

Enlisting in the cause Finding my voice as a missional church songwriter

Bryan Moyer Suderman

*Now you've gone and done it
you chose to take the plunge
you've decided who you'll follow
and declared to everyone
that you're pledging your allegiance
enlisting in the cause
of the one who was crucified
infiltrating the world with the love of God . . .*

*So welcome to the body
the body of our Lord
this ragtag band of misfits
yearning for a world restored
we are healing and broken
full of hope and deeply flawed
we are sent into our neighbourhood
infiltrating the world with the love of God . . .*

*I pray that you'll be strengthened
for all that lies ahead
and I pray we'll pay attention
to what the Spirit says as we're
not-so-secret agents in the ancient urgent cause
of the one who died and rose again
infiltrating the world with the love of God . . .¹*

I wrote the song “Infiltrating the World” at the urging of a friend who was reflecting on her daughter’s baptism. She suggested that we need a new “welcome to the body” song that helps us express an enthusiastic welcome to full participation in the vocation of the church, as mixed up and imperfect as it is (as we are). The

song seems appropriate in the context of this article as well, as I reflect on my sense of call to the songwriting that has become my primary ministry vocation over the past ten years.

You chose to take the plunge

I was baptized into Christian vocation at the age of eighteen, having been apprenticed into Christian vocation for as long as I

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can remember. As the oldest son of a missionary family living in Bolivia in the early 1980s, I was immersed in a milieu in which we knew ourselves to be sent people, agents in a compelling, exciting, challenging, and vital cause. I grew up acutely aware of how diverse and vibrant, how inspiring and messed up, how fractured and conflictive this ragtag band of misfits—the church—is.

The decision to take the plunge and be baptized as a member of First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, was for me a way to say yes to the exciting adventure of being the church in the world, and a way to declare publicly my choice to embrace the pacifist convictions, discipleship emphases,

and community orientation that I understood to be at the core of the Mennonite way of being Christian.

It was clear to me that I wanted to be a part of the mission of the church, but it was far from clear what my part in that mission might be.

I pray we'll pay attention to what the Spirit says

Fast-forward through three university degrees, a wedding, and a three-year term of service in Colombia. Julie and I were faced with decision time yet again. What to do next? How to decide? We felt that we needed to be back in Canada again, and we wanted to serve the church. In what role exactly, we didn't know.

So we approached some high-level leaders in our denomination in Canada, declared our availability and desire to serve the church and our uncertainty about where or how that should happen. The response? "Well, there's always a need for pastors.

You could apply for some pastoral jobs, and see what happens.” We found this response disappointing and disconcerting. We were hoping for help with discernment. Was this free market approach really the way the Spirit would lead?

Neither of us thought we were being called to pastoral ministry, but we knew we wanted to serve the church. We both had teaching qualifications. We decided that wherever one of us could land a teaching job, that’s where we would go. Soon I was offered a job teaching grade eight at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate. Surely this was God’s leading—what an answer to prayer!

Healing and broken, full of hope and deeply flawed

This “answer to prayer” turned out to be a disaster. Within weeks it was clear that I was struggling, and by the middle of the first semester I was barely hanging on. I would spend all evening trying to plan lessons, emerging hours later with nothing on the page and a pile of mangled paper clips on the floor. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t think. I would burst into tears at almost any time. I

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resigned on February 1 and spent a number of months in counseling, rest, and recuperation, working through a deep depression.

Vocational discernment? At this point we were thinking about survival. We were expecting a baby, I was not in any shape to handle full-time employment, and it was a challenge to think of how we could support ourselves.

But during this time something significant was happening to me. I was internalizing what

I had known before, that I am truly and deeply loved. My being loved didn’t depend on being successful or competent at my job (I wasn’t), or on any accomplishments or achievements at all. In the wake of what I saw as a public failure, I discovered that I was still loved and valued—by my spouse, my family, my church—even when I felt utterly unlovable and absolutely useless. I was learning to see that the vocation of the church—as well as my own, whatever that might be—has less to do with accomplishments and achievements than with the simple, unchangeable fact that we are loved by God.

Sent into our neighbourhood

Fast-forward again, through two more employment/ministry placements—as a Bible college admissions counsellor and then as a youth pastor. In both cases I had the privilege of walking with young people on their own journeys of vocational discernment, helping them (1) catch a glimpse of what God is up to in the world (God’s vocation); (2) begin to see that God calls, equips, and sends a people to participate in what God is doing (the church’s vocation); and (3) hear the invitation to join in (our own vocation as individuals). This was at the core of how I understood my work as youth pastor. It seemed, in many ways, that I had arrived at a place of clarity in my own vocational journey.

And then something entirely unexpected happened.

Infiltrating the world with the love of God

Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA had just emerged out of the integration and reorganization of former denominations, each with its own history and mission agencies. What kind of mission structures would the newly organized denomination(s) have? How should mission activity be structured and facilitated according to missional church understandings, in which the church as a whole knows itself to be a sent people (rather than a supporting constituency that sends missionaries elsewhere), in which the basic question is not, does the church have a mission? but, does God’s mission have a church?

