized by people from Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church USA, Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, Canadian Mennonite University, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Mennonite Central Committee US, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, and Mennonite Central Committee Ontario.

³ You can find more information about Burning Bush Forest Church at www.burningbushforestchurch.ca. Wendy was appointed MCEC’s Eco-Minister in January 2022, and was laid off in December 2024 due to budget constraints. For more on that story, see the article in [Canadian Mennonite](#).

circle around a gravel patch rather than pews facing a stage, cross, or altar). We listened to the voices of creation and Creator, walked in silence across misty moss-covered ground, and learned some of the history of that land, both Indigenous and natural. I live in nearby Toronto, and it felt necessary to learn about the history of the area. It reminds me of our ever-evolving relationship with land, even as that knowledge is of colonial and extractive pasts.

Session 1: Improv

After lunch on November 15, we spent several hours introducing ourselves. I hope this does not ring futile; indeed, it was the core of our work. Each of the 30 or so participants sat at a desk in a circle and hung a sheet of chart paper off the edge, cascading into the circle. Each paper was unique, stating, in colourful marker scribbles, the participant's name, any title they had



or organization they were affiliated with, and a visual depiction of their work as it related to climate. At the bottom was written the most important part: our “edges of collaboration” or the things we would like to talk to others about. Representatives from MCC, spiritual directors, activists, writers, camp directors, and professors introduced themselves. By the end, we had painted a rich landscape of the work that is already happening around North America in Anabaptist spaces regarding climate.

Already happening. I pondered this simple pair of words at Climate Jazz and have continued to do so in the months since - so often we see a problem and begin from zero trying to solve it. *A worship service needs to be planned? I will write the liturgy. Congregations need to focus on climate? My friends and I will start a new initiative.* While working with A Rocha Manitoba from 2021 to 2023, I began paying closer attention to climate good news stories and to climate solutions, especially nature-based solutions.⁴ I found that, as someone struggling with climate anxiety and despair, seeing these things *already happening* helped. It helped a lot. I could see that the world also held goodness and could imagine myself plugging into work that has already begun. I no longer felt the need to reinvent the wheel.

⁴ A Rocha is an international organization and was the first Christian nature-conservation organization of its kind. You can find more info about their work in Canada at arocha.ca. Nature-Based Climate Solutions, also known as Nature Based Solutions, use the power of ecosystems and landscapes to sequester carbon. Learn more at <https://www.unepfi.org/nature/nature/nature-based-solutions/>

In June 2018, I took a course through the Canadian School of Peacebuilding with Dr. Babu Ayindo. Oddly, what has stuck with me most since then was not the content of the course, but Babu's odd way of defining 'participation' as we went through the syllabus. "Take the risk!" he simply urged us in his beautiful Kenyan accent. I've pondered that in the years since, wondering how participating in goodness requires us to risk. I've often thought of love and risk as connected, and so Babu's appeal to "take the risk" has brought the three together for me. To love, to risk; these are ways we participate in the good work that God is already doing. As Anabaptists, we believe that Jesus brought God's Kingdom to earth, that God's Kingdom is *already happening*. The call of the gospel, then, is to participate in the Kingdom work that has already begun. Even cosmically, we do not have to reinvent the wheel, but simply to risk participating in the goodness we see around us (even if that goodness didn't originate with us).

Session Two: Collaboration

We spent the latter part of the afternoon in smaller conversations. Democratically, we organized our "edges of collaboration" into broader themes and divided into four groups. I wish I could recall what the other groups discussed (I believe one got very excited about heat pumps), but instead I'll tell you about the group I was part of. We



We gathered to discuss movement and system sustainability. Our central question was this: *how do we plan long-term when staff positions and funding are tenuous, when grants want immediate tangible results, and when economic and cultural shifts mean changes in charitable donations and volunteerism?* Oof. Now that's a question!

