Warren Wiebe
Interviewed by Jordan Roane
November 12, 2014 in Lawrence, Kansas
Transcribed by Jordan Roane

Abstract: Oral history interview of Warren Wiebe conducted by Jordan Roane in Lawrence, Kansas, on November 12, 2014. Warren grew up in the small western Kansas town of Hillsboro. Hillsboro is known for its Mennonite community as well as the Mennonite college there. Warren grew up attending a Mennonite church there. We discussed his experiences growing up in a Mennonite community as well as Mennonite values that were taught to him. Now, living in Lawrence, Warren attends Grace Evangelical Presbyterian Church where he and his family are very involved. Warren is an elder in the church and began attending the church the first weekend it started in 1989. In this interview we also discussed his experiences in the church and values he instilled in his five children. Some of those values included their faith, hard work, and putting others before yourself. This interview was conducted for the Religion in Kansas Project as a term project for Professor Tim Miller.

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J: Okay, thanks for agreeing to meet with me today. I’m going to read this oral consent form and then we can get started. The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas is conducting a research project that seeks to preserve and provide a publicly accessible record of the history of various churches and other religious organizations in Kansas. We seek to collect as many stories, information, and documents as possible, with the goal of creating, over time, a major repository of information on all kinds of religious bodies in Kansas, past and present. We would like to record your memories of your experiences in religious organizations. We expect that each interview will take about one hour. We assure you that you are not obligated to participate and may discontinue your involvement at any time. Since we are trying to create a public record of Kansas religious history, we are primarily interviewing persons who agree to let their interviews be available to the general public through the Religion in Kansas Project Website and to be identified by name as the person who was interviewed. Should you have any questions about the project, please contact Melissa Fisher Isaacs or Professor Tim Miller. Okay, so I wanted to start this interview by asking um just about your childhood and what it was like growing up in a small town in Kansas, um in Hillsboro specifically. So what was that like?

W: What aspect of it? Everything or church?
J: Both, either or, whatever you’d like to talk about.

W: Well, growing up in a small town, I went to school with the same people from kindergarten through senior year in high school, and if you further divided it up that same group of people went to about 7 different churches in town, most of them were Mennonites. And I went to church with the same people my whole life, and you sat in the same seat and your grandparents sat in the same seat and your parents sat in the same seat and so on and so on forever. And church was Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. The kids got to skip out on Sunday night a lot of times, there wasn’t a hard and fast rule but you always went Wednesday night and Sunday morning. And because it was a small community, and because it was founded by Mennonite settlers, that culture was a part of pretty much everything in town. Now as current day it has become diffused and there’s a wider group of different kinds of people in the town today than there were 40 years ago. So that’s what it’s like. Seventy-seven people in my graduating class in high school. Half of them lived on farms and some of them in town.

J: That’s cool. So can you tell me just a little bit about the Mennonite church? What does that look like? A typical service?

W: Well there is 7 of them so they go from the most conservative church where people drive black cars and don’t use radio or TVs to maybe the most liberal one would still be very conservative in Lawrence, Kansas. All of them have, um become different churches for different small reasons. Way back when in history they appear to be small now but at some point and time they were big enough to cause a church to divide into a new church. And uh the Mennonite church in Hillsboro, the one our family went to is probably in the middle as far as most conservative to least conservative. Uh very uh highly valued appearance of the outward man. The heart was an issue but if your heart didn’t match up with outward actions you could probably still be an accepted member of the community if you served well and uh considered others before you considered yourself.

J: Would you say those are some of the values that are pretty consistent in the Mennonite church?

W: Mennonites are founded on, uh out of the Reformation and like all Reformation churches are a denomination that tries to trace everything in the beginning back to the Bible. And the questions in the Reformation could kind of be broken down to why are we doing this, where does this hold uh fact in the Bible verses something that man has come up to. So you could say when they split from the Catholic church, everything was more narrowly Bible based but as um history and years have passed, there are probably things in the Mennonite churches where you go, that doesn’t look very Bible based. Uh ya. I can’t even remember the question now.
J: That’s okay. Um so--

