Spring 2013, Vol. 14, No. 1

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Upside-down church

Editorial

Irma Fast Dueck

"Christians aren't born—they're made," my colleague explains to a group of Iranian women, Muslim students in a course on Christianity that I'm teaching. "How does this work?" they wonder. "The church," replies my colleague. The church: that place the New Testament talks about more in metaphors than in doctrinal statements. Mustard seed, branch, harvest, light, salt, bride, family, household, living stones, building, flock. A place where the new creation begins, says the apostle Paul. The place that *is* the body of Christ. Or, as Anglican theologian Rowan Williams says of the New Testament understanding of the church, it is "a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters)."[1] For most of the history of Christianity it has been impossible to conceive of being Christian apart from participation in the body of Christ, the church.

Yet today many see the church as superfluous to the Christian faith and life. Some have argued that the current crop of baby boomers may be the last generation to accept the church in its present form. Growing numbers of young people find little in the church that speaks to them, and they either leave it or have never connected with it in the first place. Sadly, they are disillusioned not necessarily with the Christian message but rather with the institutional structures in which the message has been embodied.

And it is not just young people. A new category is emerging that might be called "post-Christian" or perhaps "post-church" or even "Christian alumni." These people have grown weary of institutional Christian life, and after contributing much to the church, have ended up leaving it. Writers including Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Dorothy Bass have been arguing that our thinking and practices of church need to change, given our current cultural context. Are they right? Must everything change?

Donald Kraybill's classic book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, described an Anabaptist-Mennonite vision of the church as a countercultural witness to the reign of God. This issue of *Vision* will examine what it means to be an "upside-down church" in our context. Four writers have been asked to reflect on classic Anabaptist ecclesiological themes, turning those themes upside down in light of current realities: Gerald Mast focuses on the relation of salvation and the church, Gerald Gerbrandt revisits the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers, Lori Unger writes about the hermeneutical community, and I have written on the relationship of baptism to church membership.

The rest of the essays focus various aspects of church life and practices. David Boshart appeals to contextual theology in order to understand the challenges and opportunities rural congregations face. Isaac Villegas describes what it means to be the church by reflecting on the corporate prayer life of his congregation. The relationship of Anabaptist ecclesiology to leadership and ministry is explored through an ordination sermon preached by Dan Epp-Tiessen and in an essay by Kevin Derksen written as he prepared for his own recent ordination. Joanna Shenk gives a passionate plea for a more inclusive understanding of church that expands beyond the traditional paradigms and models of congregational life practiced by contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites.

This issue begins and ends with sermons. The opening sermon is written by Stuart Blythe, a Scottish Baptist drawn to Anabaptism because of its commitment to peace, rooted in Christ and the church as the body of Christ. The closing sermon, by Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, is a pastoral reminder of how the ordinary struggles of church life are places of compassion, healing, and hope.

Finally, the issue is seasoned with the prayers and poetry of pastor and theologian Carol Penner, who reminds us that the church is always more than what we see or comprehend. The church is a place occupied by Christ, a landscape that we are invited to enter and inhabit.

About the editor

Irma Fast Dueck is associate professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She worships with the saints at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.

The whole score

Carol Penner

God breathes and the world answers
in a symphony of faithfulness.
Songs of services in chapels, halls, and tabernacles,
arias of councils and conferences and conventions,
oratorios of missions and campaigns and committees.
The devoted bursting forth in a hundred million hymns,
harmonious, dissonant, raucous, and serene.
The voice of the church exhaling its devotion,
praising Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Friend.
Angel voices and the saintly crowd of witnesses
hum along as God's kingdom call echoes in the world.
For so long we've tuned into one part, ours,
examining it, analyzing it to the nth degree,
arguing over our notes, perfecting them, enjoying them.
We know our part by heart,
we sing it lustily.
Then God turns the page and we glimpse the whole score,
infinitely intricate,
more voices than you can shake a stick at,
unclouded, unconcealed, unconstrained.
God the great scorekeeper winks
as we suddenly hear the age-old chorus of the church,
the melody of grace in stereophonic surround-sound.
It's there for those who have ears to hear.

About the author

Carol Penner is pastor of The First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ontario. Her prayers and worship resources can be found on her blog, www.leadinginworship.com.

Going back to church

A sermon on Matthew 16:13–27

Stuart Blythe

Springburn Baptist Church was the first church in which I served as a minister. It is a small urban church in the north of Glasgow, Scotland. I was fresh out of college. Sunday by Sunday I was glad when people actually turned up. And the fear that people might not turn up did not go away when I moved to be a minister in a large suburban congregation. Others had built up the congregation, and I was worried that I might break it!

You can put my fears down to personal anxiety, narcissistic pride, or lack of faith. On the other hand, my fears had a wider social context. This context is the post-Christendom situation in which we in the Global North now live. Whether established politically, ideologically, or culturally, the old alliance between Christianity and national identity is over. We experience this changed reality in declining attendance at church, in the church's decreasing cultural influence, and in low morale. It was a Christendom idea to say, "Build it and they will come"—provided you have enough parking and a good youth program. For many, however, the post-Christendom reality is: they are not coming.

It was a Christendom idea to say, "Build it and they will come"—provided you have enough parking and a good youth program. For many, however, the post-Christendom reality is: they are not coming.

Churches respond to this situation in various ways. In the United Kingdom some live in denial, carrying on as before, hoping that the "All Welcome" sign on the notice board will finally draw someone in. Others respond by raging against postmodernism, consumerism, pluralism, individualism, and any other "isms" they perceive as a threat to the once-established social order. Still others respond with missional energy.

Missional energy takes various forms. It shows itself in programs for "reaching the unchurched" or for "reaching our commu-

nity." Such programs are often accompanied by set materials and regional advertising campaigns, and are supported by area coordinators. In turn, other initiatives are happening, in "emerging church," "messy church," "missional church," and "café church" expressions. In practice, what many of these groups mean by the word *church* is worship services, and what they are doing is alternative church services. These services often coexist next to more traditional ones and within the same church structures.

In a few cases, however, a group's missional energy has caused them to completely restructure their way of being church. The argument they give for this sort of reformation is that the way we have traditionally done church has shaped our mission, but in the future mission should shape the way we do church. Put in theological language: they argue that instead of our ecclesiology shaping our missiology, our missiology needs to shape our ecclesiology.

People in local congregations may find it confusing and anxiety provoking to try to make sense of this reality and these missional options. Like young children trying to fly a kite without basic know-how and in the absence of wind, we may find ourselves expending a great deal of energy but ending up with disappointment. What to do? What to do? I suggest we try going back to church.

Matthew 16:13–27 is a passage we associate with the formation of the church.

> *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound*

in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

In Jesus we find the dynamic living presence of the one who comes to us and calls us ever again to recognise him and to follow him. In Jesus Christ we have one who takes priority over both church and mission.

But if we turn to this text to get some answers about mission—or indeed, church—we first of all find ourselves interrogated. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks. If this is a passage about church, Jesus first of all makes it a passage about himself. In questioning, he elicits and receives from Peter the confession: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." As with Peter, our confession as disciples is surely present tense. In Jesus we find not simply the source of our salvation, the centre of our doctrine, the pattern of our discipleship, and the object of our worship, but we find the dynamic living presence of the one who comes to us and calls us ever again to recognise him and to follow him. In Jesus Christ we have one who takes priority over both church and mission.

Starting with Jesus, however, this passage quickly becomes concerned with that thing we name as church. For in response to Peter's confession, Jesus replies: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Those of us in the believers church tradition see in Peter something of a prototype for our experience. Accordingly, we understand that at core the church consists of those gathered and gathering together confessing the person of Jesus Christ, a commitment normally marked by believers baptism. This association between confession and church in Matthew suggests that in the purpose and mission of God as expressed in the life of his Son, there is something primal about this thing we call church.

The church consists of those gathering together confessing the person of Jesus Christ. This association between confession and church suggests that in the purpose and mission of God as expressed in the life of his Son, there is something primal about this thing we call church.

Recently I was involved in a discussion about mission and church. My conversation partners spoke passionately and attractively about the way mission was shaping their activities. I agreed with them on so many issues. At one point, however, I interrupted them and asked, "Who are the 'we' you keep talking about?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You keep saying 'we' do this and 'we' do that, so before you do anything, there is first of all a 'we.' Do you mean by this 'we' what we call church?" My point was simply to suggest, not against the importance of mission but for the sake of our mission, that we cannot bypass the reality of what constitutes church as we seek to live as faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ. To be sure, the working of God in the world may not be exclusively dependent on the church. Yet what Jesus says indicates that this new sort of community has a particular role in the work of God's kingdom, not least as he adds the somewhat cryptic statement: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Yet from this high point in Matthew 16, things go downhill. For within verses, Peter the representative believer, the very one who is praised for confessing the identity of the revealed nature of Jesus, is resisted by Jesus for articulating views that are attributed to Satan! From high praise to low place, godly revelation to satanic articulation, from foundation rock to stumbling block: it all happens so quickly, so easily, so unexpectedly, so scandalously.

