The perils and delights of leading congregational discernment

Lydia and Gary Harder

What is the role of pastors and other church leaders in discernment, especially in conflict? Should pastors and other congregational leaders use their authority primarily to ensure a healthy process, one that takes both the Bible and each person seriously, or should they champion a cause arising out of their own convictions? Or should they follow another, bigger vision?

We write this piece from our perspective as people who have reached retirement after leading a number of congregations through discernment processes. We bear some scars from conflicts we engaged, but we also carry some sense of satisfaction when a longer view showed greater health and some healing in these communities in the wake of painful discernment processes.

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All these congregations considered themselves faithful to the Bible, but they still held within them vast differences of opinion that resulted in conflict. We shouldn't be surprised that fine Christian people read the Bible in very different ways when dealing with contentious issues. After all, the Bible is more complex and nuanced and open to ongoing discernment than we—especially in our desire for immediate solutions—are comfortable with. God communicated to humans through the voices of other humans over the course of many centuries in many cultures with many worldviews. Those who heard the voice of God did not hear it in exactly the same way, and the message for one context does not necessarily translate exactly or easily to another context. Discernment seldom happens in the absence of turbulence, and leaders often struggle to stay afloat amid the currents.

A tension in Anabaptist-Mennonite history on the role of leaders

What might we learn from Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition about the role of leaders in discernment processes? Our answer is not a simple one. In fact, some of the complexity surrounding pastoral leadership in Mennonite churches in the twenty-first century can be understood against the backdrop of two defining moments in sixteenth-century Anabaptist history. These two events stand in tension with each other and highlight the ambiguity of the role of pastoral leadership in Anabaptist-Mennonite experience.

On January 21, 1525, a small group of radical Christians were meeting in the home of Felix Mantz.[1] On January 18 the Zurich city council had issued a stern warning that the parents among them were to have their unbaptized children baptized within eight days, or be subject to banishment. But on that evening in that home, George Blaurock—who had been baptized as an infant—begged Conrad Grebel to baptize him with "true Christian baptism upon my faith and confession," which Grebel did. And then Blaurock baptized the others at their request but without authorization, there being no ordained minister among them.

So began the Anabaptist movement in a rejection of the hierarchical leadership structures of the established church they had known. Eventually they borrowed Martin Luther's concept of the priesthood of all believers, and radicalized it. They believed that even untrained lay people could read and understand scripture: in the Anabaptist "hermeneutical community," lay people are full partners in interpreting scripture and in making decisions. One result is that multiple interpretations and insights make discernment more complex and more time consuming.

Two years later, in February 1527, a gathering of Swiss Anabaptists put forth what has come to be known as the Schleitheim confession. These Anabaptists were being severely persecuted and scattered. What would hold them together? Article 5 of this confession addresses the question of leadership, of "shepherds in the church of God." "But if the shepherd should be driven away or led to the Lord by the cross, at the same hour another shall be ordained to his place, so that the little folk and the little flock of God may not be destroyed, but be preserved by warning and be consoled."[2] In contrast to what we observed about events in

Zurich on January 21, 1525, the Swiss Anabaptists at Schleitheim in 1527 seem to see pastoral leadership as essential to the survival of their movement.

These two stories are evidence of an ongoing creative tension inherent in the Anabaptist movement from these earliest years. This tension can be traced all through Anabaptist and Mennonite history, and it is present with us today. Sometimes the balance has tipped in favour of giving too much power and authority to our clergy, and sometimes we have gone to the opposite extreme, almost removing the pastor from community discernment.

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Where does authority lie today?

Against the backdrop of this historical tension, we ask: where does authority and power lie today, as Anabaptist-Mennonites try to discern the will of God in the midst of divisive issues? How do leaders help engage the multiple interpretations and insights of the community in our context?

It seems to us that the church's understanding of the role and authority of leaders has shifted markedly in our North American Mennonite journey through what we may call premodern, modern, and postmodern worldviews. Though an oversimplification, these broad categories describe the different philosophical frameworks in which our theology and our thinking about leadership take place. The very names of these three worldviews suggest that modernity—with its scientific, critical approach to knowledge—has been the defining one, the most influential shift in our thinking over the last century. But the names also suggest that both what came before and what comes after modernity are still somehow connected as precursor and response (respectively) to the values of modernity.

We find it helpful to imagine a river into which three streams flow. The three streams enter in a particular order: a premodern mindset flows in first, and then a modern mindset, and finally a postmodern mindset. Where these streams enter the river of

church life, there is turbulence. These are places where the river is most dangerous, and the ministry boat risks capsizing. But if these places of turmoil are navigated with care, the effect can be especially powerful.