I won't pretend it was an easy conversation. We aired some grievances along the way and felt collectively frustrated by what we see happening - the drying up of money for environmental and climate initiatives, and the lack of long-term planning within institutions and organizations. We named another observation: many of our Anabaptist organizations are doing overlapping work but struggling to get very far down the road. *What if, we wondered, we were to map out what is already happening so that these organizations and individuals could collaborate more readily?* Some of this mapping has already been done by students and staff at Conrad Grebel

University College.⁵ Could we use their work as a jumping off point? I imagine a map or database that makes collaborating across Anabaptist organizations easier, more effective, and more enjoyable because we can see the groundwork that has been laid. This conversation reminded me that we, as an Anabaptist community, have taken many steps down the path to creation and climate care; we do not need to begin once more at the trailhead.

I wonder if our habitual beginning-again is rooted in theology that sees Kingdom work as something we do, rather than something God is doing, and we are participating in. Do we, as Mennonites and Anabaptists, believe that God is active in our world, in creation? Do we trust God and one another to have begun the work? North American individualist culture pushes us to be heroes, saints, and leaders - but we don't each have to be. We can be participants. We can choose to take the backseat, to "practice playing second fiddle," at least some of the time.⁶ We can choose holy participation.

Saturday: The Great Cloud of Witnesses from Kitchener-Waterloo

On Saturday the 16th, we returned to 50 Kent and were joined by several local climate activists and creation-care takers. Beginning the day once more in worship (this time indoors), we moved into a morning filled with fascinating and hopeful presentations from local actors. We learned about an interfaith banner project



in Kitchener-Waterloo,⁷ the installation of dozens of solar panels at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate,⁸ and the origin story of Menno YA.⁹ Like the climate good news stories during my A Rocha years, this helped. It helped to know that even in this one locale, there are so many opportunities to join in the good work of caring for God's beloved and beautiful creation.

The remainder of our time together was loosely structured - we engaged meaningful conversation with one another, discovered how our work intersected, or could. I overheard

⁵ Visit uwaterloo.ca/grebel-now/grebel-now-spring-2022/feature/systems-mapping-reveals-interconnected-webs-church for more information on the project.

⁶ Romans 12:9-10 (The Message).

⁷ www.faithclimatejustice.ca/banners.html

⁸ <https://canadianmennonite.org/the-yes-and-of-rockways-solar-project/>,
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/kitchener/article/kitchener-ont-school-gets-hundreds-of-solar-panels-installed-on-its-roof/>

⁹ www.instagram.com/menno_ya/

snippets of conversations, all of which felt energetic, some even joyful. This is rare, in climate circles, this joy. And I believe it matters immensely!

Faith and climate conversations often circle around themes of hope and despair - I am always encouraged when that topic moves along to *joy* in the face of crisis. We must face this climate emergency together, and doing so requires a joyful foundation. We cannot do it without joy. We must hang on to celebration and lean into the moments and actions that energize us. I was encouraged to see and hear folks at Climate Jazz doing just that: finding joy and, as Mary Oliver wrote, “giving into it.”¹⁰

Benediction: Now Go!

The work of Climate Jazz was significant: we connected. We learned. We commiserated. We celebrated! This is the often invisible work of community-building. It is foundation work; it does not have the glamour of finish carpentry. Ranging in age from high school students through to elders, we learned together that our work is not done in isolation. We do not seek a flourishing earth alone, but together. Climate care can be lonely and tenuous work, but those of us who do it care so deeply that we willingly bear those burdens. What a gift to have those burdens lightened, made buoyant in community, in collaboration, and in joy.

I don't precisely recall how we were sent, but in my mind's eye, it was with a benediction: *Now Go!* benedictions often say; *Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.* But perhaps I would amend that familiar line for Climate Jazz, and indeed for all of us creation-lovers who need a blessing and a kick in the pants: *Now go - go in peace, knowing you are part of a great cloud of witnesses working to love creation with hands and heart. Go in hope, imagining a future in which we get it right. And go in joy, giving into it when it comes, learning from the goodness of the earth that there is always more joy to come.*



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¹⁰ In her poem 'Don't Hesitate,' Mary Oliver says, "If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it." You can find the whole poem at <https://allpoetry.com/contest/2848587-Mary-Oliver-Poem--Don-t-Hesitate-->