A rupture is created as Peter is unprepared to accept the Jesus-defined implications of the way of the cross for life, personal and corporate. And so Peter takes Jesus aside, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it, to get him "on message." Yet, Hauerwas suggests, we should not be too hard on Peter, because he simply stands in the long tradition of those who from the time of Eden onward have thought they knew better than God what God desires.[2]

According to Matthew 16, the church may have a primal role in the purposes of God, but it too can yield to this temptation to know best what God desires. Not every expression of church is equally valid or ethical. The new community can become a power and principality for harm. For this reason congregations stand in constant need of critique and creativity in relation to the nature of their lives gathered and scattered. The source and resource for this critique and creativity, however, is to be found not in the latest program but within our very understanding of the nature of the church and its relationship to Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Social movement theorists suggest that revitalising an organisation requires a rediscovery of the organisation's "inner voice," with an "innovative interpretation of this identity in a changed world."[3] Jesus is that inner voice of the church, which as confessing congregations we are invited to discern as we gather together with scripture and Spirit. To push the point harder—drawing on and paraphrasing the work of John Caputo in his book *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*—Jesus is the uncontainable inner truth of the Church which as he pushes to the fore should cause us "to reconfigure, reorganise, regroup, reassemble" our beliefs and practices, unless of course we are prepared to repress him in a kind of Peter moment.[4]

To suggest, therefore, that we go back to church as we face the present and future is not a call for traditionalistic denial. It is not

even a call simply for missional engagement. It is rather an invitation for those of us in the believers church tradition to draw deeply on our convictions about the nature of church, on its practices, and on the transformative presence of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, to guide us ever anew into faithfulness.

Notes

[1] Quoted from NRSV.
[2] Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 151–53.
[3] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Sydney: Strand, 2009), 82–83.
[4] John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 29.

About the author

Stuart Blythe is a Scottish Baptist minister with Anabaptist convictions who teaches at the Scottish Baptist College near Glasgow.

The church: Ark and art of salvation

Gerald J. Mast

In *Cloud Atlas*, the 2004 novel by David Mitchell, readers confront six interrelated stories, which occur across a wide range of time and space—from the mid-nineteenth-century Pacific islands to twenty-first-century England to a future post-apocalyptic Hawaii. The characters in these stories apparently share little in common—they are merely souls that "cross ages like clouds cross skies"—except for the thread of words by which one character's story is discovered by another story's character.[1] Yet this thread of words turns out to weave a profound—even if easily unacknowledged—strand of meaning and purpose and transformation into the otherwise random fabric of events by which characters' lives are begun, shaped, and ended; it forms a cloud atlas.

The church is a refuge from the disobedience of the world; it is an ark of salvation. And the church is a witness to the holiness of the world; it is an art of salvation.

About halfway through *Cloud Atlas*, I realized what was familiar about this seemingly unusual plot structure. Reading *Cloud Atlas* is like reading the Bible. An apparently random collection of stories, poems, rules, and rants is strung together by the encounter of a figure in one account with a life-transforming text that is birthed in a different time and place. The law received by Moses is retrieved from the dustbin of the temple by Josiah the king. The ballad of Miriam sung by a liberated Israel is recited as a prayer by Mary at the annunciation of the Messiah. The sweet-as-honey scroll eaten by the prophet Ezekiel is offered to the seer of John's apocalypse by the angel standing on the sea and on the land.

The stories in *Cloud Atlas* and the Bible make it clear that our lives are bound together with those of human beings and the creation from every time and place, that the convictions and choices of our daily lives have eternal significance, even—or

perhaps especially—if we are not kings and princes. As Adam Ewing, one of the narrators in *Cloud Atlas*, puts it: "What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts and virtuous acts." But Ewing recognizes that outcomes are results of a complicated relationship between what people believe about the nature of the universe and the actual events that unfold in that universe: "If we believe that humanity may transcend tooth and claw, . . . such a world will come to pass," even though such a world "is the hardest of worlds to make real" and "torturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president's pen or a vainglorious general's sword." Against those who insist that the life choices of one human being amount to nothing more than "one drop in a limitless ocean," Ewing asks, "yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?"[2]

It is this long and large view—the view from eternity—by which it makes sense to claim that the church of Jesus Christ is intrinsic to my salvation and yours, to the salvation of the world. Sacred texts written centuries ago become songs and stories that define us, that connect our lives to the words and deeds of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Rahab—the biblical cloud of witnesses to the God of Israel who creates and redeems. Moreover, in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we come to realize that our own faithful words and deeds—when done in weakness and humility together with our brothers and sisters in Christ—are taken up in God's accomplished but not-yet-fully-realized mission to redeem and reconcile the broken creation.

The church is not a perfect community, but it is a holy community, the place where—to paraphrase Karl Barth—God has spoken and people have heard.[3] More precisely, the church is the political and social body of those who have heard this message of love's triumph proclaimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who have begun to order their lives according to that cross-shaped message. This body transcends time and space; it is a communion of saints that spans the medieval and the modern, a global body of believers that reaches from Rome to Nome. Christians confess—by faith—that it is through this body that God's peaceable reign and the world's salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ is being made visible and available to all.

This salvation is being realized in at least two ways that are all too frequently set against each other. First, the church is a refuge from the disobedience of the world: it is a place where sinners are saved and believers are discipled into the ways of Jesus Christ; it is an ark of salvation. Second, the church is a witness to the holiness of the world: it is a place in which God's salvation of the entire cosmos is exhibited and celebrated; it is an art of salvation.

The church as ark

An ancient metaphor for the church, prized by Anabaptists, has been that of the ark. The church is a place of safety and security amid the floods of this world that threaten to overwhelm us. Here we find support in our life's struggles, wisdom for discernment, and friends to share the journey.

More importantly, where the church is gathered, the word of God is proclaimed and obeyed. New believers are baptized, disciples share the Lord's Table together, brothers and sisters in Christ serve one another and their neighbors with the gifts they have received. In the church, people are indeed saved from the sin and death of the world. Through baptism, Pilgram Marpeck writes, a believer "enters into the body of Christ, that is, the church of Christ, yes into Christ Himself, as the true ark wherein, through the word of obedience, one can be preserved from the flood."[4]

An ancient metaphor for the church has been that of the ark. The church is a place of safety and security amid the floods of this world that threaten to overwhelm us. Here we find support in our life's struggles.

As such an ark of safety, the church issues an invitation to the world and provides a fellowship of faith. For example, by its existence the church invites conversion from the bondage of sin and defeat and into a life of holiness and hope. Sometimes this takes place through organized mission activity by which the church reaches out to people in apparent distress: prison ministries, rescue missions, food banks, homeless shelters, peacemaking teams, disaster relief, and evangelism.

Just as frequently, this invitation is offered by virtue of the simple fact that the church exists. This reality is illustrated by something that happened recently during "pie night," an event my congregation holds for local college students during exam week.

While I was serving pie, I noticed that a distressed woman who was obviously not a college student had entered our fellowship hall. She told me that she had left her home after a quarrel with her husband. While walking past our meetinghouse she saw the lights on and decided to come in. A social worker put down her serving spoon in order to listen to the woman's story and to offer guidance as well as resources for support. The woman returned home with new wisdom and renewed hope. This is a routine example of the way salvation unfolds in typically unremarked yet eternally significant ways in the life of the church.

In its existence, the church reflects the sorrow and hope of the world. Like the world, it is broken and beautiful. Put another way, the church is a community of sinners who have been saved by grace through faith. As such, the church struggles through the power of the Holy Spirit to be transformed into a community of service whose members are freed from the pathologies of selfish individualism so that they are able in humility to offer one another and the world the grace that they have received.[5]

Church conflicts, committee meetings, potlucks, Bible studies, and choir rehearsals have eternal significance, because in every one of these settings people are choosing not only between the vicious and virtuous but also between the conventional and the Christ-like.

Through the church's practices, members develop new habits and responses to the challenges of their occupations and stations, habits that reflect the way of Jesus Christ and God's plan for the world. For example, through a process of conflict resolution that is respectful of both offender and offended, and that seeks restoration rather than retribution, the church offers a model of restorative justice for addressing crime and punishment. In a discernment process that attends in an orderly way to the perspectives of each member, the church models decision making that radicalizes democracy and lifts up the last and the least. By repeatedly distributing food and drink in communion services and potluck dinners, the church begins a process of resource redistribution that shows the way to economic justice in the whole society.[6] Through communal Bible study that delights in the surplus of revelation that arises from a diversity of interpretations, the church cultivates a radically cross-cultural and

interreligious hospitality. By singing together, the church blends human voices in artful ways that herald the doxological protest by which the whole world will one day bow at the name of Jesus Christ.[7]

If this description is true, church conflicts, committee meetings, potlucks, Bible studies, and choir rehearsals have eternal significance, because in every one of these settings people are choosing not only between the vicious and virtuous but also between the conventional and the Christ-like. These Christ-defined and cross-shaped processes speak to God's intention for the whole world and signal that the church is more than an ark. It is also an art that exhibits what God is doing both in and beyond the church: "the believing community is the new world on the way."[8]

The church as art

As an artful community, the church can be understood to be painting a picture or performing a drama of God's salvation that is seen and witnessed beyond its membership. By its ongoing improvisation on the practices identified with God's people in the scriptures, the church shows the world the justice that God intends for the world. It demonstrates the peace that Jesus gives, peace that issues from the cross and not the sword.

At the same time, through the art of culturally adaptive witness, the church both exhibits and confirms the salvation that God has accomplished and that is being realized throughout the cosmos, not just in the present institution of the church. The church's vivid, even if flawed, demonstration of the defenseless love and boundless grace of Jesus Christ in its own life makes visible those worldly and cosmic events in which God's great salvation appears and in which the world's disobedience is shown to be futile and therefore under judgment. In this way, the church is a community of sight: with the eyes of faith, it can spot and name and bless every event in the life of the world that glorifies the God of Jesus Christ, even when that event is not directly related to an official denomination or orthodox conviction.[9]

A recent issue of *The New Yorker* carries an article entitled "Atonement." It is the story of an American Iraq War veteran troubled by his involvement in killing civilians while his marine

unit was under fire during the early days of the American invasion of Iraq. On April 8, 2003, Lu Lobello's unit fired on a car driving toward their unit, killing James Kachadoorian and his two sons, Nicolas and Edmund, and severely injuring Kachadoorian's daughter, Nora.