Different teams formed to work at this agenda, and I was invited to be a member of Mennonite Church Canada’s missional training team, charged with finding ways to effectively communicate these missional church understandings and help them take root at the local congregational level.

In a brainstorming session, a colleague and I started talking about the songs we sing with children, and the fact that the songs we learn as children stay with us all our lives. What if we could *sing* these missional understandings, even with our very young children, in such a way that they grew up thinking that *of course* God has a mission in the world, and *of course* we’re all invited to join in—*of course* we are a sent people? Maybe these understandings might become more broadly part of our DNA as a church if we could sing them in a compelling way with our children.

That afternoon I sat down on the living room floor with our three-year-old son and sang for the first time:

*God's love is for everybody
everyone around the world
me and you and all God's children
from across the street to around the world
from across the street to around the world*

In short order a few verses took shape, describing God's mission as lived by various biblical characters, always with the hook that this is our story and our calling too. And then the refrain keeps coming back: "God's love is for everybody . . ."

Little did I know that this song would open the floodgates and that a new vocation was being born. Response was immediate and strong from those with whom I shared the song. I was asked to sing it at various gatherings, and immediately there were requests

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for a recording. I wrote a number of other songs in quick succession ("Sending Song," "On the Emmaus Road," "Disciples in Training," "A God Who Makes Friends")—all embedding foundational missional church insights in a form that is accessible and singable for children. The missional training team began making plans to record and publish these songs as part of a packet of resources for churches, to be released in time for the first Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Abbotsford, BC, in July 2001.

After the first day of the assembly, word came that we needed more—many more—CDs, so someone burnt a pile of additional copies.

The demand for this music led Mennonite Church Canada to approve a project to make a professional quality full-length studio album of these and other songs that I had been writing. The result was the 2002 release of a CD and songbook called *God's Love Is for Everybody: Songs of Faith for Small and Tall*. We were pleased to see how quickly these songs were adopted and used in families, schools, and congregations.

But now I faced a dilemma. The songs kept coming, and I kept receiving invitations to share this music in a variety of settings. At the same time, the congregation where I was youth pastor was asking me to give more attention to the detailed organizational

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work of planning youth events. And I began to experience the now-familiar signs of approaching burnout.

What to do? We again entered a time of discernment, consulting with friends, colleagues, church leaders, and a counsellor. A number of things became clear: (1) The current pace of full-time youth ministry was not something I could sustain and be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. (2) The needs the congregation was expressing were no longer in alignment with how I understood my own gifts. (3) I seemed to have found my voice in a new and compelling

way. Songwriting was bringing together my passion for biblical study; theological reflection; contextual analysis; church leadership; worship; ministries with children, youth, and adults; and of course, music. (4) Voices from across the church were saying that the songs I was writing were proving useful in helping families and congregations understand, articulate, and embrace their missional calling.

We decided that I would conclude my term as a youth pastor, and we moved to Ontario, where Julie had been offered a teaching position. We gave ourselves a period of three years, with Julie teaching full time and me as the primary homemaker, writing songs and exploring what it would look like to take this music ministry seriously as my main thing rather than as a side thing.

Not-so-secret agents in the ancient, urgent cause

Eight years later, it seems clear that the call to this songwriting vocation has been confirmed many times over. Affirmation and support come from many quarters, as songs are picked up, published, and sung in different contexts. When I get discouraged or impatient, when I am again tempted to measure my worth by grand accomplishments and achievements, I am reoriented by

someone letting me know that a song has found a home and is doing its slow and patient work in their family or community. I can work and rest and trust, knowing that even a small participation is meaningful because it is a part of the much bigger process whose outcome relies not on our own efforts but on God.

People often ask me where I find inspiration for writing so many songs. My typical response is something like this: Where does the pastor find inspiration for writing so many sermons, or the scholar for writing more articles, or the teacher for another day's classes, or the farmer for another year's crop, or the cook for another day's meals? I don't know that my process is so different from that of other members of the body of Christ. Paying attention to the realities around us, immersed in scripture and in prayer and in the life and mission of our local community of faith, we do the work that has been entrusted to us—preparing something to build up the body and offering it to the community in hope and trust that it may contribute in some way to the formation of a people capable of living our vocation in the world.

For me, the primary vocational choice was and continues to be the decision to commit to membership in a body that seeks to pay attention to what God is up to and how we can join in. This continues to be an adventure that gives meaning to my life. My own sense of call to this songwriting vocation remains subservient to the vocation of the broader body of which I am a part, and which in turn derives its vocation and identity from “the one who died and rose again, infiltrating the world with the love of God.”

Note

¹ “Infiltrating The World,” words and music by Bryan Moyer Suderman. Copyright 2008, 2009 SmallTall Music; www.smalltallmusic.com. From the 2009 CD *A New Heart: Songs of Faith for Small and Tall*.

About the author

Bryan Moyer Suderman lives in Stouffville, Ontario, and travels extensively, mostly by train, living his vocation of “building up the body of Christ by creating and sharing songs of faith for small and tall.” SmallTall Music (www.smalltallmusic.com) has been his “flexible full-time” ministry since 2003, and he has released five CDs, the most recent entitled *Detectives of Divinity* (September 2011).