


Tending the in-between spaces

Becoming itinerant storytellers

Anika Reynar

In the midst of significant structural change in Mennonite Church Canada, a group of Canadian Mennonite University students were drawn together in December 2015 around the question, Do young people care



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about the future of the church? This initial gathering generated surprising energy among the participants. Soon a group of fifteen of us began gathering over a shared meal several times a month to talk about our dreams, hopes, and fears for the church. The group, which came to be known as Emerging Voices Initiative (EVI), consisted of young adults, most of whom could be described as having an itinerant and fugitive relationship with the church. We were raised by various congregations across Canada but had no certainty that we would return to those places. We felt increasingly at home in Winnipeg but were not sure

that we would stay there after we completed our degrees. We were passionate about the church but were disoriented by a sense that we were caught between homes, between vocational possibilities, and between congregations.

As I got more involved in EVI, I came to recognize that I was not alone in my lack of certainty about my home, my future, and my place in the church. I shared this experience with other young adults, and it often created a profound sense of disorientation for us. My disorientation, my sense of uprootedness, inspired my undergraduate thesis, which explored the role the university and church could play in forming young adults into storied people who are rooted in a particular place and tradition

while continuing to create physical and conceptual routes in a world that celebrates mobility.¹

Unexpectedly, in the course of writing my thesis I found immense hope for the relationship between young adults and the church through the work of Sheldon Wolin and Romand Coles, both of them political theorists and the latter professing to be a member of no church. According to Coles and Wolin, the itinerant wanderer and the fugitive do not create a crisis for a community; instead they are the catalysts for envisioning a dialogical community that is rooted in tradition yet permeable to new and unanticipated possibilities and flexible enough to adapt to them.

In drawing on the work of Wolin and Coles, I want to suggest that it is precisely as they live amid the tension of the in-between spaces—between homes, between vocational paths, between churches—that young adults can help the church remember that dwelling in uncertainty and releasing control are critical parts of what it means to be the church. The ecclesial

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body that can recognize the gift of uncertainty has a profound capacity to meet young adults in these in-between spaces, thereby encouraging them to find a sense of home through remembering, embodying, and claiming God’s story as their own.

Choosing our own story?

A dominant societal narrative suggests to young adults that education is the means by which they can choose to be who they want to be and go wherever they desire to go. In the words of ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, young adults are led to “believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they had no story.”² As young adults set out


to choose their own story, they face a great deal of pressure to get it right: to pick the right career and to make something of themselves. Often, the

1 Anika Reynar. “Movement and Memory: Storied Pedagogy in the Age of Empire” (undergraduate thesis, Canadian Mennonite University, 2017).

2 Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and The Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 37.

desire for freedom and the pursuit of the right story leads young adults away from the community and church that raised them. In setting out on their own, they can easily forget that they are already in the middle of a story, the story given to them by the place they came from and the community that raised them, the faith story that formed their framework for understanding the world.

While young adults can easily become fixated on choosing and controlling the direction of their lives, they are not the only ones who con-



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front this challenge. The church also continually faces the temptation to try to control the future, to move in the “right” direction. We witnessed this pressure most recently in the process of restructuring Mennonite Church Canada, which proposed to shift resources and programmes from the national to the regional churches, and to reorient the church’s focus around the congregation as the primary locus of worship and mission.

The restructuring process expressed the church’s desire to follow God’s Spirit in a time when individualism, relativism, and disillusionment with professionalized institutions are culturally

pervasive realities. These cultural shifts often seem beyond our control and have therefore created a sense of anxiety for the church as it recognizes that “young adults, and frequently their parents, grandparents, and others, are increasingly disassociating from what they consider to be a staid and possibly irrelevant institution.”³ In response to this anxiety, the church has focused on what it believes it can control: the structure of the church. In doing so, however, the church has also demonstrated a tendency to forget that this body is already part of the story of Jesus, a story premised on radical release of power and control.

3 Future Directions Task Force, “Interim Report,” Interim Council, Mennonite Church Canada, October 11, 2013; see www.commonword.ca/go/1504.

Releasing control, tending a habitus

As young adults negotiate their own stories, they desperately need the church to be a social body that resists the temptation to seek control and instead models a countercultural commitment to remembering and embodying the particular relevance of Jesus's life and practices: love of enemy, nonviolent resistance, repentance, servanthood, dispossession of power, and so on.

In the life of the church, such a commitment requires a paradigm shift from a politics of *intending* to a politics of *tending*, to borrow Sheldon Wolin's terms. According to Wolin, a politics of intending is shaped by the language of contract: this system of power seeks to ensure a future by bringing all of life under a single rational structure and order. In contrast, a politics of tending requires "active care of things close at hand."⁴ A politics of tending is centered on shared practices, habits, and memories that define a place and community in its particularity, and describe how that community will negotiate its future. In this sense, to tend habits is more broadly to tend a *habitus*, a collective expression of embodied dispositions and tendencies that orient the way we understand, interact with, and move through the world.