After he returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the marines, Lobello was haunted by the events of that day. He recalled a blood-soaked infant being held by its mother; she was asking, "Why did you shoot us?" He remembered the dead lying beside the road. He wondered what had happened to the people in the car who had survived, and he felt an urge to find them and talk to them.

Salvation takes place in the world of terror and beauty outside the church. At the same time, the church and the church's book are essential to the salvation that God is bringing about.

Through Facebook, Lobello discovered that the survivors of the attack had moved to California and that Nora Kachadoorian, the young woman injured by shrapnel, had survived. He made a video in which he expressed his concern and his interest in what had happened to the rest of her family. He also said that he wished to speak with her: "I can't go on not trying to say hello to you." He sent her the video through Facebook.

Nora's family turned out to be Armenian Christians who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Her father, James—killed during the marine attack—was a conscientious objector who had refused to fight when drafted into Sadaam Hussein's army and who had been to prison twice as a result. Nora responded to Lobello's video with a message of forgiveness and a Bible passage that offered assurance that they would see her father and brothers again one day. The message stated: "Me & my mother we both forgive you, we know we will see them in the kingdom of Jesus."

With the help of a journalist, Lubello set up a meeting with the Kachadoorian family. He spoke with them about his distress over what had happened and listened to their stories of grief and agony. Margaret Kachadoorian—the mother—told him again that they forgave him, citing a passage from 2 Corinthians and asking Lubello whether he read the Bible. Lubello, a lapsed Mormon, said that he used to read the Bible and that perhaps he should

start again. Lubello and the Kachadoorians embraced one another, and in the months since the meeting they have been in contact with one another. Nora told him that she now thinks of him as her third brother.[10]

This startling story of forgiveness and reconciliation makes it clear that salvation takes place in the world of terror and beauty outside the church, that "the whole world is the House of God," as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it.[11] At the same time, this story exemplifies how the church and the church's book are essential to the salvation that God is bringing about. Texts inscribed with the holiness of God centuries ago reveal the holiness of the creation today, call sinners everywhere to seek restoration, urge victims of all times to offer forgiveness, invite enemies in every conflict to join in God's great reconciliation project. The church indeed is a work of art that is enshrined in the beauty of the earth, in the glory of the heavens, and in the goodness of humanity.

Conclusion

This article has focused on routine and concrete ways that the church realizes our salvation and the world's. It may appear that I have an overly reductionist understanding of God's great salvation. It would be a mistake to read my argument this way. Rather, I am suggesting that God uses modest means to accomplish eternal ends, a mustard seed to grow a large and irrepressible plant, the little flock to herald the multitude from every tribe and nation. We are assured that the drops of faith that we offer to the world in the name of Jesus Christ and through the life of the church will become, one day, the mighty ocean by which "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; NRSV). Thanks be to God.

Notes

[1] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (New York: Random House, 2004), 308.
[2] Ibid, 507–9.
[3] Karl Barth, *God in Action* (Manhasset, NY: Round Table Press, 1963), 22–33.
[4] Pilgram Marpeck, "The Admonition of 1542," in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, trans. and ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1978), 201.
[5] Karl Barth, *God in Action*, 32–33.
[6] The examples of conflict resolution, group discernment, and communion are drawn from John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community*

before the Watching World (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 1–27; 61–70.
[7] The examples of Bible study and singing are drawn from Gerald J. Mast, *Go to Church, Change the World: Christian Community as Calling* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), 41–48, 121–26.
[8] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 50. See also Barth's statement that the world is "waiting—not for the Church but to become the Church itself" (Karl Barth, *God in Action*, 24).
[9] I am following John Howard Yoder's reading of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV.2 as found in Yoder's essay "The Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People" (Yoder, *For the Nations*, 24–27).
[10] Dexter Filkins, "Atonement," *The New Yorker*, October 29 and November 5, 2012, 92–103.
[11] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 4.

About the author

Gerald Mast is professor of communication at Bluffton (OH) University. His most recent book, *Go to Church, Change the World: Christian Community as Calling* (Herald Press, 2012), displays how the practices of the church prepare believers for the work of the world. He is a member of First Mennonite Church, Bluffton.

Crazy days
The priesthood of all believers revisited

Gerald Gerbrandt

A recent issue of my congregation's newsletter included an article entitled "Crazy Days." In it the writer observes that people are leaving the church in droves, that the church's work is in decline, that nothing is predictable. This is a common view voiced by many people in positions of church leadership.

Rummage sale or resurgence?

The newsletter article quotes Phyllis Tickle, who in her book *The Great Emergence* suggests that the church is in the midst of a massive rummage sale, an occurrence that happens roughly every 500 years.[1] This is a time of upheaval and overhaul: everything is under review, with the possibility of being rethought, radically reoriented, or even jettisoned. The previous great rummage sale was the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. During the 500 years leading up to such a shakeup, the institutional church becomes so calcified, so set in its ways, that only a giant rummage sale can revitalize it.

Few of us are unaware of the tremors shaking the foundations of the church, and the anxiety they are producing for many. How does our theology of the priesthood of all believers look in light of them?

In the midst of the sale, everything is in a state of upheaval and confusion, but Tickle assures us that once we have passed through the turmoil, the result is a revitalized and renewed older or former church, and a dynamic new form of Christianity. Brian McLaren has a similar sense of our times. In books such as *A New Kind of Christian* and *A New Kind of Christianity*, he attempts to paint a picture of that new form of Christianity.[2]

Interestingly, these assessments are happening at the same time that Harvey Cox is writing about an "unanticipated resurgence of religion." He suggests "Christianity is growing faster than ever, but

mainly outside the West and in movements that accent spiritual experience, discipleship, and hope; pay scant attention to creeds; and flourish without hierarchies." We are entering a new era of faith and the spirit.[3] This growth, Cox says, is entirely unexpected; in *The Secular City*, published in 1965, he had instead projected the decline of religion.[4]

Are these two sets of observations about what is happening in the church today in tension with each other? Perhaps—and perhaps not. More importantly, how do we respond to these developments, and do some of our traditional theological positions look different in light of them?

Reformation understandings of the priesthood of all believers

We may not accept all aspects of Tickle's analysis. I certainly don't. Yet even if we find aspects of her analysis unconvincing, the image of upheaval is stimulating. Few of us are unaware of the tremors shaking the foundations of the church, and the anxiety they are producing for many. The previous such rummage sale was the soil out of which one of the great slogans of the Christian church grew: the priesthood of all believers.

Slogans are not a great way of doing theology, but in an age of sound bites and thirty-minute television mysteries, perhaps they can be a helpful way of sparking conversations. However they understand (or misunderstand) the phrase, most Mennonites would consider the priesthood of all believers an Anabaptist conviction, perhaps even an Anabaptist distinctive.

Unmediated access to God. The four volumes of the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* published in 1959 did not include an article on the priesthood of all believers, but the supplement (volume 5 of the encyclopedia, published in 1990) includes this brief note (dated 1959) by H. S. Bender: "The Priesthood of All Believers, a major point in Protestant doctrine, was strongly held by the Anabaptists and is a vital idea in Mennonitism. It means not only that no priest is necessary as a mediator between the human individual and God, so that every man has free access to God by repentance and faith in Christ, but also that all believers have a priestly office to perform for each other in that in Christ each can be a channel of God's grace to his fellow and indeed has a responsibility to be such."[5]

Here is reflected in a nutshell a central concern of the Protestant Reformation, though the phrase itself came much later. In the world of early sixteenth-century Europe, the Roman Catholic Church through its theology of sacraments and priesthood claimed to have a monopoly on access to God and salvation. This monopoly the Reformation shattered. No priest or intermediary is needed between God and humans, the reformers proclaimed. Whereas in Old Testament times priests officiated at sacrifices and entered the holy of holies on behalf of the people, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the need for such sacrifices has been eliminated. Each human being has the possibility of direct access to God for his or her own salvation.

Through baptism all become priests: each baptized person has the right to interpret scripture, to forgive sins, and to exercise daily discipline. There are not two classes of people, religious and lay.

No distinction in spiritual status. A way of expressing this conviction was to say that through baptism all become priests: each baptized person has the right to interpret scripture, to forgive sins, and to exercise daily discipline. As stated most clearly in 1 Peter 2:9 (and supported in other New Testament texts including 1 Peter 2:5; and Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." The bold actions of the Swiss Brethren when they baptized each other in Zollikon in 1525 are unthinkable without this conviction. Anabaptists were known for the fact that all members of the movement interpreted and taught scripture.

A practical corollary of the conviction that all become priests through baptism was the removal of any distinction in spiritual status between holy orders and laity. Luther may not have used the phrase *the priesthood of all believers*, but he did preach this aspect of its meaning: there are not two classes of people, the spiritual or religious and the temporal or lay.

This elimination of this distinction in spiritual status did not mean—for Luther, or the early Anabaptists—that there should be no order in the church, or that all believers are called to do everything. The church still needs leaders and pastors; individuals are still called to particular offices in the church, as well as more generally. In fact, the calling to vocation was an important ele-

ment in Luther's theology. But differences in calling do not create classes of spirituality.

