

Toward a Formation-Oriented Philosophical Framework for AMBS

For institutional clarity, mission coherence, and global partnership

David Boshart

Executive Summary

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) stands at a moment of institutional strength marked by theological clarity, stable leadership, expanding global relationships, and renewed confidence in its mission. Central to this mission is AMBS's calling to serve the global Anabaptist communion—at the invitation of national church leaders—while also offering theological education to churches and leaders from increasingly diverse Christian traditions drawn to Anabaptist ecclesiological commitments.

AMBS is grounded in the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the witness of Scripture; the life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ; the work of the Holy Spirit; the church as the community called, gathered, and sent by God; and the Anabaptist theological tradition. These primary formative sources remain foundational to the seminary's identity and mission. AMBS acknowledges that these commitments are lived within broader socio-historical contexts that shape institutional assumptions and practices. These influences must be named and discerned with clarity while ensuring that the seminary's identity and mission remain rooted in its primary formative sources.

Rooted in Scripture and the saving power of the life, death, resurrection and ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ, and shaped by the practices of the church, AMBS seeks to form Christians capable of wise spiritual and communal discernment while engaging diverse churches with clear theological conviction, bold humility, and fraternal companionship.

This paper proposes an explicit formation-oriented philosophical framework that integrates enduring moral insights present in modern thought while locating identity and direction in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the shared practices of the church. At its core is the conviction that human beings are formed through participation in communities, practices, and relationships—and that the unity of the church is not achieved through agreement, but received in Christ and sustained through that shared formation.

Within this framework:

- conscience is honored while rooted in communal formation and discernment,
- justice and peace are pursued as integrated expressions of faithful Christian witness,
- formation is emphasized without withdrawal from the global church or the world,
- and difference is engaged without threatening the unity already given in Christ.

This framework does not create a new vocation for AMBS; it names with greater clarity the vocation the seminary is already striving to embody.

By naming its formation-oriented philosophical framework explicitly, AMBS strengthens its capacity to maintain ecclesial trust across cultures, deepen global partnerships, guide curriculum and leadership formation, and exercise theological leadership with clarity and confidence. This clarity enables the seminary to serve its sponsoring denominations, the global Anabaptist communion, and the wider church with integrity—offering a formation-oriented approach to unity that does not depend on uniformity, but on shared life in Christ.

I. Purpose and Context: A Shared Governance Conversation

AMBS serves the church at a time of increasing complexity—marked by cultural polarization, theological divergence, and the rapid growth of the global Anabaptist communion. These realities are not external to the seminary’s mission; they define the context in which that mission must be faithfully carried out.

This paper serves primarily as an orienting framework for AMBS’s shared governance community—Board, faculty, administration, and denominational sponsors—while also providing language that clarifies the seminary’s identity to global partners, prospective students, and the wider church. It is intended not as an ideological test or policy manual, but as a theological and philosophical framework for institutional clarity, mission coherence, and faithful partnership. At its heart, this paper seeks to clarify AMBS’s vocation as a theological learning community: one called neither to ideological conformity nor ecclesial adjudication, but to faithful Christian formation capable of serving the church across deep differences with theological clarity, humility, and integrity.

As AMBS seeks to serve both the global Anabaptist communion and students from a widening range of ecclesial traditions, it is increasingly important to become explicit about how the seminary understands its institutional identity, the assumptions that shape its organizational culture, and the theological posture that guides its work across contexts of difference. This includes clarity about how AMBS maintains the integrity of its educational mission when working with churches whose doctrinal commitments, cultural realities, or ethical frameworks differ from those present within North American contexts.

In practice, these questions are not abstract. They are experienced concretely by faculty and students who find themselves working across contexts of difference—sometimes in settings where the official positions of the church differ significantly from their own theological convictions. Some of AMBS’s stated commitments have been experienced as being in tension with AMBS’s commitment to respect the authority and doctrinal position of partner churches. Such tensions are not incidental to theological education in this context; *they are to be expected* as part of a formational learning environment in which students and faculty engage faithfully across differences. This paper seeks to articulate a formation-oriented philosophical framework that allows AMBS to enter such contexts without compromise of integrity, while also honoring the authority, discernment, and contextual realities of the churches it serves.

