


Church after Eden

Finding possibility in banishment with Pastors in Exile

Jessica Reesor Rempel

In the centre of the room, on a low coffee table, is a tray of flickering tea lights, an assortment of half-empty mugs, a pair of sock-clad feet, an open Bible. Around this center one sees a circle of eager faces leaning toward the centre, and behind them a ring of overstuffed armchairs. The backdrop to this scene is an old brick wall, this room having been added on a century after the church was originally built. The people present crave



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connection to each other, to God, to an ancient text, and to the hidden purposes of being alive in this time and place. We crave dignity. We long for equality in our lives regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, race, class. This is Feminist Bible Study. We have gathered every Thursday evening in the months from September to April for three years now. This place is safe, and it is challenging.

Tonight we are discussing Eve and Adam and their expulsion from Eden. We talk about sources for the text and the ways it has been used throughout the centuries, and then we move on to exploring how we identify with the figures, based on our own experiences. “Eve,” someone laments, “poor Eve! She’s been blamed for centuries as the cause of all that is wrong with the world. People say it’s because of her that humans were banished from Eden and the world got so messed up.”

Then, in this feminist-oriented space, where every question is embraced and every voice is equally important, some people around the circle express doubts about the traditional narrative of the Fall. Would we really choose not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

(Gen. 2:17)? Would we want to remain in blissful ignorance?¹ “If I could go back in time, I would eat the fruit too!” one of us announces.

Someone else notices that it is only after the exile from the garden that new life is possible, since only outside the garden do Eve and Adam have sex and bring a child into the world (Gen. 4:1). “If Eve hadn’t eaten the fruit, we wouldn’t even be here!” she proclaims, cheekily. It does not go unnoticed that after the banishment there is also pain. Ultimately the beloved children, the new lives brought into the world by Eve and Adam, become the cause of deep grief. Despite the pain and messiness of life outside the garden, the consensus of the group is that life after the banishment is in fact the better alternative to staying in the garden forever.

Pastors in Exile for a church in exile


As a pastor with Pastors in Exile, I often feel as though I am functioning in a post-banishment context. Ministry is gritty here, and everything is an experiment; everything must be learned.

Pastors in Exile is a charitable organization that began in 2014 as a response to the changing context for the Mennonite church in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. As young pastors living and working in the region, co-founder Chris Brnjas and I observed that many of our young adult peers identified with Mennonite/Christian faith but no longer participated in church communities, while others were actively involved in church but were looking for opportunities to deepen their faith in the presence of other young adults. At the same time, we noticed fear from within congregations and church agencies about the absence of young adults in the pews. Some characterized the Mennonite church of times past as a sort of Garden of Eden where Sunday school classes overflowed and young adults lined up to be baptized, whereas the current period of church life seemed akin to the banishment from the garden.

Supported by friends and mentors of all ages, Chris and I felt called to be pastors in that space of banishment and exile—thus the name “Pastors in Exile” (PiE). Rather than lament the lost garden, at PiE we are called to embrace this time of exile (there can be no going back to the way things were in the garden) and to join God at work in this new context. As Mennonite-rooted pastors working in the community, we see our role being to connect young adults in Kitchener-Waterloo with vibrant

1 All biblical references are from Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Plymouth UK: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

faith experiences outside and inside church walls. This connecting takes the form of retreats, Bible studies, spiritual care, and blogging. We also foster connection with local churches in order to bridge the gap between churches and young adults who find themselves on the margins. Over



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the past three years, as I have journeyed with the transient community of young adults who connect with PiE, my belief has strengthened that this season of metaphorical banishment from the garden is necessary and full of potential for the Mennonite church.

New life after the banishment

We are told that after they were evicted from the Garden of Eden, “Adam and Eve knew each other, and Eve conceived and gave birth to Cain. ‘With the help of YHWH,’ she said, ‘I have gotten a child.’ She also gave birth to a second child, his brother Abel” (Gen. 4:1-2a). It seems that procreation was only possible for Eve and Adam after they had recognized

their nakedness and were sent from the garden. Likewise, at PiE—where we are not a church, and as such are mostly free from the expectations about what churches are supposed to do (Sunday morning worship services, for example)—we are able to explore relationship with God in new ways. As current pastors with PiE, Tamara Shantz and I, along with our board of directors, listen to the spiritual longings of the young adults we engage with and then shape ways of gathering together that support these needs and are not available in quite this way elsewhere in our community.