At times this emphasis on the removal of distinctions in spiritual status has led to misunderstandings, which may be a risk of doing theology by slogan. By the 1980s Mennonite theologian Marlin Miller had become uncomfortable with some connotations this phrase had come to have, especially the idea that since all are called to be priests, the role of the pastor is to be played down, and the pastor is to be seen as just one of the congregation.[6] Miller contributed a longer article to volume 5 of *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* on the priesthood of all believers, which indirectly corrected this misunderstanding while at the same time signalling its significance.[7]

All are called to mission. On a more positive note, the phrase also points to the role all Christians have in the mission of the church. Interestingly, perhaps in an effort to include the Mennonite emphasis on mutual support, Bender's brief definition identifies only the service members of the community provide for each other. More commonly, the role each Christian has in witnessing to the gospel beyond the community is noted. As the author of 1 Peter puts it, you have been chosen as a royal priesthood "*in order that* you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9; NRSV). We understand the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20 to apply to all Christians. Just as Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6), to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6), so all members of the church are called to be salt and light, to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The priesthood of all believers today

The question now is whether the phrase or slogan *the priesthood of all believers* has potential today, in the midst of the rummage sale or resurgence the church is experiencing, and if so, what might its power be? On a simple level the basic themes granted the phrase can still be affirmed today, even if further nuancing in light of current trends may be helpful.

Priesthood *of all believers*. Consider the emphasis on all being priests, with no spiritual distinction between clergy and laity. As

Miller wrote, Mennonites have usually agreed with this understanding of the priesthood of all believers—in theory, if not always in practice. We have usually agreed in theory, even if not always in practice, that "that all believers are called to participate in the life and witness of the church, to share in mutual discipline and forgiveness, and to test the interpretation of Scripture and doctrine."

As pastors receive more formal training and become more professional, this gap between theory and practice may be increasing. In the 1970s there was a strong sentiment at least in some Mennonite circles against what might be called a high view of the pastor. This view Marlin Miller (then president of a Mennonite seminary) and our conference ministry offices appropriately and helpfully challenged. That era seems to have passed. Now the original import of the slogan may be needed again. All Christians have a calling (Luther), whether to church ministry or to professions such as law and teaching, or as labourers or businesspeople. Each calling is a faithful response to God's nudging, with no special spiritual status belonging to any particular call.

We may need to recover the original import of the priesthood of all believers slogan: All Christians have a calling. Each calling is a faithful response to God's nudging, with no special status belonging to any particular call.

Putting this into practice may require greater clarification of what some of these callings entail. If all are priests, with the right to discipline and interpret scripture and teach, then what is the particular role of the pastor or the theologian in the community? The phrase would imply that neither office has greater spiritual status than, say, that of a schoolteacher or dentist or entrepreneur, and it would also imply that neither office is there to provide all the answers for what it means to be faithful. Might we find a more helpful way of describing these offices or roles that fully recognizes their significance, that gives them an integral role in discernment conversations inside the church, while retaining the conviction that all are called as priests, and all have a role to play in interpreting scripture and testing doctrine?

***Priesthood of all* believers.** In the past, most discussion of the phrase *priesthood of all believers* has focused on the connotations of *priesthood*: all have direct access to God, there is no difference in

spiritual status between those called to work in the church and those called to work in society; all have rights and responsibilities in the mission of the church. But what about the second noun of the phrase, *believers*? The tendency has been to take that word for granted, as simply referring to all baptized members of our congregations.

Perhaps I am quibbling here, but let me draw attention to one drawback of the slogan's reliance on the term *believers*. For Anabaptists, discipleship and ethics have been an essential component of response to Christ's invitation. I cringe when I hear the term *believer* used as a synonym for *Christian*. I do not mean to imply that belief or theology is unimportant. But Mennonites have long held that words without deeds are hollow. This conviction is reflected in the classic statement from Menno Simons, which affirms that true evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping; it clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowful, shelters the destitute. Bender's description of the priesthood of all believers alludes to this active ministry, but only in the context of life within the community. More significantly, in Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats, the difference between the two groups is not in what they believed but in what they did for the hungry and the naked (Matt. 25:31–46). Christianity is not primarily intellectual assent to a set of beliefs. If we equate being Christian with believing certain things, in using the slogan *the priesthood of all believers* we risk supporting an unfortunate misrepresentation of the Christian faith.

Including believers disaffected with the institutional church. On a more profound or at least more foundational level, in this time of upheaval in the church, is the only option a simple equating of believers with members of the institutional church? Or to put it more provocatively, is this a twenty-first-century parallel to the medieval Catholic church's monopoly on access to God and salvation? Mennonites have a high view of church, but when we say that, are we limiting the term *church* to those who are members of our congregations? Remember: even as the institutional church appears to be in decline, Harvey Cox argues that religion is experiencing a resurgence!

This is an especially difficult question for those of us in the Anabaptist tradition, in which the concept of church, with the

connotations of mutual support and discipline, has been a core conviction. Christianity is not individualistic but a corporate endeavor, we believe. In his book on Anabaptist theology, Robert Friedman writes, "Essential for this type of church are two traits: (1) that no spiritual distinctions were made between lay members and preachers, for all were of 'one priestly nation,' (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and (2) that no distinctions were made between secular and sacred work, the plowing of the fields or assembling for worship, for all areas of life were in principle sanctified and transfigured within this church."[8] Here we see a traditional Mennonite emphasis on church, integrally connected to the main themes of the phrase *priesthood of all believers*.

But what does that mean for today, when many youth—and now young adults or even middle-aged people—have chosen not to be baptized, or have been baptized but somehow drifted away from a congregation. Here we see some aspects of the current rummage sale we are in the midst of. On the one hand, droves are leaving the institutional church, with the church experiencing traumatic change or at least anticipating such change. When speaking of the resurgence in religion, Cox adds that this revival is one that tends not to follow creeds or accept hierarchies. Or, one might add, show up for baptism or for worship on Sunday morning.

We can, of course, dismiss people who are uninterested in its institutional expressions as simply not part of the church, or as having left the church, and then—as in the past—we can continue our discussion of what the priesthood of all believers means for those of us within the church's structures. But often these people continue to believe, and they not only believe but attempt to live ethical lives faithful to their belief. Despite my significant discomfort with the term *believers* in the slogan *priesthood of all believers*, perhaps here it challenges the way we Mennonites have tended to think and function. Neither the phrase nor the teaching of Christ, for that matter, puts a lot of weight on what we call church membership. The notion of the priesthood of all believers does emphasize mutual support, and communal hermeneutics, but not church membership. Might the slogan at this point push us to find a new way of including these "believers" in the community that has been named a "royal priesthood?"

I am not about to propose a radically different understanding of church, but I also struggle with how to tie together the dynamics the Christian movement is experiencing today with a New Testament understanding of church. The church today is changing. Along with Phyllis Tickle I trust this will lead to a revitalized traditional church. But it may also result in a new form of Christianity which we may not recognize if we only look at it through old glasses. Perhaps our responsibility is to remain in dialogue with believers outside the traditional church, always holding before them the corporate nature of the body of Christ and the characteristics of mutual accountability and discipline which we hold dear, without attempting to force them into the model we have developed.

Notes

[1] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 16–17.
[2] Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 2001; and *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).
[3] Harvey Cox, *The Future of* Faith (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 1, 8.
[4] Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965).
[5] H. S. Bender, "Priesthood of All Believers," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 1116; available online at http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P752ME.html.
[6] From personal conversation with Marlin Miller.
[7] Marlin Miller, "Priesthood of All Believers," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 721–22; available online at http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/P752ME.html.
[8] Robert Friedman, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History 15 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 120–21.

About the author

Gerald Gerbrandt is president emeritus and professor of Bible at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB). He is a member of Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg.

Beyond black and white—and red all over
Finding footholds for ethical biblical interpretation

Lori Unger

Something's wrong with the Bible.
It keeps flying through the air,
aimed at my head.
This Bible,
the Good Book,
the Holy Word of God,
keeps piercing me,
bludgeoning those around me,
cutting us off at the knees.
And who are those others,
standing piously by,
nodding,
with sad, satisfied smiles,
as another text hits its mark?
How can I open this weapon of a book
and seek guidance?
How can I pattern my life
after something so death dealing?
If only that book had a mind of its own,
and I could forget
that behind every hurtling text
is an arm.

What's black and white and red all over? For the purposes of this article, the answer to the riddle is, of course, scripture: the black and white of sacred text saturated with the blood that has been shed over differences of scriptural interpretation and practice.[1]

After our pastor had told us this riddle in a recent sermon, she pointed out that scripture has always produced mighty emotional responses among those most dedicated to it, and the result is not always beautiful.

Remember the people of Israel after their many years in exile? They were initially dismayed when they heard once again the reading of their holy scriptures. As they zealously began to pattern their lives according to the words they had received, the first casualties were their foreign wives, whom they sent away in droves (Ezra 10:3). Families torn apart, mothers separated from their children—who among them could affirm with Psalm 19 that God's word is sweeter than honey and more precious than gold?

No, scripture has not always brought out the best in people. And perhaps among those most devoted to it, it has brought out the worst. Who will be next to be driven to the edge of a cliff in the name of right belief and practice by those who consider themselves the most faithful?

When the people who were gathered in the synagogue at Nazareth heard Jesus's take on Isaiah, they were so angry that they drove him to the edge of a cliff, intending to throw him over! He narrowly escaped, passing mysteriously through the crowds, unseen (Luke 4:14–21).

No, scripture has not always brought out the best in people. And perhaps among those most devoted to it, it has brought out the worst. This pattern of intense emotional response to scripture seems consistent throughout history, and casualties have continued to mount over the centuries. Indeed, Anabaptists in the sixteenth century were well acquainted with the cliff of scriptural interpretation, and the blood of their martyrdom still stains the book's pages.

