

Loved, blessed, and freed to hear God's call

Lydia Neufeld Harder and Gary Harder

Bob's call has been discerned, and he has been blessed and ordained for Christian ministry. Part of his ministry is to be a street pastor with street people. Sometimes he advocates for them with the powers that be, which brings him into conflict with those powers. Sue is a journalist who files stories from that same world of homelessness. She was blessed by the church in her baptism but not for her work in journalism. She sees herself as a truth-teller, shedding light on the dark places of our cities. Bob and Sue are

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working together to tell a story of police abuse of a homeless person. Both feel called by God to do this. The powers that be will resist. Bob and Sue hope the result of telling this story will be blessing for their city.¹

A theological reflection on church and calling

The church is good at blessing people in the church. We have parent-child blessings and baptism blessings and marriage blessings. We have official blessings for people working on committees and in Christian education. We

bless people when they become members and when they move elsewhere. We pray a benediction on everyone who gathers on Sunday morning.

And then we read the story of the call of Abraham, which ends with "And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3; NIV). And that complicates things. This blessing goes beyond God's chosen people to encompass everyone. God wants the people of Abraham, the people of Jesus, to participate in blessing all the people on earth. This is missional agenda. This is vocation in broad strokes. Paul names the will of God as "to

bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph. 1:9–10). This mission is what motivates Bob and Sue. But the church finds it easier to bless Bob in this work, because his is a “Christian” vocation, while Sue’s work is “secular.”

The complication is that our theology of church is still deeply affected by modernity and its many dualisms. We still live within a culture that separates our lives into different spheres: sacred and secular, communal and personal, church and society. We aren’t nearly as good at calling people to live out God’s blessing in their secular vocations as we are at giving them a job to do in the church. The number of vocational options is expanding dramatically, and we have no idea how most of them can be used to bless all the people of the earth.

Starting with baptism

We assert that our calling grows out of our baptism. The archetypal story is that of the baptism of Jesus. In some ways this story is problematic, because none of us is called to be or capable of being a saviour. And yet this story is profoundly applicable, because the church is called to represent the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the world. The church is called to be a primary instrument of God in blessing the world.

Mark 1 tells the story of the baptism of Jesus, his temptations in the wilderness, and the beginning of his public ministry. These three stories are in a carefully arranged sequence: Baptism. Temptations. Public ministry. His baptism can be read as his commissioning for his earthly mission—that is, for his vocation.

What is striking to us in the baptism story is the description of the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus, and the voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11; NRSV). In this amazing affirmation of God’s love for Jesus—God’s blessing on Jesus, Jesus’ empowerment for public ministry—we see that Jesus does not need to earn God’s love and blessing by his hard work. Before Jesus engages in any public ministry, God is already assuring him that the Holy Spirit is empowering him and that he is fully loved by his heavenly parent.

We might think that this assurance should be obvious, given who Jesus is—the Son of God. But Jesus too needed this message and this affirmation. As we all do, he needed this full blessing

from God before he began his ministry. He would not need to earn that blessing or that love. It was already given to him as a gift.

Every baptism is a wonderful opportunity to declare that the one baptised is a beloved child of God. It is not that the act of

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baptism makes that person beloved. It is rather that baptism gives the church the opportunity to especially name that love and celebrate it. This naming solidifies one's identity as a person deeply loved.

This naming of our being loved and blessed then frees us to hear God's calling to love and serve others. It frees us to listen for God's invitation to our vocation. All ministry, all service, all calling—whether within the church or in the world—grows out of being assured that we are loved and that the Holy

Spirit will empower us for what God invites us to do. If we are trying to earn God's love or the love of others, or even to merit our own self-love, we can easily fall prey to myriad temptations to gain acclaim in ways that violate our core identity.

Baptism is both personal and communal

In the 1970s and 1980s our church struggled with the encroaching individualism of the day. Over and over again we heard, "I want to be baptized, but I don't want to join the church. My faith is personal, and there are too many problems in the church." That there were problems in the church we couldn't deny. The church, from its very beginnings, has been full of problems and conflicts and sinful behaviour.