W: Oh I know! Here’s a good example. You could never do anything on Sunday. Now it wasn’t so much that you, doing it on Sunday maybe was a heart issue, it was more you couldn’t let anybody else in town see you working on Sunday. So you could maybe mow your backyard but you could never mow your front yard. And if you had a power mower you couldn’t even mow your backyard on Sunday ‘cause everyone would know you were mowing your backyard and that was um, but that’s also a kid looking at what he perceived to be inconsistencies. And I know when I go back as an adult to church it’s a very Bible based, Gospel-centered church service. And when you sit down and you go, wow this sounds a lot the church we go to in Lawrence, Kansas, which is Gospel-centered, Bible-based. So there might have been more of an inconsistency from more of my perception as a kid in junior high/high schooler then was really there so and when I was there was still a whole two generations of the church that spoke low-German, my dad’s generation and my grandparents’ generation all spoke low-German. And when my dad was a, I think a young young man or maybe right before he was born, was that, here’s an example of how the church has evolved, a big issue was if the church service should be in low-German or in English. Well that’s probably not a Bible issue but I’m guessing there probably could be church splits over that. We’re leaving because you want to put in English and English is not who we are or where we came from so we’re switching and uh I’d never seen anyone get their feet washed in church but in my Dad’s younger years he as a younger man had to wash the feet of the older people in the church as did all the younger people. And he said it would be a farmer who hadn’t had his shoes off all week and he’d take his boots off in church and you had to wash his feet, it was humbling. So the message of being humbled before others as Christ humbled himself before sinners was easy for him to understand so--

J: Gotcha, and your parents still live in Hillsboro?

W: Same house

J: Do they still attend the same church you grew up going to?

W: Yep about uh boy I was gonna say maybe 13, 14 years ago the church we grew up in was rebuilt after the original church burned down. Then the church we grew up in about 10 or 12 years ago completely burned down one Sunday afternoon. Somebody, there was a short in the sound system and it was a church that had been built in sections over time and so not a great fireproof structure with firewalls and current fire codes. So once it started in one end, it literally burned all the way to the other end of the block in the course of an afternoon. And by the time the fire was done the church was destroyed completely. Which uh in Olathe or Lenexa or Overland Park or even Lawrence, there’s no way a building would burn for 6 hours completely to the ground without part of it being
saved. But in a small town with lots of other towns coming in to help with the fire, it completely burned down. So, I think the first thing I remembered reading about it was somebody that had gone to the church their whole life saying uh the church is not a structure or building, the church is a body of believers. So the building is gone but the church remains. So I thought that was a pretty good off the cuff after watching your church burn down to a reporter.

J: That’s cool. So what kinds of things did you learn growing up or what values did you learn growing up that you still hold onto today?

W: (Laughs) In the Mennonite world, above all other values, and maybe this was just in our house and in our family, was work. If you were a lazy person you were uniformly detested and held at low regard. If you were a hard worker that covered a lot of faults. For instance if I could say, ya Jordan’s kind of pushy but she’s a hard worker, that, and that’s something I still carry over, possibly to into a negative trait because its still um hard work is valued from all my growing up years and all the people I knew who were older and wiser was seen as a universal positive attribute and so that’s, if I could be, I’d say that’s contrary to the Gospel and it’s not that works gives you salvation but by golly once you’re saved, God put you here to work so you better be working hard. And uh, I don’t know you probably need to ask my kids how that translates into their perception of their Dad and how that translates even better into so what’s their perception of the world. Um because almost one part of me says I hope they don’t carry that to such a degree as I do cause its not a uh it’s not a balanced view point. And certainly carried to an extreme it’s not a very gospel viewpoint. Hard work becomes your idol and that would probably be easy to see in a lot of Mennonite lives but at the same time most of that hard work was always for the interest of others and not necessarily to just accumulate possessions or wealth or material goods.

J: So would that be something that you’ve maybe tried to teach your children but to an extent to where it would be beneficial?

W: (laughs) I don’t know, I hope they’ve learned how to work hard and you don’t know that till they leave. And the other part probably more in front of that is, um the lesson that we’ve probably most tried to teach our kids is that you need to have a perspective that looks out from yourself to the interest of others and their needs or concerns. And not even what those are but, getting over the, everybody’s born with a selfish heart that looks out for their own interests number one so we spend our whole lives trying to get out from under that curse so that’s what we are trying to pass on to our kids, is you don’t have to know what your roommate’s interests are, you just have to acknowledge they have them and you need to spend some energy and time and effort trying to find out what they are because you can’t value a person unless you understand them.