It seems that patterns of passionate—and, too often, bloody—engagement with our beloved scriptures continue. Women have known something about this harm in their marginalization, as have those whose slavery was justified by appeal to scripture scarcely 150 years ago. Most recently, the angry tone emerging from many Bible-believing communities toward people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender comes to mind; it bears no resemblance to the love to which Jesus has called his followers. Yet these attitudes are vigourously defended, often with ugly words and hateful speech. Hot-button topics, certain to get our blood boiling. Who will be next, I wonder, to be driven to the edge of a cliff in the name of right belief and practice by those who consider themselves the most faithful?

A disorienting journey

The church faces other hurdles with regard to the place of scripture in our life of faith. Relativism and postmodernism have challenged the simple reading of the text and undermined the authority with which the Bible speaks to us. Modern biblical scholarship, for its part, has insisted on a critical distance between the text and its interpreter, negating attempts to gain personal assurance or guidance from the text. Standing in tension with these trends, and causing a mental short-circuit of sorts, is the powerful and recently inherited fundamentalist mindset that informs us that (1) all scripture agrees with itself; (2) scripture is inerrant and thus must never be questioned; (3) scripture means what it means: its meaning is derived directly from God and it needs no interpretation; and (4) what we understand it to mean is what it has always meant. It would be difficult to argue that any of these perspectives resembles something that might have been inherited from the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.

Questions about the nature of biblical authority are particularly poignant for Mennonites, who have widely considered ourselves people of the book. The Bible has been our stronghold, the firm ground that enables us to find our place in the world, our foundation on which everything else stands, the rock on which the whole of our life depends. Steady and reliable, the text has informed our choices and guided our living, becoming the standard by which we judge ourselves and others, the measure of our integrity and the source of our hope. The Bible has been our window into God's purposes, our access to the promise of Christ, and God's primary method of communicating God's purposes with us.

We have arrived in the twenty-first century in an unsteady state, unable to escape a growing relativism, a discomfort with absolute truth claims, and an uneasy relationship with ultimate authority.

Yet Mennonite ways of reading have not remained static. In the past century, Mennonites have wandered through encounters with North American fundamentalism and modernist scholarly practices of interpreting scripture. We have arrived in the twenty-first century in an unsteady state, unable to escape a growing relativism, a discomfort with absolute truth claims, and an uneasy relationship with

ultimate authority. This journey has been disorienting at best, and we arrive at the present moment scarcely able to find continuity with those who have gone before.

Looking to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists

As we attempt to reconcile past and present ways of reading, we might learn something of value from our sixteenth-century Anabaptist forebears, gaining footholds to use in navigating our current interpretive crisis. What in Anabaptist history can offer resources as we attempt to navigate a changing landscape?

The extent to which early Anabaptists steeped themselves in scripture is remarkable, and in their citing of scripture, untrained lay members of Anabaptist communities sometimes bested the doctors of theology who interrogated them.

Characterizing early Anabaptist reading of scripture is difficult at best, given that Anabaptist communities sprang up almost simultaneously in different places, and their leaders differed in emphasis and approach. In general, however, it can be said that the Bible was of central importance to the early Anabaptists, who read scripture with eagerness and urgency, seeking direct guidance on how to sustain themselves and their communities.[2]

Early Anabaptists embraced a "plain" reading of scripture, meaning that they wished to allow scripture to speak for itself, unclouded by tradition or scholarly obfuscations. In the words of Felix Mantz, "The eternally true word of God will sing in the heart of each one that this is the truth. If only the Word be allowed to speak for itself, freely and simply, no one will be able to withstand it."[3] The extent to which early Anabaptists steeped themselves in scripture is remarkable, and in their citing of scripture, untrained lay members of Anabaptist communities sometimes bested the doctors of theology who interrogated them.[4]

This rigourous learning of scripture served a pragmatic purpose for the early Anabaptists. Anabaptists asked, "How then shall we *live*?"—a question rather different from that of their Lutheran and Reformed colleagues, who asked, "What shall we *believe*?" The Bible, then, became a resource for discipleship, worship, and mission, and early Anabaptists worked hard to ensure that their lives, including their lives in sacred community with one another,

conformed to the testimony of scripture. Immersing themselves in scripture, and uncritically merging their sixteenth-century horizon with that of the first-century church, they felt enabled to live and worship in accordance with the will of God, even in the face of martyrdom and persecution.[5]

A communal hermeneutic

The emphasis on a "plain" reading of scripture did not, however, mean that the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century all agreed on how to read the text, or even about what it meant, though their disagreement did nothing to undermine their perceptions of the authority or adequacy of the text itself.[6] Indeed, central to Anabaptist interpretive practice was community discernment, in which the plain sense of scripture is revealed among the gathering of believers.[7] In this way, early Anabaptists had no illusion that scripture would explain itself, but rather they practiced a communal hermeneutic, in which the meaning and significance of scripture is most rightly understood in the gathering of the faithful, among whom the Spirit moves.

Not only were these early Anabaptists able to acknowledge differences in interpretation, they did so without experiencing a crisis of authority with respect to the Bible.

This communal hermeneutic offers the first foothold for our present-day dilemma. Not only were these early Anabaptists able to acknowledge differences in interpretation, they did so without experiencing a crisis of authority with respect to the Bible. Implied, or at least possible, in this collective interpretive practice is that right understanding and practice may not remain static from one interpretive community to another as the Spirit moves through time and place, enlivening communities of faith with particular interpretive insight.

Granted, a sixteenth-century mindset did not allow for the profound distrust of authority we experience in today's postmodern environment, nor were believers then as cognizant of the role of an interpreter in the hermeneutical process as we are today. As historically separate as we are from these first Anabaptists, and as different as our questions are, this hermeneutical move becomes a simple foothold, a place to begin as we navigate through our present-day interpretive climate.

Love as a framework for our reading

Now, the communal hermeneutic did not always function to imbue Anabaptist communities with loving kindness. Walter Klaassen details an extended exchange between Pilgram Marpeck and the early Swiss Mennonites, who tended toward legalism in their application of biblical principles, in their zeal to ferret out those whose Christianity was counterfeit. Concerned with their "legalistic biblicism and their alacrity and sharpness of judgment," Marpeck chided the Swiss for their devotion to the letter as opposed to the Spirit, and he argued that their tendency to legislate and judge "violates the basic freedom of the Christian in Christ."[8] Speaking in strong language, he condemned them as hypocrites who "conceal their lack of spiritual life under human ordinances and commandments"; he declared that whoever legislates, commands, or orders "usurps the office of the Holy Spirit."[9] He called the Swiss to order their discipline according to the law of love, which is the only law in the Christian life, according to the Spirit.

Where entrenched legalism leads to ethical abuses and estrangement, and relativism inevitably disintegrates into nothingness, Pilgram Marpeck offers love as a framework for our reading.

It is perhaps ironic that in condemning the Swiss Mennonites for their legalistic applications of the biblical text, Marpeck makes a judgment of his own, authorized by his larger interpretive framework that privileges the practice of love as the primary work of the Spirit. Notice both that (1) he has made an interpretive decision based on a framework of love, and that (2) in doing so he has excluded judgmentalism as a proper posture of faithful Christian communities. It could be said that, according to principles outlined by Hans Denck, Marpeck has relied on the inner word, or the testimony of the Spirit moving among the gathered people of faith, to inform his choices regarding the outer word of scripture.[10]

Here we gain our second foothold into current conversations. Where entrenched legalism leads to ethical abuses and estrangement, and relativism inevitably disintegrates into nothingness, Marpeck offers us a way forward. He demonstrates a self-consciousness about *the manner in which* he chooses to read and use the text of scripture. Nearly five centuries ago, he seems to have

had a sense of what some of us are just coming to now: that the act of interpreting, even interpreting scripture, inevitably involves choice—about what is most important, about how it will inform the landscape of our values and judgments, about how we will treat other people as a result. Marpeck also offers love as a framework for our reading, compelled by the leading of the Spirit, imploring his sixteenth-century counterparts—and all who would come after—to hold each other with compassion, even as we strive to remain faithful.

Listening to the voice of God through scripture and Spirit

We end where we began, confronted by what is black and white and red all over. Given the chaos of postmodernity, our resultant (and increasing) inability to allow authority to remain unquestioned, the glaring inconsistencies pointed out by critical engagement with the biblical text, the ethically problematic nature of some biblical injunctions, and the ways those injunctions have been used to sanction systemic oppression, we can no longer affirm with simple trust that "the Bible tells me so." We can no longer affirm that the text speaks plainly in its own voice and that we have no responsibility if it becomes a weapon in our hands.

We can no longer affirm that the text speaks plainly in its own voice and that we have no responsibility if it becomes a weapon in our hands.

Yet how can we let it go, this book that is full of wisdom, that invites the people of God to a transformed life characterized by upside-down values that call into question and resist the prevailing wisdom of our day? How can we find our way back toward this book that has formed and shaped us and given us hope in Christ? Can we again be people of the book?

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Christ never called us to be people of the book. Jesus called us to be people of the Spirit. The book is not God, after all, but the witness of God's people to the presence and work of God in the world. The Bible is not and never has been a static repository of knowledge and wisdom. Rather, we are called to listen for the voice of God—yes, through scripture, and also through the Spirit, blowing among the gathered people of God. As Pilgram Marpeck admonished Anabaptists nearly 500 years ago, we, the community of faith, are

responsible to discern the word of God, using a framework of love and humility, expecting with gratitude that our communal interpretive impulses will change through time and place, as the Spirit moves.