In recent years, AMBS has found itself serving amidst strain across the global Anabaptist communion—moments in which theological disagreement, cultural difference, and institutional actions have intersected in ways that have disrupted trust, complicated relationships, and forced undesired decisions. These strains happen both between members of the global Anabaptist community and within a denominational body. In such contexts, the question is not whether difference exists, but how the seminary is present within it: whether it contributes to fragmentation or to patient, formational faithfulness. This paper emerges, in part, from those lived tensions and seeks to articulate a way of proceeding that is both theologically grounded and institutionally responsible.

At the same time, this posture also creates tension within AMBS's North American constituency. Some within our sponsoring denominations may expect the seminary to exert more influence on issues facing the church today. From this perspective, a focus on unity through shared formation may be experienced not as theological discipline but as moral failure—interpreted as accommodating injustice, reinforcing oppression, or abandoning those who have been marginalized.

The formation-oriented philosophical framework articulated in this paper does not intend to resolve that tension. Instead, it reframes the seminary's vocation aligned with Paul's wisdom in Philippians 3:15 "...if you think differently about anything, this, too, God will reveal to you, only hold on to what you have already attained." In this vein, God is the arbiter of difficult ecclesial questions on which the global church experiences disagreement. AMBS is not called to function as an instrument of ideological alignment, but as a theological learning community committed to forming leaders capable of discernment, truthfulness, patience, and faithfulness within complex realities where the global church experiences disagreement. In fact, this is the *only* posture that will ensure that ecclesially discerned wisdom flows not from "AMBS to the rest," but flows in all directions to enhance the discernment of God's will for all. This will, at times, leave the seminary vulnerable to criticism from multiple directions. Such vulnerability is not incidental to this approach; it is intrinsic to a posture that seeks to remain accountable to the gospel, the global church, and the work of the Spirit rather than to any single socio-historical framework.

The North American denominational context within which AMBS was formed has changed significantly in the last 25 years. Membership decline in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada has reduced institutional capacity for leadership development and theological reflection. At the same time, the global Anabaptist communion has grown substantially, particularly in the Global South and has come to see AMBS as a trusted resource for providing theological education, the Meserete Kristos Church situation notwithstanding.

These changes surface an opportunity for clarifying the seminary's evolving vocation for such a time as this: to play a larger role within our sponsoring denominations and an increasingly diverse church to strengthen the Anabaptist identity of leaders and their congregations.

This paper is written for AMBS's shared governance community—Board, faculty, administration, and denominational sponsors. Shared governance, in this context, refers not simply to decision-making structures, but to a shared responsibility for stewarding the seminary's mission, identity, and theological integrity.

II. The Theological Center of AMBS

AMBS is grounded in:

- the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
- the witness of Scripture;
- the life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ;
- the work of the Holy Spirit;
- the church as the community called, gathered, and sent by God;
- and the Anabaptist tradition's emphasis on discipleship, community, peace, justice, and communal discernment.

These commitments provide the seminary's theological center of gravity.

At the same time, AMBS acknowledges that theology is always lived, taught, and practiced within historical conditions. Faithfulness does not require denying those conditions, but discerning how they shape assumptions, language, and institutional habits.

This commitment to theological rootedness joined with historical awareness is itself characteristic of Anabaptist witness.

III. Social and Formative Influences without Ideological Dominance

Within the cultural and ecclesial environment in which AMBS operates, multiple streams of thought and practice exert formative influence—often implicitly—on how theology is interpreted, how institutions function, and how leaders are formed. These influences arise both from within the academy and from the wider life of the church and society. They shape the questions we ask, the assumptions we carry, and the practices we normalize, frequently without explicit awareness.

