

# Improbable? Transformation and the congregation

## A review of some resources

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**I**t is not going to happen, I said to myself as I entered the church building. The probability that one of our students will be accepted here is not very high.

Oh, the building was not the problem. It was modern; it had a beautiful sanctuary, offices, Christian education space. Everything was there. But the connection with the seminary was not.

**The Mennonite church is transforming. More and more it is taking culture seriously in order to do mission. This is not easy. It is not easy because it means change.... Gone are the days of the lot, the farm, eighth-grade education, and family solidarity.**

People thought differently, people worshiped differently, people lived their Christian life in different ways, pastoral leadership took different forms. How could it work?

A man greeted me. He was the pastor. I introduced myself and told him my mission. I was there to see if I could place one of our M.Div. students in this congregation, a student who wanted a more conservative group in which to do his practical experience. It would mean involving this student in the leadership of the congregation for the entire school year.

The pastor's first question had to do with logistics. What would this student do? Did he expect pay? What were the academic requirements of the supervisor? (The pastor did not have a seminary education.) I assured him that no pay was expected. The aim of this program was learning. The student wanted to experience as much of ministry as possible. He hoped to preach, teach, do evangelism and pastoral care, sit in on some meetings to learn how planning and administration occur, and do whatever else was appropriate to the setting. And yes, we could accommodate a supervisor

without a seminary education. The primary qualification was that the supervisor loved Jesus, the church, and pastoral ministry, and was willing to model that for our student.

The pastor thanked me and assured me he would think it over and consult with his colleagues and the church before getting back to me.

I left feeling both hope and despair. No way, I thought, is this going to work. The gap between this church and AMBS is just too large.

To my surprise, the congregation decided to accept my student as a pastoral intern. He could learn from them and with them. They would do their best to conform to our policies.

What happened is a testimony to the student, to the congregation, to the pastor, and to the program. At the end of the first semester the supervising pastor wrote that the possibility of their congregation becoming involved in this program with AMBS “had never been considered. The gap between the educated ‘elite’ of the larger Mennonite body and the simple congregation of [\_\_\_\_\_ Mennonite Church] seemed quite large. Furthermore, there are some distinct differences in our understanding of the intent of some scriptural doctrines that made this [possibility] even [more] remote.

“Nevertheless, this experience has been a positive one for the congregation. Not only do we feel privileged to be able to channel some ‘conservative’ input into one of your students, but we feel the broader exposure of AMBS through your student has helped penetrate some of our ecclesiastical isolation.”<sup>1</sup>

And so it continues. Year after year it happens. Congregations are changed; students are transformed. Congregations appreciate the seminary and students fall in love with the church all over again. Student calls are clarified. Some students come to the experience shouting with God. Some leave embracing a call to pastoral ministry. Congregations await the next student.

Whatever the focus, transformation happens. People change. They don’t just perform a different function. They are different.

Transformation is complex. We use the word in various ways. We use it to describe (1) a changing institution (the process of merger or integration of Mennonite churches is now called transformation), (2) a changed person (someone whose life is

changed radically), (3) a changing environment (a geographical location suddenly conveys something new), or (4) a changing model or style (when one's way of leading or following changes). The word seems to refer to something drastic or thorough. In the case of personal transformation, one not only acts differently but is transformed through and through, into a different person. In another setting, one might use the expression "born again."

In recent years a number of authors have been giving attention to the subject of transformation in church life, and to the role of leaders in the process of transformation. In what follows, I will survey some of the literature on congregational change.

**Mennonite churches are not alone in needing to undergo transformation. We can draw on the insights of others as we reflect on our experience with these dynamics.**

Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, in *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1996), write about the congregation as a transforming system (46). The church exists for mission in society: "The fundamental purpose of the transforming system is to

convert the raw materials taken in from the environment into energy, which the congregation needs to survive and to carry out its mission" (49). The church exists for worship and worship exists for God and to change society. When we worship the true God, transformation occurs.

Shawchuck and Heuser refer to an "input system" and an "output system." The input system includes programs, ministries, people, money, new leadership, technology, and other efforts the congregation imports from its environment to achieve its mission and to survive (47). A congregation's output system is "the programs, ministries, and other efforts the congregation puts together in order to 'export' its influences into its environment" (51).

If the church is to be in mission, it assesses its environment and plans for meeting needs. It expects change. For example, if a congregation hires a choir conductor, it expects music to result. If the congregation starts a soup kitchen, it expects to feed the hungry and make a difference.

I say, "It expects." This is where the difficulty begins. The transformation is not automatic. Change does not happen in a mechanical or robotic manner. How one includes people, how the

church makes decisions, how information is shared, how programs are envisioned all have an impact on the transformation process. And not every program of the church needs to be religious to qualify as a church program. Sports teams and fellowship times are sometimes as important as worship and communion. Relationships are of vital significance. Everything is interrelated.

