

Holy experiments in forming disciples

Area church and congregational stories

Ruth Boehm

When I began pastoral ministry, I thought I knew about practical discipleship in the congregational setting. I had a sense of what to do, what curriculum to use. Twenty years later I'm less sure. I am no longer trying to find the right approach, and my interest has shifted toward what I have come to see as holy experiments.

This holy experimenting has begun out of necessity. Major shifts are taking place in our churches and in our Canadian context. Stuart Murray, an Anabaptist scholar from England, has identified a number of these shifts experienced by the church in post-Christendom. One of the shifts the church has the opportunity to grab hold of is a shift from institution to movement.¹

A movement is fluid, less defined; it is exploratory, grassroots, and powerful. Keys to the success of a movement are clear communication and risk taking. As the church moves from institution to movement, we need to let go of the ways we used to do things. Our vitality will depend on being open to what God is doing and calling us to.

Communicating what the Holy Spirit is doing in different parts of the church is essential. Stories of holy experimenting can inspire people to celebrate, dream, and become open to what God is doing and may yet do. In what follows I want to share some stories of risky holy experimentation in discipleship. The first involves an area church,² and following that are some stories from congregations. These are all efforts to respond to the challenges of forming disciples of Jesus Christ in our current context.

Attending to God's transforming activity

In an area church representing 105 congregations, the Congregational Ministries Council and Jeff Steckley, the congregational ministries minister for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC), decided to risk experimenting with a different response

to the discipleship challenges that member congregations were identifying.

Jeff and the council led a process rather than trying to give answers. A summary of their experiment and what they learned was presented in the report “Written on Their Hearts: A Report on Regional Conversations about Faith Shaping and Tending,”

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presented at the MCEC Annual Church Gathering in April 2012.³ As the report’s title indicates, Jeremiah 31:33 emerged as formative during the discussions: “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The report notes that “118 faith formation leaders (pastor and lay) representing 50 churches participated in six regional faith formation conversations from June to October 2011. They spent time reflecting

together, telling stories, and listening to how faith is being shaped in their particular faith communities.”

The group identified difficulties they confront in seeking to form faith:

1. Irregular Sunday attendance makes it challenging to sustain interest, to use Christian education curriculum well, and for community to be formed.

2. As a culture we no longer observe Sabbath; thus there are many more choices about what to do on Sundays. Families experience conflict about how and where they spend time. It is increasingly challenging to balance commitments to church faith formation activities and commitments to the broader community.

3. Parents struggle to take primary responsibility for the faith formation of their children.

4. It is increasingly difficult to identify and equip congregational faith formation leaders.

5. Children and youth of first generation Anabaptist congregations are well engaged in Canadian culture. Parents must mediate between culture of origin and Canadian culture as they form the faith of their children and youth.

6. We struggle to nurture relational opportunities across and among generations, for faith to be formed and for God to transform.

7. We struggle to find language that feels authentic and resonates with our experiences of faith.

Then the report addressed the way “stories of formation and transformation give hope for the future and are signs of God’s presence and care. The following themes emerged from the telling of these stories”:

1. Congregational celebrations of relationships and life milestones offer profound opportunities for faith formation and transformation.

2. Music continues to be a significant means through which God is experienced.

3. Sharing of personal, life-transforming stories continues to be very significant. Personal storytelling breaks down barriers across generations and cultures.

4. People are asking questions of faith, reflecting a longing for God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and relationship with Jesus.

5. Many still see church communities as having a vital role in exploring questions of faith, while others are discovering support, fellowship, and a place to explore questions of faith outside the church. God is active within and outside the institutional church.

6. A variety of forms of mentoring or companioning relationships provide significant connection to faith communities. These relationships are often the places where faith is being formed.

7. Service and learning trips provide opportunities for faith to be embodied as people “do first, then listen and hear.”

8. A spiritual sensitivity is being observed in children as they pray for and with one another and readily pose questions of faith to each other and to adults.

At the conclusion of each regional conversation, those gathered spent time in prayer and stillness before God. As the conversations continued, people spent more and more time working with scripture. The story from Mark 6:45–51 about Jesus walking on the water was reassuring and freeing: Jesus comes to us in the midst of changing times when the way is not clear.

This counsel was offered as wisdom emerging from the conversations and time spent “practicing the presence of God”:

1. Let go of the idea that a single approach to faith formation will serve all of us well. One size no longer fits all of our contexts.

2. Be daring and risk trying new approaches to faith formation.

The faith formation program efforts of some congregations have faltered to a point where there is nothing to lose in exploring new approaches. God seems to be grafting something new into and onto the church.

3. Develop both roots and wings; be grounded, yet open to try new ways of forming faith. As one participant said: “Be both wild and strong together!”