J: Ya, that’s awesome. So now you don’t live in Hillsboro anymore, you live in
Lawrence, Kansas. And I don’t even know if there are Mennonite churches here.

**W:** There’s one

**J:** There’s one, um but you’ve chosen to attend now, Grace. What, why have you chosen this church maybe as opposed to Mennonite church, but specifically, Grace EPC, what attracted you to that church?

**W:** Well, when I was in college at KU, pretty much everybody I knew that was in college, and that doesn’t mean everybody in college went to this church, but in the circles I knew went to one Presbyterian church. And it was called First Presbyterian and it’s still here in Lawrence but the KU Intramural fields. Really cool looking architecture from the outside so then I got married and was gone for a year and we moved back and we moved into an apartment directly up against the parking lot of First Presbyterian church for one the good reason was we could walk to church on Sunday mornings, we could walk across the parking lot and we were there. So after we moved in and went to church the first Sunday and there was uh like wow there is not a bunch of people here that used to go here, maybe its vacations, summer, I don’t know and then we went maybe, I want to say before the 2nd time but maybe it was before the 3rd time, we saw a couple downtown that I’d known from college, they also had known my parents, and they used to go to this church and they said “hey, we’re going to a new church, it’s in Deerfield school, tomorrow morning is the first time we’re meeting in the school, so uh you guys want to come?” So we were like well that’d be like a friend saying hey we used to go to the same church, you’ve been gone for a year, we are going to a new church, why don’t you come. So we did and when went the first Sunday was uh a small revelation that a lot of the people that were familiar from the old church were going to this new church we were like wow it didn’t seem that different um and meeting at a school when you’re just out of college kind of seems kind of cool a little bit. And the people, and because when we had gone to the old church, there weren’t people there that we knew, and going to the new church there were people there that we knew. So we just started going and that was 25 years ago so uh little by little we saw more and more people at the new church then the old church uh another Mennonite trait that my Dad made sure we heard often is if people want you to know people want you to know their business they’ll tell ya. So that was his way of telling my Mom don’t ask people about their business. So I never until 25 years later, ever found out what caused the people to leave the church. And then I was reading a uh, it’s like a story about the history of the 25 years of the new church and if you go way back to the beginning, reasons for um the people leaving the old church had to do with, in most conscious form, the church, lets leave it in less conscious form, the church uh had a division over Biblical truth and over that division one group left and one group stayed, so that may be the best way to put it. And I’m, ya. So anyway, the church, I think the church that we went to, the new church, seemed, uh, always in church growing up, obviously if you’re going to the same church your whole life, with the same people, your view of the church is, I go to church with people I
know. Uh who I go to school with, who I work with, who live down the street. So that factor was present in the new church and then little by little, the college kids that we knew, who now were graduating were going there. So it seemed a lot that it was the same church just in a different location. And um very, so it wasn't a Mennonite church but we used the Bible and you know the only part that it took me 10 years to get around from a Mennonite perspective is in the Mennonite church they baptize people when they believe which can be junior high on to adult, and our current church if you have kids you typically get them baptized when they are infants. But that’s not necessarily an essential but we probably held out 10 years, I did because in my mind that’s different than what I know. Then we, I think I went to every class, teaching, Bible study on baptism cause I couldn’t get over the hump, uh cause it’s not clearly taught either way in the New Testament, that it’s an absolute. But finally I think it came to a point of you’re in this church, you’ve been in this church for 10 years, uh what does it say in terms of submitting to the leadership that God’s placed over you in this church on the issue of baptism so somewhere in the few months after that, we had 5 kids by then, so they all got baptized on the same Sunday in front of the whole church. Some were little, some were obviously at least 8 years old (laughs). And a tender moment was there was some grandparents in the new church that when I was growing up lived in Hillsboro and knew my grandparents and so after the baptism the grandma came up and said “Oh I could see your grandfather would have been a proud man today of the family that has, the legacy that has come after him and how it has continued to walk in the Gospel”, and I thought that, I go, that was pretty neat, so.