These movements do not arise in a vacuum. They often emerge in response to particular historical conditions, perceived failures, or excesses in prior eras. In this sense, they can be understood as part of an ongoing pattern of reaction and correction within both church and society. As such, they carry forward real concerns and insights, even as they may also embody distortions, partial truths, or overcorrections.

Taken together, these influences contribute to what might be described as “the water we are swimming in.” They are not external to us; they shape us—intellectually, theologically, and often politically—whether we recognize it or not. The task, therefore, is not simply to identify them, but to understand the assumptions, values, and formative power they carry.

Fundamentalist and biblicist approaches have emphasized the authority of Scripture and the importance of doctrinal clarity.¹ These impulses reflect a deep concern for faithfulness. Yet when detached from historical awareness and communal discernment, they can lead to rigid or decontextualized readings of Scripture that limit the church's capacity to engage diverse contexts faithfully.

Liberal traditions have contributed important commitments to freedom of conscience, resistance to coercion, and respect for human dignity.² These insights remain essential for theological education in a plural context. At the same time, when liberalism is treated as a sufficient framework, it can lack the depth of moral formation and communal identity necessary for sustaining Christian life and leadership.

Liberation theology has offered a powerful theological account of God's concern for the poor and oppressed, insisting that Christian faith must be attentive to material conditions, injustice, and systems of power.³ It has rightly challenged the church to take seriously the lived realities of those on the margins. At the same time, when reduced to a singular interpretive lens, it may risk constraining the fullness of the gospel or subordinating other dimensions of Christian faith and practice.

Progressive frameworks have heightened awareness of structural injustice, historical exclusion, and institutional responsibility.⁴ These concerns resonate deeply with the biblical witness and have strengthened the church's attention to justice and reconciliation. Yet when progressivism functions as an organizing framework, it can narrow theological imagination, reduce hospitality to difference in certain directions, and strain relationships with global partners whose contexts differ significantly from those of North American culture.

Post-liberal theology has emphasized formation, narrative, and the shaping power of practices, drawing renewed attention to the communal and liturgical dimensions of faith.⁵ These insights align closely with Anabaptist ecclesiology and pedagogy. However, when taken alone, post-liberal approaches may not provide sufficient guidance for institutional leadership, public engagement, or intercultural partnership at scale.

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

Christian nationalist frameworks⁶ differ from many other formative influences in that they represent not merely one contextual stream among others, but a direct theological distortion when Christian identity is subordinated to political, national, or coercive power. Such approaches greatly harm God's mission of shalom by conflating church and state for the purpose of power, and by distorting worship through the elevation of national identity to a place that properly belongs to God alone, thereby undermining the noncoercive and transnational character of the gospel.

Secularizing influences have contributed to the marginalization of theological reasoning, the privatization of faith, and the reframing of moral discourse in non-theological terms.⁷ These dynamics shape the expectations that students and institutions bring to theological education, often without explicit recognition.

Each of these influences carries formative power. Each reflects particular concerns, insights, and historical conditions. Yet none can serve as a sufficient or governing framework for theological education.

The challenge for AMBS, therefore, is not simply to position itself in opposition to these movements, nor to adopt them uncritically, but to engage them through disciplined theological discernment. This includes recognizing where their insights illuminate aspects of the gospel, where their assumptions distort the Gospel, and where their claims must be resisted in light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

These movements do not determine AMBS's identity. But they do shape the environment in which that identity must be lived, articulated, and embodied. Faithfulness requires not disengagement, but clarity—an ability to discern, with humility and conviction, how to engage these formative influences without being governed by them.

IV. Why an Integrative Framework is Necessary

Each of these intellectual movements emerged in response to real deficiencies in the others. Each offers necessary insight. None is sufficient on its own.

The task before AMBS is therefore not to select among them, but to articulate a coherent formation-oriented philosophical framework capable of:

- honoring conscience while rooting it in communal formation and discernment,
- pursuing justice while resisting reduction to ideological strategies,
- sustaining formation without withdrawal from the world,
- engaging difference without fragmentation or coercion,
- embodying peace as both theological conviction and lived practice.