In our experience, congregations will usually have some members with each of the three philosophical outlooks. And we find it helpful to remind ourselves that none of these mindsets is God's mindset, and that God works through and in spite of every human worldview.

The premodern church of our childhood

In the predominantly premodern church of our growing-up years, the church was the centre of our world, creating a moral universe ordered by a transcendent God who claimed our attention at Tuesday evening Bible study, Thursday evening choir practice, Friday evening young people's meeting, and Sunday morning and evening services. The Bible was revered, loved, read literally, and obeyed. And the preachers, especially the *Ältester* (bishop), were given a lot of respect, authority, and power. We had a high sense of their office. They came from within the congregation and were part of—yet set apart from—the community, ordained for life and not dependent on the congregation for their livelihood. The congregation had a strong sense of tradition and was relatively homogeneous. Our worship conveyed a primary picture of God as holy and transcendent. People were in fear of God—in awe at best, in terror at worst. Spiritual leadership was primarily focused on preaching the Word and on *Seelsorge* (care of the soul).

What impact did this premodern worldview have on the congregation's discernment? In some ways, discernment was a simple process. The *Lehrdienst* (the group of preachers and deacons) made the important decisions, and for the most part these were accepted by the *Bruderschaft* (the male members of the church who made the decisions for the congregation). Members of the congregation were fairly similar in the way they read the Bible and in theology (radio and television preachers had not yet appeared on the scene, and neither had those who read the Bible through a historical-critical lens). But there were conflicts. We remember deep conflicts over smoking and drinking and dancing, over troublemakers who didn't conform, over pregnancy before

marriage, and over class differences between those who had been landed or wealthy in Russia and those who weren't. Many of these conflicts remained unresolved, even when troublemakers had been excommunicated. And some of the preachers and bishops gained an enormous amount of power—and with it came temptation to abuse their authority.

A modern worldview enters the church

The early 1960s brought dramatic change. Modernity's waters were merging into the river of congregational life, with turmoil and some big waves. Potential future leaders of the church who studied in our Bible colleges and seminaries learned about historical-critical ways of reading the Bible, rediscovered an Anabaptist vision and the priesthood of all believers, and wanted their calling to ministry to be dependent on their gifts and education. Churches challenged the power of their clergy, undercut the high sense of office, and installed lay leaders to run the church using Robert's Rules of Order. Now the minister was to be a full-time, fully trained professional who would function as an employee of the church, fulfilling many tasks and given a big job description but little authority to actually lead. Discernment was left to the church council and the congregation. Ordination was played down, and pastors were now "licensed" and "installed."

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At the heart of the mindset of modernity was a subject-object polarity, a divide between mind and heart, thinking and feeling. Rationalism and objectivity were valued, and much credence was given to scientific method. Left-brain thinking (reason and intellect) was valued more than right-brain thinking (feeling and emotion). Now the Bible was read "critically" in original languages and in historical context, without expectation of a direct and immediate translation into our lives. The church was no longer the center of our world. And ministers were now expected to have a significant set of gifts, skills, and training. They were given clear job descriptions and regularly evaluated on how well they functioned. They saw themselves as servants with little authority and little job security.

One of the challenges modernity posed for the church was how to maintain any sense of the transcendence of God. Modernity's focus on human reason tended to take the sense of mystery and emotion out of faith and life—and out of ministry. As some young adults once confided in us, "We had great discussions in Sunday school. But our parents and our church didn't teach us how to pray."

Of course, there were those who rejected the influence of modernity and retreated into the simpler world of the fundamentalist televangelists who still read the Bible with premodern eyes. Others moved toward the charismatic movement, with its embrace of emotional experience. We might have anticipated these developments as natural reactions to the rationalism of modernity. Many congregations became polarized, with little understanding or even conversation between camps.

And now the postmodern

But soon another worldview roiled the river's waters. After a while the name that came to identify this stream was postmodernism. Modernity had left too many deep yearnings unfulfilled. Now a younger generation wanted to focus more on personal identity—on "who we are"—and on relationships. The language of integrity, personhood, character, self-worth, and personal wholeness became important.

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In the church, a younger generation is often impatient with what an older generation chooses to focus on (to many youth, the issue of homosexuality, for example, is a nonissue). They are looking for meaning and relationships and integrity in the church. They expect a pastor to be embracing, relational, and inclusive, and to have a strong personal and Christian identity. They want a pastor who is a cultivator of a healthy environment, a creator of a spirit of life and energy and hope and faith, more than a doer of tasks or a mouthpiece for doctrine. And we pastors now talk much more about "self-differentiation" and "keeping boundaries" and "intimacy issues" and "self-care." And we go on spiritual retreats.