I believe that this Spirit has been at work among Mennonite congregations as we continue to navigate the rough waters while seeking to pattern our lives after the witness of scripture. In 2006, after many years of painful process, the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches affirmed the freedom of individual churches to call women as pastors, citing the urgency of their mission and the movement of the Spirit among them. Currently, Mennonite Church Canada has embarked on a "Being a Faithful Church" initiative to discern various ethical matters, particularly anticipating and facilitating a conversation about sexuality and the church. An abundance of resources are asking the wider Mennonite community to consider its interpretive framework as they listen for the voice of God in scripture together. In these initiatives, one can hear echoes of our Anabaptist forebears, finding our way forward together with the guidance of the Spirit.

In the words of my pastor, the words of scripture mean nothing "until we get a taste for its ultimate goodness, until we are intimately familiar with its powerful provocation, until we realize that the deepest hungers within us are only satiated when we encounter the God contained within its pages. And we cannot know God intimately through scripture until Christ has found and knows us in this way, until the Spirit of the words is stronger than the words themselves," until the black and white gives way, not to the red of our mutual annihilation, but toward a mutual bond in Christ, trusting the Spirit to lead us into faithfulness.[11]

Notes

[1] Marilyn Zehr, "What Is Sweeter than Honey?," a sermon preached at Toronto United Mennonite Church, January 27, 2013; available online at http://tumc.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=422:taste-and-see-sermon-by-marilyn-zehr-february-3-2013&catid=10:sermon&Itemid=58.

[2] Willard Swartley, "The Anabaptist Use of Scripture: Contemporary Applications and Prospects," in *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present*, ed. Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker (Bridgewater, VA: Penobscot Press, 1995), 65–79.

[3] Felix Mantz, "Petition for Defense" (Zurich), quoted in Swartley, "Anabaptist Use of Scripture," 67.

[4] Swartley, "Anabaptist Use of Scripture," 67.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 70.
[8] Ibid., 94.
[9] As quoted in Walter Klaassen, "Anabaptist Hermeneutics: The Letter and the Spirit," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 40, no. 2 (1966): 94.
[10] Swartley, "Anabaptist Use of Scripture," 72.
[11] Adapted from Marilyn Zehr, "What Is Sweeter than Honey?"

About the author

Lori Unger is a doctoral student in theology and hermeneutics at Emmanuel College in the Toronto School of Theology. She is a member of Toronto United Mennonite Church.

Unbreakable love

Carol Penner

Thank you, God, for your love which does not break down;
for Jesus Christ who extended love to the lowest and the least,
who loved in the face of hatred and pain.
Thank you for Christ's love which continues to rise from the dead,
breaking out of places where we see only death and destruction.
Love's new life breaking out in a thousand thousand places,
who knows how,
a tide of love, working through all people of goodwill,
working through your church.
War can't stop you,
hate can't stop you,
illness can't stop you,
your love holding us secure, binding us together,
binding us to you.
For this we give thanks, for this we live thankfully,
prayerfully, as followers of your son Jesus Christ.
Amen.

About the author

Carol Penner is pastor of The First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ontario. Her prayers and worship resources can be found on her blog, www.leadinginworship.com.

Getting *all* wet
Baptism and church membership

Irma Fast Dueck

Pastor: You've been active in the church for years. You're a committed Christian and committed to living a Christian life. Why don't you want to be baptized?

Parishioner: I do want to be baptized. Really, I do. But I don't want to join the church, so I won't get baptized.

It's a conversation that many of us have participated in. Some, like me, have been on both sides of the exchange. As a teacher of undergraduates, I am bewildered by the many students who publicly express commitment to the Christian faith, who exhibit a deep desire to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship, and who are actively involved in Christian communities/churches, yet who choose not be baptized and join the church. While their reasons for not being baptized are as varied as the students themselves are, perhaps the most common reasons they give are ecclesiological: these young people desire baptism but do not want to become members of the church.

Reasons for not being baptized are varied, but perhaps the most common ones given are ecclesiological: these young people desire baptism but do not want to become members of the church.

Some churches have reacted to this resistance to church membership by separating baptism from joining the church, in hopes of making a decision for baptism easier for youth and young adults. But without the connection to the church, the rite's meaning diminishes: it becomes an individualized action focusing on a person's decision of faith without marking that person's corresponding entry into the community of faith, Christ's body, a people committed to following in the way of Christ. Without the link to becoming a member of the body, baptism is like getting just a little bit wet, like wading rather than going deep.

It is difficult to reconcile the separation of baptism and church membership with Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and understandings of the church. Indeed, baptism and church have belonged together in Christian tradition since long before the Anabaptist movements of the sixteenth century.

So what's the problem?

Current practices of baptism and church membership among Mennonites reflect a tension between a functional theology of church life and the more official "doctrinal" theology of the church expressed in the Mennonite confession of faith.[1] A growing gap between the number of church members on the rolls and those actually participating in church; discomfort with the language of church membership, which seems institutional and inhospitable; inclusion of unbaptized people at the communion table—all these elements indicate a disconnect between functional/practical and confessional theologies.

The literature emanating from the "emerging" and "missional" church movements has been important in drawing attention to the fact that a cultural shift is taking place that the church needs to navigate. And when it comes to baptism and church membership, attempts to navigate this change are taking various forms:

- Some have placed fewer expectations on those wanting to be baptized, in an attempt to make the decision for baptism easier and less complicated.
- Some, in response to the current "post-commitment" culture and in a desire to be more hospitable, have put fewer demands on church members and have blurred the line between members and non-members.
- Others churches are resisting the post-commitment culture by placing more, not fewer, demands on members, citing evidence that many people respond better to higher expectations than to more modest ones.
- Some have begun to equate church attendance with church membership, while others criticise this equating of attendance with committed membership.
- Some argue that the idea of membership, when accompanied by institutional language and expectations, is alien to Christian community. They contend that belonging is

relational and does not need to be linked with bureaucratic agenda.

- Some have moved to different types or levels of church membership, such as "seekers," "friends of the church," or "associates."[2]

These approaches are symptomatic of larger issues in our cultural climate, issues that raise new questions about the meaning of church membership and its relationship to baptism. While many factors in our culture have an impact on our practices, let me highlight two issues that may give us cause to renew our thinking about baptism and church membership:

Current practices of baptism and church membership reflect a tension between a functional theology of church life and the more official "doctrinal" theology of the church expressed in the confession of faith.

Christendom is in rapid decline. From the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 313 until approximately the midpoint of the twentieth century, the church occupied a central position in Western societies. This period has been called Christendom; as a key social institution, the church provided stability and security. Today many claim that we are in the midst of a transition from Christendom to post-Christendom. This new reality is characterized by pluralism and a radical relativism. Today religion is more frequently understood in terms of its sociological and psychological significance than in terms of claims it may make about divine revelation and absolute truth. Furthermore, the mainline church as an institution has lost its privileged position (a position, some would argue, that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches never had), and increasingly it occupies a place on the margins of society alongside other voluntary associations.

Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of baptism and church membership developed in reaction to Christendom structures and thinking. After Constantine came the union of church and state, in which baptism of infants and loyalty to the state went hand in hand. Believers baptism confronted this understanding and challenged the state's authority to dictate in church matters. This move was in many ways what made Anabaptism seem so dangerous: it was perceived, at least in part, as a threat to the state's authority and to the unity of society. The language of church

membership was significant for Anabaptist-Mennonites in a Christendom time: they wanted to clearly distinguish those truly committed to following Christ (the visible church, as distinct from the invisible church) from those who were part of the church for other reasons (through infant baptism, because of social/cultural expectations, etc.).

Today Christendom has all but disappeared, and in our secularized society most people who go to church do so because they want to be there and choose to be there despite significant social pressures to be somewhere else. But church membership is no longer a sign of radical commitment to the church and to Christ as ultimate authority in one's life.

Church membership smells of "institution." We live in a time of deep suspicion of all things institutional. Our society is facing a crisis of trust: we find it increasingly difficult to trust anything, but especially institutions. The institutions people once trusted (church, police, health care, education, etc.) have all become suspect.

Accompanying the demise of Christendom has been the demise of modernity, with its Enlightenment emphasis on logical and linear ways of thinking and living. The Protestant Reformation for the most part created churches closely aligned with the newly literate culture of the time. Linear and rational thought patterns, reasoned exegesis of texts, and expository preaching illustrated the new "modern" culture's focus on the written word. At different times and to different degrees, the church removed the symbolic, the mystical, and the experiential, in order to make space for logical and linear ways of thinking and living. Anabaptist-Mennonites were no exception to this trend.

With the modern world came an emphasis on organizational structures and efficiency. One thinks of Henry Ford's creation of assembly line methods of mass producing manufactured goods—processes that frequently resulted in dehumanization and disempowerment of workers. John Drane has argued that as the twentieth century progressed, the characteristics of a "McDonaldized" society began to show up in the church. According to Drane, the predictable, calculated, efficient, and controlling aspects of McDonald's restaurants are mirrored in today's church: there are jobs to be filled, tasks to be done, budgets to be used

efficiently: all the work is managed in an orderly fashion so as to meet the needs of the consumer. A McDonaldized church is an institutional church.[3]

In our culture the language of church membership quickly gets reduced to a list: a list of prerequisites needed so one can enter an institution, or a list of jobs to be filled by those who have taken on the responsibility of membership. Sadly, membership language has become synonymous with membership dues and membership statistics, and it contributes to a sense of exclusivity, of distinguishing between those who are in and those who are out. The language of "church membership" merges with the language of "church institution," which sounds like "constitution," which means bylaws and bureaucracy. The result is a diminished sense of the church as the body of Christ, a living organism.