4. Attend to the transforming activity of God, rather than focusing on the challenges.

5. Let God be in control and tend to us, trusting that God will work with and through us. Try to see and hear what God thinks is important, as opposed to what we think is important.

6. Pray, wait, reflect, and slow down. Listen, observe, and pay attention to what God is doing.

7. Nurture and strengthen connections. We need each other’s care, help, and mentoring.

8. Be open to new intergenerational faith formation ideas and possibilities, remembering that faith continues to be formed throughout all of life.

9. Remember that God is already at work, inviting us to join along. God will inspire us and show us a way forward that we don’t ultimately control.

This holy experiment by the area church has already yielded some fruit. Participants found encouragement in discovering that they are not alone in facing the challenges of sporadic attendance and needing to move into experimentation. Some clusters of congregations met for a second time to continue the conversation and to see what could happen when they work together in new ways.

A shift is taking place, a shift from having a formula for how we foster discipleship in family and congregational or area church life, to discovering and celebrating possibilities. The shift involves lament and letting go of how things have been done. The shift necessitates waiting for God to lead and being open to the opportunities that will emerge.

The shifts that are taking place can be visualized using a model developed by C. Otto Scharmer in *Theory U: Learning from the Future as It Emerges*.⁴ The model is based on a U shape: it moves from left to right, from letting go, to “presencing” (Scharmer’s new

word for presence + sensing), to letting come. This model is being adapted for use in area church and congregational settings.⁵ It may help free us to try other holy experiments.

Devoted to the breaking of bread and the prayers

Like the MCEC area church, congregations are engaging in holy experiments. Some of these experiments are simply noted here without evaluation.

At Hillcrest Mennonite Church, worship is based on Gather Round texts,⁶ and Sunday school follows. On the fourth Sunday of the month, the congregation meets in what they call 2:42 Groups. They take their name from Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” People in these groups go to each other’s homes to eat together. Recipes for simple meals are provided. Everyone brings something. For each meeting a grace, a blessing, and two sets of questions are provided. The main course questions help people connect with each other. The dessert questions are linked to the morning’s biblical text.

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The two key goals are to deepen relationships and form faith. The groups are intergenerational, and the questions are accessible to children and adults. The questions are open ended and lead both toward scripture and away from scripture.⁷ One of the sessions, for example, dealt with a text from the Gospel of Matthew about the

kingdom of heaven. One question was, “If the kingdom of heaven were a colour, what colour would it be?”

On the fifth Sunday of the month, worship has a thematic focus and is followed by intergenerational activities. Some of the fifth Sundays have included discernment about refugees and about fair trade; they have also used Nathan Dungan’s book, *Money Sanity Solutions: Linking Money and Meaning*.⁸ The congregation is in the first year of this experiment with revitalizing Sunday school, but they have already enjoyed learning to know each other more deeply.⁹

Treating catechism as a wide-open window

Leamington United Mennonite Church is trying a holy experiment with catechism by extending it from a few months to two years. According to Pastor David Dyck, this pattern has grown out of their sense that they have been failing, somehow missing the target, and being frustrated with an inability to help young people to become disciples.¹⁰ They also had a growing conviction that this is their primary task as pastors and the church. A different approach was birthed out of longing and a sense of needing some new approach in this task of forming Christians. The way catechism was previously set up offered them a window of opportunity that was open for six months and then closed again.

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David Dyck notes, “We started raising the bar, and the youth didn’t balk. We felt that catechism could be a window: let’s open it as wide as we can. Catechism doesn’t end when you are baptized, but we had made it that way. After high school and baptism, students went away to school, and it seemed like that was it in terms of faith formation.”

The word *practice* has become central in the formation experiment. The focus on practice is based on the teaching of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:24: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (NIV).

The LUMC pastoral team has been developing a catechism based on concretely defining what it means to put the teachings of Jesus into practice. The practices they have focused on include forgiveness, generosity, prayer, service, abstinence, offering gifts, gathering for worship, and community. As teachers they emphasize that none of these things comes naturally. Class participants should not expect that everyone will already be good at these practices. When we are learning how to play the violin, we start out clumsy and may want to give up. Only with practice and dedication are we able to play melodically. The unnatural becomes natural. As one follows Jesus more and more as an act of obedience, these practices become more and more natural. They

create habits and shape our identity: we become disciples following Jesus' way.

In practical terms, the pre-baptism catechism lays out these practices. In the years following baptism, the practices will be worked out in more detail in conversation about and interaction with the realities of daily life, in the world of school and relationships. The process will give attention to the practice of community and how it will manifest itself.

The experiment started this year with the students who have returned home during the university break. They call themselves Verein 6:40. *Verein* is a German word for an association, club, society, union; here it refers to a small group of students united in training to become like our teacher Jesus. Luke 6:40 reads: "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (NIV). Training and practice go hand in hand. Verein 6:40 meets every two weeks. The meeting is structured like the 2:42 Groups, with time for eating, praying, studying, and sharing. David Dyck observes that "this plan did not come to us all at once; it keeps on coming. As we experiment, we keep learning new things. It started with a word—*practice*—and the word *Master*, and the idea of learning how to live as he did. It has grown and multiplied. As we experiment, we learn—and new experiments are born."