J: That is cool. So speaking of kind of the differences between Grace and then maybe just the Presbyterian denomination in general, um how would you kind of define, if you could, those differences in even Biblical truth, or how, I don't know, does that make sense?

W: Well outwardly, I'm no theologian, so outwardly what are we teaching as truth, I think they all probably come down pretty close in the doctrine, what we believe would be uh on the whole close to each other, the obvious big difference would be the Mennonites are not in for, that's part of the movement Anabaptists comes, means not infant baptism, believer’s baptism. Which still is present in our church today, I mean if, I just had a, we just interviewed a girl who is 14 who's gonna get baptized. Uh next time it comes up, so that's obviously a lot like the Mennonite church, and her family is a wonderful family, and so there's also you know another family that very Sunday baptized their little baby girl so and both of them are, there are no divisions in one wrong and one right, so that's probably the biggest change in, again, what's the most uh you know, if it's a given that the Bible remains mostly the same, remains the same, and the teaching is based out of the Bible, then uh they are very similar in the fact that a church is a family of believers and a body of believers and that's very much what we grew up in Hillsboro and and absolutely what um, what we, our kids have grown up with and
what being in the church here is about, uh now in the Mennonite church, I don't even know how they organize, whether it's Presbyterian government or not, I know that we're in a denominations, I know that we have elders, I know we had pastors, I don't know how we link up to the denomination um except everything in the Mennonite church is always driven by service so you uh you're a bigger part of the Mennonite denomination and there's um activity and projects and papers that continue to refine uh where the church is at as scripture points the church into new and uh different issues in the world but my perception being as a person going to the Mennonite church, looking at it from the outside, that would have been way down in the background for the rank and file guy, the Mennonite church and the denomination is all about, okay so our church is a part of the MB denomination, so somebody’s town was hit by a tornado so we're going with all the other churches in that denomination and part of the Mennonite is there is a thing called Mennonite disaster relief, so we're going for two weeks to help people whose town got hit by a tornado or there's a huge sale every spring, and of course I'm sure it's, there's pride that overtakes some efforts, but the net result is the whole sale is on the state fairgrounds in Hutchinson and it's to raise money for Mennonite disaster relief and um so again they are looking at how are you, how are you helping others? Um I know that got, you know, what did I get from the Mennonite church? Well I got that, that part about other orientated to the seeds of it. Um so ya then I think if you walked in, probably our church today in Lawrence might be more conservative from a theology standpoint then the old church I went to in um in Hillsboro because the grandpa generation of my grandparents are all dead, the generation of my parents are part way dead, and so the generation that's the leaders in the church are more my generation, um and i think there is probably uh, I don't know they came from such a conservative background they may reacted to a less uh to the other extreme of they had so much order and structure, let's see how we can worship and teach without so much structure. So I know this Jordan, the church at Hillsboro uses audio-visual, there's no audio-visual in the church in Lawrence, there's barely even a cross on the front. I mean in the old gym, there nothing for geez 20 years, nothing except a white wall of concrete bricks and the new church in Lawrence, or the newer sanctuary has a cross in the front form there's, there's uh, if you watch the video on worship from the church in Lawrence, it could go toe to toe with any Mennonite church on uh Biblical worship, Bible based worship. There's not a lot of changes, and maybe I've even benefited from going from a conservative church to a like conservative church whereas if I was still in the Mennonite church in Hillsboro, I'd probably, probably be sitting here today and be maybe less, less conservative, I don't know. There's a lot of old Mennonites still though out there.
J: Ya, that's cool. Um it sounds like what you're saying is that growing up, the Mennonite church was very community based, um would you say now looking at the church in Lawrence you got to, is it also community based?