This institutional language is unappealing not just to those outside the church but also to those who are deeply committed to the church. Some resist being labelled or included in organizational statistics; others are reluctant to claim denominational allegiance. Some feel membership implies total agreement with everything the church teaches; others are wary of communicating exclusivity. These reactions may be symptoms of a post-commitment culture, but in this time of transition we also need to ask whether the terminology of church membership is still helpful.

Receiving baptism in the body of Christ

So why do we continue to hold baptism and church membership together? Given the developments described above, there may be good evangelical reasons to separate them: more people might get baptized if baptism were not linked to church membership. Unfortunately, the church is often perceived as a barrier to baptism, thereby making "church" a problem that somehow needs to be solved. And if church membership is reduced to having your name on a roster, paying membership dues, meeting financial obligations, filling volunteer positions, having a sense of entitlement, clearly there is a problem, even if it is a problem of perception. But it isn't a problem that can be solved by separating baptism from church membership, because when that happens, both baptism and church are diminished, the fullness of their meaning lost.

Nobody gets baptized alone. Baptism is a primordial Christian act, and it reminds us of what it means to be Christian—among other things, that to be Christian is to participate in the church, the body of Christ. Perhaps the most obvious first clue in the act of baptism is the fact that nobody gets baptized alone. Baptism takes place with others. The water of baptism brings us into the community of the church, into the body of Christ. We join with each other in baptism, reflecting our deep dependence on God and on the body of Christ, which gives us our identity and nourishes us. Baptism reminds us that we are not alone. We are not homeless orphan children but those who belong. Just as Jesus was claimed at his baptism—"You are my Son, the Beloved . . ." (Mark 1:11)—so at our baptism we are claimed, marked, signed, branded, sealed. As Peter proclaimed, in what must have been part of an early baptismal liturgy, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

Baptism reminds us that the church is not something we achieve or create or produce; through baptism we receive each other in the body of Christ.

The early Anabaptists argued that through water baptism you confessed your sins before the congregation, testified to your faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and were incorporated into the fellowship of the church, thereby accepting the responsibilities that went with membership in the church. Water baptism signified that the inner yieldedness to Christ (*Gelassenheit*) had taken place; that you were now committed to the body of Christ, the church; and that the church was committed to you. It also meant that you were willing to suffer for Christ and for your sister or brother.

Here within the Anabaptist tradition of baptism we see a curious interplay of the personal and the communal. While baptism brings you into the community, baptism is at same time a profoundly individualizing act. In being baptized you turn yourself over to God; you yield your life to God. In baptism you set yourself on a particular path in which you commit yourself to learning to love Jesus more than anything else, and you choose to walk in the path of Jesus, no matter where it leads.

A distinguishing feature of those within the believers baptism tradition is that you receive baptism as a result of your own decision, not that of your parents or government or church. And it is perhaps because of this element of personal choice that baptism and membership in the church has become strangely privatized and limited to one's own deciding and acting. When I listen to my students reflect on their baptisms, their imagination focuses on baptism as something "*I*" do: *I* learn, *I* decide, *I* choose, *I* get baptized, *I* join the church that *I* like. Accompanying this emphasis on one's own decision and action in baptism has been a history of qualifications needed in order to be eligible to participate, a practice that has brought us dangerously close to conceiving of salvation as our own responsibility, as something *I* do, *I* achieve, *I* make myself eligible for. This is a distortion our early Anabaptist forebears did not foresee as they were reacting to the practices of baptism in the time of the Reformation.

***We* receive *baptism*.** At minimum, the water of baptism should recall the simple gesture of washing, which reminds us that it is God who washes us. We don't wash ourselves; we don't baptize ourselves. God makes us clean, regenerates us, renews us. We do not achieve baptism, or earn it, or accomplish it; we *receive* baptism, as a gift, just as we receive the grace of God and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. We don't invent our identity at baptism; in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we receive our identity. And so too with the church: baptism reminds us that the church is not something we achieve or create or produce; through baptism we receive each other in the body of Christ. In baptism we are yoked together with other Christians, whether we like it or not, whether we like them or not.

***Church participation is the lived expression of baptized life*.** Baptism is not just a one-time event based on a one-time decision. It is a way of life, a way of being Christian together. Baptism as a way of life is more akin to a spiritual practice than to a one-time decision. And it follows that church membership (participation) is the lived expression of baptized life. It too is more like a spiritual practice rather than a list of duties and obligations (though given our current cultural climate, the language of church membership may need to change). The biblical basis for

understanding church membership (or participation) as a spiritual practice comes simply from understanding what membership in the body of Christ means: loving Jesus, and loving in the way that Jesus loves, and together living as Jesus calls us to live.

It is naive to assume that anyone who gets baptized and joins the church already knows what this loving and living entails. While as Christians we may be born again, we are certainly not born full grown and fully mature. Baptismal membership in the body of Christ, then, by its very nature, should be understood as a process of spiritual growth and formation. If joining the church at baptism means anything, it means that we have decided to become part of a community committed to being formed into Christlikeness. This shifts an understanding of membership that is essentially passive (we join, and now we're in) to something that requires active participation of us. Church is no longer something we *go to* but a dynamic *we live, together*.

Baptism means getting wet. Trying to disconnect baptism from church membership—or church participation—may be like trying not to get wet at baptism. But we can't avoid getting wet in baptism. In baptism, our scriptures tell us, we are fully immersed—drowning—in Christ (see, for example, Col. 2:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:17), dying with him to rise with him to new life. Baptism is not just a personal matter but is a public testimony of our drowning in Christ, of receiving our new identity as part of the body of Christ and our ordination into the ministry of Christ.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).

[2] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2004), 309.

[3] See John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002). The book is based on George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993).

About the author

Irma Fast Dueck is associate professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She worships with the saints at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.

Vital witness on the rural frontier

Six handles for contextual theology

David Boshart

For most of the twentieth century, rural congregations in North America provided the financial resources that fueled the church's mission in church planting and overseas ministries. Now some rural churches believe that their best days are behind them. During the farm crisis of the 1980s, young adults fled farming communities in pursuit of a brighter future in an urban area. Those who stayed have had fewer children. These factors have contributed to a significant decline in attendance in many rural congregations, and to a perception of overall population decline in rural areas.

Rural communities do well to reassess the focus of their spiritual ministry by considering how to build sustainable community in the changing ecology of rural North America.

For a time, it seemed like evangelism and church growth were becoming irrelevant subjects in rural areas, strategies better suited to urban contexts. Nevertheless, historic rural churches have a long, rich tradition of faithfulness that has withstood pressures of time and change. In a world that worships the individual, rural congregations value community and retain wisdom about how strong communities are constructed. But in their hearts, members of century-old rural congregations know that things are changing in ways they had not imagined.

A new way of seeing

Rural communities do well to reassess the focus of their spiritual ministry by considering how to build sustainable community in the changing ecology of rural North America. Latin American base communities may provide a model. In several Latin American countries during the 1980s, government and social structures became so unstable and unpredictable that people could no longer trust social institutions and welfare safety nets. In Christian

base communities, people began to read the scriptures together. Relying on the internal spiritual resources of their Christian brothers and sisters, and gathering around the scriptures, they began to trust their own discernment more than their unpredictable and often dangerous world. Before long, these Christian base communities no longer made a distinction between secular affairs, such as economic and business activities, and the ministries of the church. Thinking contextually and theologically, they began to see the world transforming around them. While this movement has not endured in many places, Christian base communities have been a beacon of hope for people in a context where nothing was working.

The Gospel of Luke provides a similar vision for the possibility of bearing witness to the reign of God apart from our perceived abundance or scarcity. Consider a favorite missional text. In Luke 10, Jesus sent out the seventy, expecting that they would be—*and were to be*—defenseless, innocent, inexperienced, and ill-equipped. Jesus says, in essence: I will keep back your bag, your change of clothes, and your credit cards. These witnesses left behind the security the world had given them, and they relied on the resources of the kingdom and the kindness of strangers. Jesus tells them to stay in the home where they are welcomed, "eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you' " (Luke 10:8–9; NRSV).

What does it mean to announce that the kingdom of God has come near? It appears that this message was announced to people at their point of need, where God's shalom was being disrupted, where the sick needed to be healed, where people were living under oppressive forces beyond their control. When the seventy announced this message, amazing things started to happen: sick people became well; even people possessed by evil spirits were liberated. In short, when the kingdom comes near, people thrive in wholeness and hope.

They seventy returned with joy and said to Jesus, "Lord, even the demons submitted to us in your name!" And Jesus said, "While you were out there, I saw Satan fall down from heaven like lightning." This work of announcing that the kingdom of God is near causes Satan to fall like lightning from heaven. Luke says, "At that time, Jesus was full of joy in the Holy Spirit." This is the

only place in the whole of Luke's Gospel where we see Jesus responding this way: full of joy in the Spirit as he prays to the Father. When we see all three members of the Trinity engaged in a joyful celebration of human witness, something noteworthy is taking place!

In Luke's conclusion to this narrative, we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!" The church in mission has a new way of seeing. This is an instructive message for rural communities today. One chapter later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray in hope that things will look on earth like they look in heaven.