Peace, in this framework, is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of rightly ordered relationships shaped by the reconciling work of Christ. Justice is not an

⁶ Drew J. Strait, *Strange Worship: Six Steps for Challenging Christian Nationalism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2024). Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

abstract principle alone, but participation in God's restorative work in the world. Both are inseparable from the formation of persons and communities in the way of Jesus.

V. A Formation-Oriented Philosophical Framework

The preceding analysis leads to a central conviction: formation and unity are not competing concerns, but inseparable dimensions of faithful Christian life.

Unity is not sustained by uniformity of thought, but by a shared life in Christ, cultivated through the practices that bind the church to him and to one another. Unity is a gift given in Christ—one that the church is called to receive and sustain, not manufacture.

Within this framework, human beings are understood as relationally formed moral agents whose faithfulness depends upon the communities, practices, and institutions that shape them.

This framework rests on several interrelated convictions:

- persons are formed, not self-generated;
- formation precedes action;
- power always forms and must be exercised with humility and accountability;
- pluralism is an enduring reality;
- discernment is communal and ongoing.

By pluralism, AMBS refers to the enduring reality that Christians and churches inhabit diverse theological, cultural, and social contexts while remaining accountable to shared life in Christ.

Freedom, therefore, is understood not merely as autonomy, but as the capacity to participate faithfully in God's reconciling relationships.

VI. Anabaptist Theology as Formative Grammar

This formation-oriented philosophical framework reflects core Anabaptist commitments expressed as practices:

Discipleship: following Jesus as a lived, communal, and ongoing way of life.

Community: the church as a body that forms identity through shared practices, not merely shared belief.

Atonement-informed reconciliation: the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, through which sin is addressed, relationships are restored, and new life is made possible. This includes both the reconciliation of persons to God and the restoration of right relationships within human community.

Peace and justice: embodied commitments to nonviolence, reconciliation, and the restoration of right relationships.

Discernment: seeking the Spirit's guidance together through Scripture, prayer, and communal life.

Mission: participation in God's reconciling work in the world.

These practices do not function as ideological tests, but as formative commitments shaping leaders for service in diverse contexts.

VII. Implications for AMBS's Mission and Practice

Before turning to specific operational implications, it is important to clarify how AMBS understands its posture toward the diversity of churches it serves.

As the seminary names its philosophical and theological commitments more explicitly, questions naturally arise about how AMBS can remain genuinely present with churches that hold differing theological convictions, cultural assumptions, or ecclesial priorities.

AMBS's vocation is not to require alignment with every partner's institutional position, nor to function as an adjudicator of ecclesial questions where the global church experiences disagreement. At the same time, the seminary does not suspend or relativize its own theological commitments in order to sustain relationships. Rather, AMBS seeks to form Christians capable of wise spiritual and communal discernment, while also exercising its own theological discernment as an institution—grounded in Scripture, centered in Christ, and shaped by the practices of the church. In this way, the seminary engages other churches with clear theological conviction, bold humility, and fraternal companionship—honoring their authority and context while remaining transparent about its own contextual theological discernment.

For example, this framework allows AMBS to partner with churches whose doctrinal commitments may differ from prevailing North American assumptions without either obscuring AMBS's own theological commitments or requiring ecclesial conformity as a precondition for educational collaboration.

This posture is made possible precisely because AMBS locates its identity in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the formative practices of the church, rather than in ideological conformity or institutional assertion. Instead, AMBS seeks to cultivate learning communities that bear witness to its theological commitments while creating learning environments where trust, dialogue, and formation can occur across differences.

Such clarity enables the seminary to practice a form of presence that is neither neutrality nor advocacy, but fraternal companionship. The seminary does not obscure its convictions in order to maintain access, nor does it impose those convictions as conditions of relationship. Instead, AMBS seeks to be a teaching partner that creates learning environments where trust, dialogue, and formation can occur across differences.

In this way, explicit identity becomes not a barrier to relationship but a condition for it. Churches are able to engage AMBS knowing both what the seminary is committed to and what it does not claim authority to decide on their behalf.