One year ago, two young adults from the PiE community who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Christian approached us with a need: they wanted a space where they could explore in a group setting these dual identities, and they had gifts of hospitality they wanted to offer to others. With ongoing facilitation support from Tamara, these young adults began a group called Queerly Christian, which continues to meet bi-weekly, providing peer support as well as engaging deeply with biblical and theological texts dealing with sexuality. The Queerly Christian participants hope

to become a resource to local churches, as individuals who have lived experience and biblical and theological grounding in this area.

Recently, after someone defaced a local LGBTQ+-affirming church, members of Queerly Christian were able to process their hurt and fear together. I had the privilege of joining members of this group and others who came to assist local artist Kandace Boos (who is also a Mennonite and a young adult) in transforming the hateful graffiti into an image of love and celebration. After biking home that afternoon with paint on my clothes and hope in my soul, I jotted down my impressions of the experience:

THE CHURCH SHALL REMAIN HOLY is sprayed in black on the grey concrete walkway in front of the church with its rainbow flag and sign promoting an upcoming LGBTQ and Allies potluck. One week later the mood is somber as we gather around this unwanted addition to the church decor. We are an eclectic assortment of neighbours, faith leaders, and just plain passionate people. The somber mood does not last long. Soon the black words are outlined in white paint and then a torrent of colour is unleashed under the careful direction of a local artist/ally. "THE CHURCH SHALL REMAIN HOLY" it still reads on the walkway, but the message and the mood are now very different.


At PiE, freed from Sunday morning obligations, these are the sorts of new life experiences that we often have the privilege to encounter.

Journeying in and out of the garden

Life after the garden does not mean forgetting what came before or devaluing the experience of those who are still in the garden. While there are valuable insights to be gained from the Garden of Eden metaphor for the Mennonite church, and for PiE's relationship to it, this metaphor has its limitations. For one thing, it implies that those in traditional Mennonite churches have not eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and as such are ignorant of the ways the world works and of how best to live out God's call in their context. This simply is not the case. In my work with PiE I have encountered many Mennonite congregations that are well aware of how the world around them is changing and are excited to maintain what is good and life giving in their structures while releasing

what is no longer relevant. God is at work in faithful people inside and outside church walls.

Moreover, the garden metaphor implies that the journey out of the garden is a one-time experience. In reality, there are no “winged sphinxes with fiery, ever-turning swords” (Gen. 3:24) at the entrance to this metaphorical garden. While we can never go back to how the church used to be, we can keep drawing on the rich resources of our history to enliven the way the church and other ministries are embodied today. Many of us are constantly moving in and out of the garden, harvesting what we need for the journey, and even taking time to water what grows there. For myself, and roughly half the young adults connected with PiE, this move-



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ment takes the form of being actively involved in a Mennonite church while also seeking out the new ways of connecting to each other and to our faith that PiE has to offer. Giving the lie to the belief that young adults are detached from their faith and unwilling to prioritize it in their weekly schedules, some of the young adults I engage with take time to attend one or more of PiE’s weeknight groups, to worship with a congregation on Sunday mornings, and to serve on church committees.

Moving forward in hope

Last fall I had the opportunity to spend three back-to-back Sundays in a local Mennonite congregation, facilitating intergenerational dialogue for adult and youth faith formation classes around what it would mean to be a truly welcoming place for people on the fringes of their congregation—for young adults in particular. In the end the series produced no simple next steps drafted neatly on chart paper, but that was no longer the point. It became clear that the point was to take the time to sit together and listen to each other’s hopes and worries for the future of their church. Their church, like so many churches, is in a time of transition, and it is far from clear what the next twenty years have in store in for

them, but they are committed to making space for all voices to be heard as they move forward together. Inside the church and out, young and old, and in all the liminal spaces in between, we are the family of God attempting to live out our faith in the best ways we know how to.

Back at Feminist Bible Study, by the end of the evening we have come to wonder whether perhaps the story of Eve and Adam is not a cautionary tale after all but simply the telling of family history. Outside the garden, life is difficult and complicated, the authors of Genesis seem to be telling us, but it is also full of newness and possibility. In the room with the comfortable chairs and the exposed brick wall, in this place that is both church and not church, we pray for each other and the world, we blow out the candles, and we gather up the Bibles. As we scatter into the night, I am filled with hope for the future of church.

About the author

Jessica Reesor Rempel is pastor and cofounder of Pastors in Exile. She is passionate about nurturing community, extending radical hospitality, and seeking out sacred moments in the midst of the mundane. Jessica's call to this ministry has been shaped by studies at Conrad Grebel University College (Waterloo, ON) and Toronto School of Theology, as well as by time spent serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario and in Laos. Learn more about PiE at www.pastorsinexile.org.