But feeding in ingredients does not guarantee the desired results. One critical element is administration. Organizations are spiritual entities and require spiritual compatibility with their leaders in order to transform. Jim Ritscher's contribution on "Spiritual Leadership" to *Transforming Leadership* (John D. Adams, gen. ed. [Alexandria: Miles River Pr. 1998], 61–80), describes ten qualities of spiritual leadership. Ritscher writes, "When I use the word spiritual, I am not referring to religion.... Spirituality is an experience of *depth* in life; it is living life with heart rather than superficiality... It...is the awareness that there is something more to life than just our narrow, ego-oriented view of it" (68). He goes on to say that spirit is "a matter of utmost concern to business," that "businesses and other organizations assemble groups of people who must communicate with each other effectively to produce results. Businesses that are spirited tend to produce quicker, better, more effective results" (69).

What is true in business is true in the church. Churches have spirit. Just as the spirit of leadership in business must resonate with the spirit of the business, so the spirit of leadership in the church must resonate with the spirit of the church. This compatibility of spirit is a mysterious and elusive part of leadership. It is better caught than taught. It is an ambience. It is something one knows by feeling and by intuition rather than by cognition. It is difficult to teach, if one can teach it at all. One tends either to have it or not to have it. The student in our story at the beginning of this essay had enough compatible spirit. This harmony is often the difference between success and failure. It is hard to identify and name, but it is real.

Whatever techniques of ministry our student learned, his internship changed people's attitudes towards the seminary. Their attitudes were transformed because the student's spirit and the congregation's spirit complemented each other so that people could grow in faith together.

Transformation is not just learning or doing a new thing. It is becoming a new thing, a new creation. Phillip V. Lewis has written a book on *Transformational Leadership: A New Model for Total Church Involvement* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, Pubs., 1996). He asks leaders not just to function in new ways, not just to change clothes, but to *be* new. Lewis profiles the kind of leadership he believes the world needs now, and gives one the impression that leaders who function in the new way he recommends will find themselves building a megachurch.

Building a megachurch may not be bad, but perhaps the heart of the matter lies elsewhere. Denham Grierson, in *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education of

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Australia and New Zealand, 1984), is concerned about what shapes and sustains a faith community. In his estimation it is not ideas, formal confessions, and erudite academia that form a community, but local culture, necessity, and local mythology. He suggests that in order to understand a faith community we should study how it perceives space and time, language and intimacy, consensus and circumstance.

Roy Oswald, writing for the Alban Institute, has communicated something of the same vision, in "Planning with Norms, Myths, and Meaning Statements," *Action Information* 14, no. 5 (September/October 1988). He suggests that instead of doing strategic planning and following someone else's

recommendations, a better use of time and resources is listening to people's self-perceptions and becoming acquainted with their community's expressions of faith. This approach offers greater possibilities for reaching the depths of people's lives and changing them through and through.

Loren Mead's book, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, Inc., 1994), sees "a serious storm...buffeting the churches" (ix). The age of Christendom is over. The age of the missional church is upon us. We must respond by rebuilding the church from the ground up, with a

completely different understanding of evangelism and of the role of church members in it.

Charles M. Olsen, in *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Washington: Alban Institute, Inc., 1995), has a vision of connecting administration with spirituality. His book provides both a vision and a method of transformation. He demonstrates that church boards can become the focus for spiritual growth in a congregation.

The story I began with is a story of transformation. Our student's internship experience changed the relationship between the congregation and the seminary in a positive direction. But for such transformation to happen an institution must be willing to interact with the environment around it. I noted earlier that the purpose of the church is worship and mission to the community; both require interaction with and assessment of the community.

Not everyone in the Mennonite world sees interacting with the environment in a positive light. Some parts of the church regard the environment, or the culture, as something to avoid. Too much association with the culture will contaminate the church and make it unfit for the kingdom.

The Mennonite church is transforming. More and more it is taking culture seriously in order to do mission. This is not easy. It is not easy because it means change. It means changing who we are and what we are. Both are scary.

In many places and for many people the Mennonite church has already changed. Many Mennonite young people have gone on to higher education, to professions, and to an awareness of the world unknown to their forebears. Gone are the days of the lot, the farm, eighth-grade education, and family solidarity.

Yes, we must be transformed. We must change. We must find a way both to keep our distinctives and to be contemporary. As the resources described above indicate, Mennonite churches are not alone in needing to undergo transformation. We can draw on the insights of others—including these authors—as we reflect on our experience with these dynamics.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Used by permission.