And yet we Mennonites mostly refuse to baptize individuals apart from the church. Our theology of baptism and the church holds these two together. To be fair, there are stories in the New Testament where an individual, or a household, is baptized outside of a gathered community. A primary example would be the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, baptized by Philip without a witness (Acts 8:26–39). But we believe that most of the biblical witness indicates that baptism is an act of the church and has its place in the church community. We believe that to be "baptized

into Christ” is also to be baptized into Christ’s body, the church (Rom. 6:1–4).

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, in its article on baptism, asserts that “believers are baptized into Christ *and his body* by the Spirit, water, and blood.”² The commentary on this article spells out this conviction: “Baptism should always be done by the church and its representatives, if possible in the presence of the congregation. It should be public because baptism means a commitment to membership and service in a particular congregation.”

In his recent book, *The Naked Anabaptist*, Stuart Murray names believers baptism as one of the core convictions of the early Anabaptists.³ He notes that “the conviction that baptism is for believers is inextricably linked to fundamental beliefs about the nature of the church in the Anabaptist tradition.” Murray says further, “Baptism, in the Anabaptist tradition, is not only a visible expression of personal faith but a pledge of discipleship, an invitation to mutual accountability, and commitment to active participation in the church community.” We would add: and to its witness within the culture and society in which we live.

Two biblical texts have been particularly important here. The Acts 2 story of Pentecost and the birth of the church recounts the first baptism, when three thousand people who had listened to Peter’s fiery sermon and experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit were baptized. Then “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). In other words, these baptisms led to the formation of a genuine church community. The rest of the book of Acts then recounts how the community and the individuals in it lived out the Great Commission as their vocational calling. This commission was given by Jesus to his followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). In our theology of church, baptism and mission belong together.

Jesus then adds, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” It is a final blessing and promise. When we are baptised, we hear, “You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.” In the

living out of our discipleship and calling within the church and in the world we hear, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:21). Being blessed and blessing others are brought together in baptism. Our personal vocation and the vocation of the church are brought together in our baptism.

Vocation writ big

If vocational choices—and all other major choices—were totally up to each individual, then they are of no concern to the church (or to God, for that matter). Then there would be no point in inviting advice or discernment or even blessing from the church.

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But if baptism matters, and church matters, and living in the world as God’s ambassadors matters (that is, if we reject the dualisms of the personal and the communal, and of the sacred and the secular), then the church community should play a vital role in helping shape each person’s vocational choice. Then the church can play a part in helping all of us discover and develop our gifts. Then the church can bless the use of these gifts, and

hold each of us accountable for how we use them vocationally and in mission.

How can the church bless our gifts and hold us accountable?

We turn again to the stories of the baptism and temptations of Jesus. In his baptism Jesus hears that his core identity is that of a beloved child of God. Then he is sent into the wilderness, by God’s Spirit, to face temptations to live out his vocation in culturally acceptable and self-aggrandising ways. His intense struggle with these temptations refines his commitment to live out his calling in God’s way.

These stories highlight temptations to live out vocation in self-serving ways, in order to get acclaim and honour and prestige and wealth. They are temptations to try to earn love and blessing and public approval: Turn stones into bread. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple, and by angelic rescue publicly authenticate your identity as Son of God. Through a simple act of worship, be granted the world’s kingdoms and their splendour.

The baptism voice helps Jesus resist these temptations. He doesn't need to earn love and blessing; he knows he is loved and blessed by God, before he has done anything to earn that love and blessing. This assurance gives him such a solid core of self-love and self-worth that he won't be driven off course. Right after he rejects these temptations, Jesus begins his public ministry.

Vocation and calling are so much more than holding down a job. Every baptized Christian's vocation is to live for God in the world. Our calling is to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly, wherever we find ourselves. It is to understand shalom-making as our core vocation. It is to be a part of blessing every family on earth. But we all, whether we are pastors or reporters or anything else, are tempted by our seductive culture to buy into the values and choices and habits of its shallow consumerism.