The Mennonite church, at its best, has an incredible capacity to tend habits of speech, worship, and hospitality that mirror the life of Jesus. But these habits can quickly become entrenched. When entrenched habits limit our ability to see more and say more, we begin to reach the edges of the habitus. Habitus, as sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu conceives it, represents a body of habits that give stability and coherence to a particular narrative.⁵ However, as Romand Coles correctly recognizes, habitus—as a centripetal disposition—resists being reopened, reimagined, and retold. Coles advocates maintaining the stability of a habitus while simultaneously pushing the edges of the habitus, encouraging "corporeal and theoretical practices"⁶ that "generate imaginative critical interrogation, flexibility, energetic quaking of and push-back against the limits of the self-evident, and radical transformation."⁷ "These spaces of possibil-

4 Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 89.

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).


6 Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2016), 7.

7 Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism*, 56.

ity,” Coles goes on to suggest, “open only when and because gaps, blips, and mismatches—failures of articulation—occur.”⁸ It is within these gaps and moments of critical interrogation that truth, imagination, affection, and hope begin to be realized and clarified.

Fugitive edges

The task of pushing the edges of the habitus is complicated by the fact that there is no singular habitus. Rather, disparate places, traditions, and



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practices overlap in ways that make it difficult to know where the edges are. This is where Coles’s metaphor of an ecotone becomes helpful. An ecotone is a meeting ground or an edge between two environments—the place where a forest and a meadow come together, for example. From the Greek *oikos* (habitation), and *tonos* (tension), the word *ecotone* points to a place full of fertile and generative possibilities yet also to an unpredictable and “ambiguous tension-laden dwelling.”⁹ Drawing on the work of Anglican bishop Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the metaphor of an ecotone evokes not only an edge

between two different communities but also a transformation in our understanding of topography and territoriality.¹⁰

As Williams observes, Jesus does not come to be “a competitor for space in this world.”¹¹ Rather, Jesus’s good news is that he “interrupts and reorganizes the landscape in ways that are not predictable.”¹² To live into

8 Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism*, 94.

9 Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), 14.

10 Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

11 Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 6; quoted in Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

12 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 40; quoted in Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

the gospel story, therefore, is to follow Jesus's example in not becoming competitors for space in this world but rather in competing against the desire to control and determine the right direction or the structure for the church, or the path of one's life. Here we are called to carefully and courageously tend the spaces and the edges that we inhabit. Within this

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call, however, "we cannot know precisely where the edges are, because they are part of what and how we are called into being, and they run throughout our lives and works in ways that precede us and are multidimensional."¹³

This sense of not knowing where the edges are begins to push toward an account of the church that is not self-contained but instead is defined by its fugitive character. Working with Shel-

don Wolin's idea of "fugitive democracy," Mennonite theologian Peter Dula develops the notion of "fugitive ecclesia."¹⁴ In developing the idea of fugitive ecclesia, Dula gestures toward a church body that is episodic and rare. While the life of the church has continuity with the body of Christ, it is predominantly characterized by a patient struggle to work through and become attentive to the tensions, struggles, and conflicts that emerge in the pursuit of living truthfully. In this sense, the church does not have a definitive claim on truth but is rather called to live on the edge, cultivating an openness to receive gifts from other spaces, traditions, ecologies, and stories.

Rooting, storytelling, and wandering

To the extent that they are living fugitive lives, young adults are in a position to help the church understand what it means to be fugitive. At its best, Emerging Voices Initiative did exactly this. In the winter of 2016, seven EVI members became itinerants, wanderers traveling across Canada to lead listening workshops, where constituent churches were invited to add to the "imaginative critical interrogation" of what it means to be the church. At the end of the tour, we observed that the tour "led to a rich

¹³ Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 15.

¹⁴ Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 95–113.

journey of sharing and collecting stories across the country. To find our way forward, we need to tell stories. Stories are how we share meaning, how we name where God is at work in our lives and invite others to do the same. We hope to keep storytelling central as we consider a re-structured church.”¹⁵

In each church we visited, the stories we heard reflected the way each community was working to tend the history, memories, and unfolding particularities of that place. While these stories were diverse, they also contained common threads that transcended territorial designations. Increasingly, I began to understand that the role of EVI was to navigate the in-between spaces and to work to weave the particular stories of local congregations into the Anabaptist story and God’s story more broadly.

In building bridges between localities, our task is not so much to ensure that the church gets the structure right as to ensure that congregations are not isolated from each other. As young adults wander, question, and struggle with the tension of being in between, they need the church to offer a broader story that gives coherence to their travels. This story, while rooted in the memory and wisdom of Jesus, must continue to be receptive to unexpected openings that invite new routes for exploration.

My hope is that in the dialogical interplay between storied traditions and fugitive moments, the church will be humble enough to receive the gift of uncertainty from voices speaking from the edges, whether those of young adults or those of thinkers such as Wolin or Coles. In turn, I hope young adults will find a sense of home in the story of the church, even and especially as the church struggles with the tensions of living truthfully in a world characterized by competing cultural narratives.

About the author

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15 Emerging Voices Initiative, “Tour Reflection: The Church’s Future,” January 26, 2017, <https://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/2017/01/26/tour-reflection/>.