Soup and Bible study

The soup is on at St. Jacobs (Ontario) Mennonite Church. The congregation's Christian formation ministry has helped organize times on Thursday evenings for the church to eat a simple meal and study the Bible together. Each four-week series has been led by Derek Suderman, a member of the congregation who teaches Old Testament at Conrad Grebel University College.

A volunteer prepares a simple meal of soup, bread, and water. After supper, people pitch in to clean up in time for everyone to participate in the Bible study. Topics have included a study of Jonah and "How does Jesus read the scriptures?" Thirty or forty people have participated. Some join for the study time only. The youth take care of the children during the study.

Like several other congregations, St. Jacobs Mennonite Church has had some members participate in *Tending the Soul of Indi-*

viduals and Congregations, an MCEC initiative to sponsor six retreats over a two-year period. Led by Wendy Miller from Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, Virginia), these retreats are times of learning to be attentive and listen to the Spirit in participants' own lives and in the life of their congregations. Learning a vocabulary of tending the soul has helped participants name the experiences of individuals and the congregation. Having their own souls tended has aided them in tending the soul of their congregations.

The chair and vice chair and four other members of the St. Jacobs congregation have taken part, and the training has brought sensitivity to the work of the Spirit in the task of leading the congregation. When the congregation faced the question of what to do with a surplus of money in the budget, the council met and discerned a path forward in response to the leading of the Spirit.¹¹ The congregation affirmed the council's proposal to give much of the surplus away. On a Sunday morning in February they held a special offering. Baskets were set out representing ministries St. Jacobs supports, as well as the church's capital fund. People were given play money and could put it in any of the baskets. The results of their distribution determined the allocation of funds to the various projects.

True evangelical faith comforts the sorrowful

These three Ontario congregations are conducting holy experiments among themselves and with other congregations. So many other stories could be told. So many other holy experiments are underway.

Perhaps the area of greatest need for holy experiments is in beginning conversations with those who have little connection with Christian faith or are disillusioned with Christian faith.

One day I received a phone call to officiate at a funeral of someone who had no connection with our congregation. A family member had seen me lead a funeral in the community a few months earlier. I agreed to walk with the family, but I was hesitant. I wasn't sure what God was up to. That evening my six-year-old son recognized a word on a wall hanging at our house, and he asked me, "Mommy, what does that sign say—with the word 'it' and 'it' and 'it'?" I looked up at the piece, which had been hanging

there for many years. I read to him these words of Menno Simons: “True evangelical faith does not lie sleeping. It clothes the naked, it comforts the sorrowful, it gives to the hungry food.” Then I stopped, hearing anew this call to live out true evangelical faith.

We are called to walk into situations, equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit, the support of a praying community, the Bible (which has a way to connect with everyone), and the love of Christ. As we take up these holy experiments, we discover ways of sharing our faith with our family, friends, and neighbours. As we enter into conversations or preach at funerals or eat together or debate together, we can invite people to enter into a deeper relationship with our living God and a deeper living out of true evangelical faith.

Notes

¹ Stuart Murray Williams, from a handout at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) School for Ministers, February 22–25, 2012. The other transitions in post-Christendom include movement from the centre to the margins, from majority to minority, from settlers to sojourners, from privilege to plurality, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission, and from institution to movement.

² Mennonite Church Canada now calls regional conferences area churches, in recognition that church happens at many levels beyond the congregation.

³ The report’s findings included in this article have been minimally paraphrased.

⁴ San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009.

⁵ For more information, contact Jeff Steckley: jsteckley@mcec.ca.

⁶ Gather Round is a Bible-based Sunday school curriculum for children, youth, and their families, copublished by Brethren Press and MennoMedia; see <http://www.gatherround.org>.

⁷ From a January 21, 2012, presentation by Derek Suderman at Vineland United Mennonite Church, at an event organized by MCEC for pastors, chaplains, and congregational leaders: “Catching the Spark . . . Carrying the Light: Facilitating Dynamic Bible Study.” Derek presented a grid for framing questions for Bible study. One gridline was open and closed. The second was away and toward. He challenged leaders to think about their use of questions and encouraged us to ask open-ended questions that lead us toward the biblical text (exploration) and away from the text (application).

⁸ Minneapolis: Share, Save, Spend, 2010.

⁹ Interview with Jan Steckley, pastor of Hillcrest Mennonite Church, May 25, 2012.

¹⁰ Interview with David Dyck, May 25, 2012.

¹¹ Interview with Mark Diller Harder, May 25, 2012.

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