Perhaps the biggest contribution the church can make to each person's vocational discernment is to keep naming that he is a beloved child of God, and then to send him into the wilderness.

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That is, the church sends each person into the world with the knowledge that the choices that she will make in her vocation are crucial, because these choices will determine how she will participate in the church's larger vocation to be a blessing to all peoples. Therefore the church promises to be with people in the depth of their struggles. The church will be ready to enter the chaos of people's lives. And the church will be ready to help people discern their bigger vocational identity and perhaps also identify their gifts that might lead them to a particular job. But always,

vocation is much bigger than job. Always *how* we live out our calling is bigger than *what* (job) it is we do.

Gary's father was a reluctant farmer. No other occupation was open to him after fleeing Russia. But he was deeply respected for how he lived in the community. Ron and Don, renovation experts we have hired a number of times, live out their values and their faith every day. They do their work with integrity and with a contagious joy. They are trusted and respected everywhere they work.

Discernment and accountability

Are there some specific discernment practices the church can offer to help people connect their gifts with a strong sense of vocation? Ponder these stories.

As her string quartet continued to prepare for their concert, Jill sensed that the tension had eased. All four were professional musicians, and the violist was especially intense. There had been some hurtful words. Jill, drawing on her church's history of conflict

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mediation, had found the courage to initiate an in-depth airing of feelings. She reflected on the awareness that it was in fact the many opportunities she had been given to play in church as a youngster that had led her to become a professional violinist. It was the support and encouragement of her Sunday school teacher that had helped her discern her direction. In the end, the quartet's concert was the best they had ever played.

Pam felt that her life was at a crossroads. The atmosphere in her workplace was becoming more toxic. And yet she liked the work she had chosen. What should she do? Her pastor encouraged her to gather a small group of people from different parts of her life, who knew her well, to meet with her as a discernment group. Her pastor offered to lead it. As Sue heard these people—four of them from her church—share their insights, and then pray for her, she suddenly knew what she needed to do.

Tom often reflected on his pastor's prayers, especially when he heard prayers for people in different vocations. His pastor from time to time brought specific people and the work they do before the Lord. He mused about whether the work he did would merit a prayer. Probably not. And then he heard it. "We bring before you, Lord, those who work with their hands in construction, people like Tom." He felt a special blessing on the work he loved doing.

Finally, at twenty-six years of age, Karen was being baptized. The journey to this moment had not been easy. For a while she had stopped coming to church, though deep down she knew that she would come back. And she had. She had requested that her former youth sponsor preach the baptism sermon. The sermon

took her almost by surprise: this sponsor challenged her to live out God's love in every part of her life, including her work. But she felt a full Amen rising to her lips.

More and more Sam felt his aging, felt he was useless. But not this evening. The youth and young adults of his church invited Sam and some other seniors for an evening of "traditional foods and storytelling." Sam worked with several young people in preparing a favourite dish (he was good at making *platz*), and then told stories over dinner about the faith challenges of his growing-up years. Thus began a spirited friendship.

Blessed and blessing

Our baptismal journey begins with knowing that we are deeply loved—by God and by the church. It continues with knowing that we are part of God's people trying to bring God's love and blessing to all people on earth. The church challenges all baptized believers to live out their lives and their calling with integrity and blessing, whatever job they do. Sometimes the church offers a prophetic word about jobs that are hard to reconcile with kingdom values. Always the church tries to create an ethos of blessing, and discernment, and calling, and empowering.

Notes

¹ The stories in this article are fictional but based on experiences in congregations of which we have been a part.

² *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 46–48 (our italics).

³ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010), 111–12.

About the authors

Gary and Lydia Neufeld Harder are semi-retired from their respective careers, Gary as a pastor and Lydia as a professor of theology. Now they work part-time as interim pastors of Hagerman Mennonite Church (near Toronto). They continue to teach a course on church and ministry at Conrad Grebel University (Waterloo, Ontario). Gary has written a book on his pastoral experience, entitled *Dancing through Thistles in Bare Feet: A Pastoral Journey* (Herald Press, 2007). Lydia's scholarly writings have explored the nature of church as a hermeneutical community.