

Practices that help us take on the hard conversations

Mark Diller Harder

We decided the time had come to begin to tackle the topic. It was fraught—an issue our congregation had avoided. After all, it was a delicate subject and could make people feel vulnerable, exposed, and defensive. It could create conflict among us. And it’s hard to talk about even in our families, let alone with folks at church. People could so easily feel judged, unsure. And what role does our faith have in helping us find our way forward? Where do we even start?

We are talking—of course!—about our seniors and the process of aging. It really is a matter of life and death, or rather, of aging and dying. How do adult children and their aging parents open and sustain conversation about the many practical and emotional and spiritual questions associated with getting old and dying? How do faith communities enter into those conversations?

Opening up the subject

In January 2015, fifteen members of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church attended a congregational resource event on the topic “Aging Together—Partnering with Families and the Faith Community to Meet the Challenges of Aging.”¹ Our resource people were Gerald and Marlene Kaufman, authors of *Necessary Conversations between Adult Children and Their Aging Parents* (Good Books, 2013). They began with an African proverb: “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago.” The sooner adult children and their aging parents talk, the better—preferably before health deteriorates or a crisis hits. Marlene and Gerald proceeded to raise all sorts of timely topics including housing, downsizing, health and medical care, driving, finances, and issues around death and dying.

The event struck a chord for participants. They recognized how seldom these conversations happen openly in our lives, and yet how significant they are. They were convinced that these

conversations belong in the church, that these are topics for congregational discernment. So often they remain private, happening (if they happen at all) within the confines of family, where they can be difficult or limited to the most pressing questions. What happens when we see these as significant conversations that belong in the context of the faith community? Can bringing them

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into that context provide members of our congregation with support and resources as they navigate the specific situations they confront? Is there a broader theological perspective that emerges from the ground up when we talk about these things in church?

Creating space for good conversation

We decided to test the idea. In spring 2015, our Christian formation ministry planned a four-week series called “Necessary Conversations for Living Thoughtfully and Dying Well:

Four Thought-Provoking Conversations for Seniors and Others.” In addition to the Kaufman book, we used as a resource a book by Glen E. Miller: *Living Thoughtfully, Dying Well* (Herald Press, 2014). We identified four conversations: (1) dealing with losses and challenges associated with aging, (2) downsizing challenges, (3) putting things in order (finances), and (4) leaning forward as death approaches.

We paid close attention to content (*what* we talked about), and maybe more importantly, to format (*how* we talked together). The series was well attended and well received. We were doing congregational discernment on issues that normally remain private. On reflection, we identified some key elements that created a space in which people could engage fruitfully in these conversations:

We bathed the series in worship. We began each session with prayer, singing, and worship. Our opening worship included three scripture texts: the story of Abraham purchasing a burial place for Sarah (Gen. 23); the story of Jacob stealing his brother’s blessing (Gen. 27:32–41); the story of Ruth refusing to leave Naomi (Ruth 1:8–18). Each Bible story was paired with inner musings of two people in the pew as they talk to God about situations in

their own lives.² Worship set the context. Worship opened us to the moving of the Spirit in our conversations.

We created a safe space for conversation. For significant conversations to happen, people need to feel safe and that their voice is being heard. We talked about respect and honouring each other's stories and experiences. All of us sat in a semi-circle where we could see each other's faces. As leaders we modelled a vulnerability and honesty about our own lives and about experiences in our families. We drew on relationships of trust built over many years in our congregation. At the end of each session, we spent time eating together.

We began with stories. At several of the gatherings, we invited a few people to be a part of a panel conversation on the particular topics of the day. Each shared a story. A daughter told about the emotional toil and challenge of navigating in rapid succession the complicated medical system and levels of care for a father with rapidly declining health as he moved toward his death. A son reflected on the experience of working with siblings living at a distance to quickly dispose of two generations' worth of hoarded stuff—the contents of a large house and barn—because parents had refused to talk or to consider other housing options before they died. A younger senior couple shared their joy and freedom in downsizing to a condo unit well before any of their peers had done so. We also spent time in small groups, allowing all participants to reflect on and share their own experiences.

We drew on broader resources. We recognized that collectively we did not hold all the wisdom we needed. We had our resource books as background. We invited a Mennonite Foundation stewardship consultant to open up the many topics around finances and aging. We invited a local chaplain of a Mennonite long-term care home to highlight for us “five important things to do before you die.” We were guided into a greater depth of conversation.

We discovered a living embodied theology. We did not start our conversations explicitly with theology. Yet as we talked, our theology and beliefs emerged naturally, embodied in how we told our stories. We named how God had been present as a source of strength in difficult transitions. We reflected on the value of a Christian community around us and supporting us. We countered

the individualism of our time by making public what is so often only private, and by receiving strength to go back to our families to have these conversations. We declared our conviction that death is not the end. Death is a natural part of life. That conviction makes a difference in how we view heroic medical interventions or what we decide about do-not-resuscitate orders. We can prepare ourselves and our families for death without fearing end-of-life decisions. We can let people die. We discovered through discerning together as a congregation that a living embodied theology had undergirded our conversations.

What's next?

The congregation's good experience of talking about difficult questions around aging and death has prepared us to take up the next subject presenting itself for our discernment. At the time of this writing—in the fall of 2015—our congregation is in the midst of conversations on sexuality and same-sex relationships. We have followed the “Being a Faithful Church Process” initiated by Mennonite Church Canada,³ designed to better equip congregations and individuals to discern scripture for our time. After a rich six-week Sunday school and worship learning series, we are now in the midst of a three-week Sunday evening listening series, to prepare us for further discernment in the months ahead.

Many of the aspects of our necessary conversations on aging series have become a part of this sexuality series. Before we begin, we eat a simple meal of soup and bread together. We worship with prayer, lighting a dancing oil lamp and inviting the Spirit's presence among us. We try to create a safe space where all voices are heard and respected. We sit in a circle. We listen carefully to each other's stories and respect the vulnerability and sacredness of each one. We draw on the wisdom and resources of the broader church.

We are having the sometimes hard but necessary conversations about what really matters to us. And we are discovering that a theology that informs our ongoing discernment is emerging from the ground up, embodied in our congregational life. Our discernment is shaping our theology, even as our theology gives shape to our discernment.

Notes

¹ This was a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada event for pastors, chaplains, and congregational leaders, January 17, 2015, Breslau (ON) Mennonite Church.

² This worship resource was created by Sharon Brown, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada Interim Coordinator of Leadership Formation, for the MCEC event on January 17, 2015. It is reproduced in this *Vision* issue; see Sharon Brown, “Worship Resource for an Event on Aging Together:.”

³ In 2008–9, Mennonite Church Canada began developing and then testing the “Being a Faithful Church” process, designed to better equip congregations and individuals to discern scripture for our time. See more at <http://www.commonword.ca/ResourceView/5/17176#sthash.b8dFc702.dpuf>.

About the author

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