With this posture in view, the implications of the formation-oriented framework for AMBS's mission and practice include the following:

1. Curriculum Design

Curriculum is intentionally shaped to serve leaders across diverse cultural, ecclesial, and geographic contexts. Courses integrate biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and contextual analysis, recognizing that faithfulness is expressed differently across cultures.

Learning outcomes attend explicitly to knowing, doing, and being, ensuring that intellectual formation, practical competence, and personal transformation are held together. Pedagogy emphasizes practices of listening, translation, and intercultural discernment, resisting the assumption that Western theological frameworks are universally normative.

2. Faculty Hiring and Development

Faculty are called not only to disciplinary excellence but to a shared vocation as formational educators serving a global church. Academic disciplines are not ends in themselves, but resources for shaping leaders capable of faithful discernment and action.

Faculty are expected to leverage their scholarship and teaching in service of leadership formation—helping students integrate knowledge with practice, character, and responsibility. This includes cultivating intercultural competence, theological humility, and attentiveness to how power operates within educational and ecclesial contexts.

3. Leadership Formation

Leadership is understood covenantally rather than managerially or ideologically. The goal is not simply to develop skills, but to form persons who can exercise influence faithfully within communities shaped by the gospel.

Across disciplines, leadership formation includes cultivating theological judgment, moral discernment, spiritual maturity, relational competence, and contextual awareness. Graduates are prepared to lead in environments marked by pluralism, conflict, and cultural difference, with particular attention to noncoercive authority and communal trust.

4. Justice, Peace, and Public Witness

Justice and peace are pursued as integrated theological commitments grounded in God's mission of shalom and the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Structural analysis of injustice is held together with practices of reconciliation, humility, and spiritual formation.

The seminary resists alignment with any single political ideology, seeking instead to form leaders capable of faithful Christian witness across diverse social and political contexts. Public engagement is shaped not by ideological certainty, but by disciplined discernment and a commitment to the reconciling work of God.

5. Global Partnerships

Global Anabaptist relationships are understood as invited, mutual, and reciprocal, rather than self-initiated or programmatically driven. AMBS engages internationally at the invitation of national church leaders, honoring local authority, context, and discernment.

Partnerships are shaped by listening, long-term trust, and shared ownership. The seminary resists presumptions of expertise or superiority, recognizing that the Spirit is already at work forming faithful leaders within each context. Educational work is undertaken in companionship, not as expansion.

6. Learning Community Life

AMBS extends broad hospitality to those who seek theological education, recognizing that students arrive with diverse convictions, identities, and experiences. Participation in the learning community entails shared expectations of respect, truthfulness, and openness to formation in relation to Scripture, Christ, and the practices of the church. Expressions or actions that undermine the dignity, safety, or full participation of others are not consistent with the community life commitments that are central to our mission. In their application process, students acknowledge their awareness of the diversity they will encounter at AMBS and commit to preserving the dignity and safety of all who study here prior to matriculation. AMBS faculty provide ongoing support for students to increase their intercultural adaptability.

7. Institutional Culture and Governance

Decision-making attends not only to outcomes, but to the formation of institutional culture over time. Conflict is engaged through practices of repair, reconciliation, and covenantal responsibility. Governance and administration are shaped by transparency, accountability, and communal discernment over efficiency. Aided by clarity about decision-making responsibilities and processes, shared governance reflects a commitment to collective responsibility for the seminary's mission and identity, recognizing that how decisions are made is itself formational..

VIII. Conclusion: Clarity in Service of Faithfulness

AMBS does not require a new mission. It requires philosophical clarity capable of sustaining that mission across cultural change, leadership transitions, and global engagement.

By naming its formation-oriented philosophical framework explicitly, AMBS strengthens its identity and its confidence in theological leadership. It clarifies how the seminary

shows up in the world—relative to its sponsoring denominations, in service to the global church, and in engagement with diverse traditions.

This clarity enables AMBS to remain rooted without becoming insular, engaged without becoming captive, and faithful without requiring uniformity.