But then comes this challenge. What about core beliefs and absolute truth claims and genuine obedience and commitment and old-fashioned Christian ethics and standards? What about authority and the truth claims of the Bible and adherence to our confession of faith?

The river is by now turbulent. How do we talk about discernment, when people have different agendas and different expectations of leadership? How do leaders keep themselves and the church from being swamped? What approach do they take when all three of these worldviews are in the mix, even when one predominates? How can leadership help forge a healthy partnership in the midst of all the voices in the congregation?

A personal story

Both of us—Gary as pastor and Lydia as theologian-educator—were involved in providing leadership for our church in 2002–3 when our congregation was trying to discern its way through the shoals of a homosexuality-focused dilemma. Primarily we wanted to ensure a healthy process and discussion, but of course we also had our own views (we are both on the "open" side). Our challenge was to be transparent about our position and the reasons for it, without imposing our views or silencing those who disagreed with us.

For fourteen months our congregation did rigorous biblical studies and heard from psychologists and scientists, and we had meeting after meeting—including Bible studies and prayer meetings. We were learning to speak in depth about our feelings and our doubts and our experience.

In the end, our conflicts seemed to overwhelm us anyway, and the congregation resorted to power plays and maneuvering using Robert's rules. As leaders, we were heartbroken about the ways we had all wounded each other.

But to our surprise, God was at work in our mess. In the end we realized that we had engaged each other in more depth than ever before. We had studied the Bible in more depth and prayed in more depth. In the outcome there were no winners. But the congregation had grown stronger and embraced much healthier rules of engagement in conflict. We have seen a lot of reconciliation and a lot of healing.

Yes—we leaders made mistakes. We were not aware enough of how each of the three worldviews affected what happened, and what gifts and roadblocks each brought to the discernment. The premodern folks ensured that we took the Bible seriously, but they weren't always open to looking at texts in context. People with a modern outlook brought a lot of expertise but didn't always understand the emotional dynamics at play. Postmoderns focused on relationships but didn't understand that for some folks truth claims are more basic. Perhaps our biggest mistake was rushing to decision at the end of a tumultuous day. We had worked for fourteen months at the issue, and still we made a decision before we were ready. Discernment in a hermeneutical community takes a long time.[3]

We did some things well. We invited many lay leaders to lead—based on their gifts, not their convictions or their worldview. We grew in our ability to listen deeply to each voice, even when we disagreed. We did thorough Bible studies. We were in regular contact with our denominational bodies. We lost both our innocence and our arrogance.

Lessons learned through pain and healing

Despite the process's painful ending, in retrospect we identify three crucial pieces of the healing that happened.

First, as painful as it sometimes was to do so, we kept encouraging the congregation to hear every voice. This care in listening to every voice among us, regardless of our agreement or disagreement with it, is still bearing rich fruit.

Second, immediately after the decisions were made, we formed a healing and reconciliation team, which began its work with a worship service of lament. This powerful service enabled all of us to bring our brokenness before a loving God.

Third, in the end we realized that our common worship of God through Jesus is a deeper value than our convictions on this issue. That realization is what kept our congregation together. But it has taken a long view to see this underlying shared commitment.

We are now less afraid of conflict in discernment. We have been learning to listen deeply and respectfully to those with whom we disagree, and we are learning healthier ways of engaging each

other. We have been learning to appreciate the multiple voices in scripture and among the interpreters of scripture. God's Spirit continues to work among us in unexpected ways.

And we as leaders? We embrace our responsibility to ensure a healthy process of discernment in which every voice and perspective is heard and valued. But we also recognize our need to be vulnerable and open about our own views and convictions. And above all, we are called to lead our congregation in worship, for it is only in opening ourselves deeply to God that we all move beyond our personal opinions and convictions and our bondage to the limitations of our worldviews. It is then that our love for God and our brothers and sisters deepens—and with it, our ability to live into God's will being done among us on earth.

Notes

[1] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 54.
[2] John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 38–39.
[3] The decisions we made then began a much longer process of discernment which led eventually to our becoming a congregation hospitable to all who seek to worship with us.

About the authors

Lydia Neufeld Harder and Gary Harder are both happily retired—Lydia from being a professor of theology and Gary from more than fifty years of pastoral ministry. They eased into retirement by working together as intentional interim pastors in three congregations over the past seven years. They live in Toronto, Ontario.