W: The church in Lawrence is its own community, so our kids to the extent have community at church that would follow them to high school or middle school to elementary school but in your classroom at any of those schools, you might have a couple of your community from church friends but you're gonna have 20 other people that are not and the spectrum of that are not in Lawrence would be every flavor under the rainbow which you could get by just going to the high school and say show me the, show me the index of groups, student groups, and as you read through the titles or the names, there would be nothing like that 40 years ago in Hillsboro. There'd be 7 different groups of Mennonite and you knew what church everybody went to. There were some guys in my class that were Catholics and the nearest Catholic church was 10 miles away and on boy scout Sunday, there was a Sunday where scouts every year, you would go, they would pick one church different every year to go to broaden your horizons to what other church services looked like. And so we would go every so many years to the Catholic church 10 miles away to see what a Catholic mass looked like. So ya the churches, our church in Lawrence is a community but community in Lawrence is not made up of our church. Um we are a tiny, one tiny, of a hundred parts in Lawrence we are one part but there are 99 other vastly different parts and so that lets the kids see you know, I'm not in this because it's the majority view and increasingly in the world the pendulum is kind of swinging away from Jewish-Christian worldview to the worldview of whatever I want my worldview to be is what the worldview is for me and you can have your own worldview, whatever you want it to be and I'm okay with that. So it's hard to say I'm looking out to try to see the interest of others before my own and it's also hard to choke down for our kids that there's absolute truth in all these other 99 parts if they are in opposition to the absolute truth, that's um that means you're in opposition. So it's hard to carry that out to say, ya that's just a bench mark they live with, they see thousands of other different people living life in different ways whereas I grew up, the biggest difference was well that church just drives blue cars, black cars, they are still in church on Sunday, we're still in church on Sunday. Or that church, the men have beards once they get married or the ladies wear hats um ya. So I don't know if it's taught, every kid now in our family and as we've talked to this student about getting baptized who's 14, one of the questions is so how did you come to the point to say that this is about me and not me just being about what my parents believe in, so that's a, and that's a good question for everybody to face up and to grow into and to come to understand. So.

J: Ya. How um, how are you involved in the church or your family as a whole? What kind of things are you involved in?

W: (laughs) We are involved in the church um, I have a saying that says that if we ever where, had to move from Lawrence, I think that the top 10 or top
hundred thin things that would hurt, or that we would miss about Lawrence are in some way connected to our church. So if you take that as a background um you know we started in as a married couple in a church that was brand new, so as we've had kids you do things that need to be done for kids, and as your kids get older you do things that need to be done at different age levels for kids, and then because of a church that starts has, people who have an interest in, there's only a few of us and a lot of things that needs to be done and that means all of us are going to be doing a fair number of things. So, but that's the mindset and everybody shares kind of that mindset so in that block of people, even to this day, there's probably, I won't put a number on it, but there is small number of people relate to the whole body of our church that do a super majority of the tasks that get done in the church and then there's fill in by everybody else to do, ya, so it's kind of that old rule 80% of the work gets done by 20% of the people. So we're in, we're in for the, we've seen it mostly on the sharp end of the pencil, of doing and we've had times recently where we've been on the other end of the pencil, meaning people doing for us. So if you've said what all have we done, probably um a good description would be if you and I founded a business Jordan and in the beginning there were 2 of us to do everything and as we grew and we got new jobs and new tasks we'd do those so now 25 years after we started the business, you and I could say we pretty knew do most everything in the business, um Margaret and I wouldn't be able to say we pretty much know how to do everything in the church but we could say, we've done a lot of things in the church and it's a huge part of who we are, day to day, week to week, and we all have our shortcomings and folks can look at us and say there's hypocrisy there but the flip side of that is, I think our involvement of the church speaks to a degree and an accurate degree of uh where our heart is, what our beliefs are, what, you know you can say you see what's important by how a person spends their time, and their energy, and their money so I think on those you'd say, what's our involvement in the church? We spend our time, our energy, and our money and drag our kids along in all 3 of those areas as well to say that's, that's, and there's no part of it that's not uh, and I hope our kids have picked this up, there's no part of it that's an obligation or a duty, it is um, a joy, it is a ya, every Sunday, when we are constantly coming to a more clear understanding of what it means to worship but we are worshiping on Sunday and that essentially is the other 6 days in some form or fashion involved carrying that worship forward to the next Sunday. And it's a joy to, it's a joy to serve, it's a joy to worship, so. There's not a lot of competition for that but I know that goes on in our church and right now with lots of other folks lots of other things to pick out and to do contrary to that. We are just lucky enough that all of our circles tend to run through the church so, it's what all our friends are doing too. So that, and that's, we have a great circle of friends, so.
J: That's awesome. Well thanks so much for sharing your story and agreeing to meet with me, I really appreciate it.

W: Oh ya.