Contextual theology, missional vocation

Let me make a couple of proposals: (1) Developing a relevant witness in rural communities is inherently a task of contextual theology. We might define doing theology like this: *read the Bible with the world before you, and dream!* (2) The missional vocation of the church is to *bear witness to the reign of God in the world.* We can assume that the apostles, like Jesus, didn't solve every problem they encountered. They offered signs of how things are when God gets God's way. *God brings the kingdom; we bear witness to it.* It is important to remember this distinction in order to maintain proper scale for the church's ministry.

Developing a relevant witness in rural communities is a task of contextual theology. We might define doing theology like this: *read the Bible with the world before you, and dream!*

Rural communities doing contextual theology will read the Bible with the world in view, asking: Where is God's shalom being disrupted in the biblical context and in our rural context? What are the barriers to people thriving in wholeness and hope? They will ask an eschatological question: Given the biblical witness, how are things in our context when God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven?

As we consider this theological task, I propose six possible handles for congregations seeking to develop a relevant witness in their rural contexts.

1. Discernment. Congregations, as base communities, need to trust biblical and spiritual discernment more than they trust the

specialists' patterns and expert prescriptions for (re)building strong congregations. We need a theology that insists that the vitality of our congregations will not be determined by the economic vitality of the nation or by the categories of secular socio-economic-political discourse.

Biblical and spiritual discernment is a discipline the church needs to relearn. Many Sunday school classes and discussion groups have taken whole topics off the table for discernment because of fear that conversation will become partisan and rancorous. We do not need to let the political rhetoric spewed on talk radio and cable television divide us. When that happens, it is a sure sign that we believe that the politics of party are more powerful and more trustworthy sources of hope than the reign of God is. When we imagine that the powers of this age hold the best solutions to the problems in our world, we abdicate the ministry of bringing hope.

When our discernment is foundationally biblical, we will have confidence that the church can be a colony of heaven, and we will not turn to the world to solve our every problem. And keeping our discernment biblical will enable us to maintain the appropriate scale in our witness rather than attempting to manufacture the kingdom.

2. Economic development. We need to reclaim the spiritual ministry of local congregational economic development. There will always be shifting population patterns driven by market forces. Some rural communities may be losing population, but in fact few rural communities are. Most are instead being repopulated with different people. What opportunities for ministry and business might these new people present?

We should remember that strong, rural Mennonite communities weren't always here. They were built on prairie land without ready-made markets. Mennonites moving into these places with the help of government subsidies—and through the displacement of indigenous people groups—created new economic opportunities. Congregation-based economic development will be an important theological issue when congregations see themselves as base communities. Thinking theologically with regard to economic development will inform how we will prosper and enable us to do so with justice.

Mennonites readily affirm the economic development that Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Economic Development Associates offer to bring hope and strengthen communities in other parts of the world. Why should we consider this kind of work any less spiritual when it happens locally, among us?

In the face of recent worldwide economic upheaval, the appeal of the city may be on the wane. There is a discernible trend of gifted young adults moving back to their roots expecting that they can build a rich and meaningful life in rural contexts. Our business people and self-employed people need to claim a spiritual ministry of mentoring them, modeling how to develop God-honoring businesses that include countercultural patterns of environmental stewardship and attendant spiritual practices.

Gifted young adults are moving back to their roots expecting to build a rich and meaningful life in rural contexts. Business people need to claim a spiritual ministry of mentoring them, modeling how to develop God-honoring businesses that include countercultural patterns.

Mennonite dairy farmers John and Mary Ellen Kauffman of Exeland, Wisconsin, found significant meaning in retirement by becoming mentor farmers. John and Mary Ellen offered the use of their land and equipment to families aspiring to do dairy farming with grass-fed cows. They have helped six families start their own farming operations as God-honoring businesses that model a deep commitment to observing the Sabbath. Their witness to these families caught the attention of a secular publication that profiled their prophetic work.[1]

3. Rethinking church numbers. Rural communities need to join Jesus in rejecting a victim posture when congregational vitality seems threatened. Jesus said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (John 10:17–18; NIV). Jesus was never a victim. Mennonite congregations, as cruciform bodies, do not need to assume a victim mentality when facing demographic shifts that seem beyond their control.

Congregations of 300 members may not always be congregations of 300. A congregation that shrinks as a result of demo-

graphic changes need not have a witness that is any less dynamic, relevant, and transformative. Global church growth researcher Christian Schwarz has found that when congregations reach 300 members, church growth becomes far less efficient. His research in 120 countries demonstrates that churches of fifty have the greatest potential for growth, the highest return on the energy invested in their witness. Declining membership in rural churches does not need to be a sign that a congregation is dying.[2] Reading the Bible with the world in view will remind us of the power inherent in witness that begins with mustard seeds.

Research demonstrates that churches of fifty have the greatest potential for growth, the highest return on the energy invested in witness. Declining membership in rural churches does not need to be a sign that a congregation is dying.

4. Food production. Rural congregations are ideally located to develop a robust theology of food production and consumption. Discussions in the church can quickly devolve into division and accusation between organic producers, those who practice community-supported agriculture, and bulk commodity producers. The church that is serious about bearing witness to the reign of God in a rural context will not be divided over differences in farm practices. A church fractured by the moral indignation of some directed against others offers hope to no one. Instead, the church will gather around these issues in biblical spiritual discernment. Reading the Bible with the world in view and dreaming, they can construct a theology of food that is hopeful for consumers and producers.

Currently, only five percent of food consumed in my state is produced in the United States. Agronomists tell us that 85 percent of the food that is being consumed in the state could be produced locally. On average, our food travels 1500 miles before it reaches our tables. All types of food are available to us year round, yet we are eating a less diverse, and therefore less healthy, diet.

Iowa State Professor Emeritus Neil Harle says that a just global food policy is *the* most important contributor to world peace. We tend to think that oil supply is the greatest barrier to world peace. Should the oil run out, and communities lose access to food locally, we will face global destabilization on an apocalyptic scale.

Developing a grace-based, just theology of food production is an area where our rural peace churches should be doing cutting-edge theology for the whole church.

In rural Freeman, South Dakota, a group of Christians known as Rural Revival are taking seriously the call to bear witness to the reign of God on these matters. Rural Revival seeks "to revitalize and sustain our community by nurturing a positive environment for making a living on the land." The group's case statement goes on to say, "We are a faith-based organization committed to the agrarian way of life as an expression of God's intention for mortal humans living together peacefully in a finite world." They are committed to the growth of a local food system, to linking those with land and resources to aspiring farmers, and to planning educational and informational programs on local food and land tenure issues."[3]

5. Host to the nations. The story of our Anabaptist origins has been that of a migrating martyr community. But we are not being martyred now; no one is asking us to leave. Though we are aliens in this world, and though we want to keep learning from the rich testimony of our forebears, we need to cast off our identity as migrating martyrs while avoiding the temptation to move into seeing ourselves as entitled settlers, a mentality that is toxic to witness. Instead we can become hosts who capture the eschatological vision of God's reign by seeking to be a colony of heaven where all tribes and peoples and languages and nations are welcome to worship God among us. We need to take on a new identity as prophetic hosts to the nations.

We need to cast off our identity as migrating martyrs while avoiding the temptation to move into seeing ourselves as entitled settlers. We need to take on a new identity as prophetic hosts to the nations.

Our heritage has given us gifts for the task of building community among immigrant people who are fleeing oppression as our spiritual ancestors did. We need a theology that insists that we can successfully build Christian community in rural settings across ethnic lines, to the enhancement of our collective spiritual vitality.

6. Retirement alternatives. Finally, as base communities, our congregations need to develop an alternative theology of retirement. Rather than consigning people in retirement to spending

their last decades of God-given life in enclaves of the like-aged, we need to extend a call to our older sisters and brothers to be present to bless the community that bears witness to the reign of God. One never retires from one's spiritual vocation of meeting a world of need with the love of Jesus.

Every congregation needs the testimony of those who have lived the community's life deeply and well. We need elders in our congregations with a clear sense of call, who show us how to imagine a joyful life in the new order of God's reign while living in a world whose structures and systems aren't sustainable. Our consumer society suggests that there is only one direction in life: forward. One keeps going forward, always forward, never looking back. At some point in life, Christian elders need to stop looking forward and turn around to offer those who are coming after them a word of blessing and a word of hope.

Every congregation needs the testimony of those who have lived the community's life deeply and well. Christian elders need to stop looking forward and turn around to offer those who are coming after them a word of blessing and a word of hope.

Author and poet Robert Bly says it this way: "What is asked of adults now is that they stop going *forward*, to retirement, to Costa Rica, to fortune, and turn to face the young. . . . One can imagine a field with [the] adolescents on one side of a line drawn on the earth and adults on the other side looking in[to] their eyes. The adult in our time is asked to reach his or her hand across the line and pull the youth into adulthood. . . . If we don't turn to face the young ones, their detachment machines, which are louder and more persistent than ours, will say, 'I am not a part of this family,' and they will kill any real relationship with their parents."[4]

Is it possible for rural congregations to offer a relevant and transforming witness to the inbreaking of God's reign in the world? These six handles for doing so offer a place to begin. Who wouldn't want to be a part of church whose witness was this relevant, hopeful, and transformational? When we trust the wisdom of rural folks who submit their dreams to one another as they gather to read the scriptures with their world in view, Satan falls like lightning. Our congregations become kingdom colonies, and things on earth begin to reflect the realities of heaven.

Notes

[1] Raylene Nickel, "Giving Beginners a Leg Up," *Successful Farming* 104, no. 11, 22–26.
[2] Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).
[3] See links to Rural Revival's mission statement and goals at www.ruralrevival.org/.
[4] Robert Bly, *The Sibling Society* (New York: Random House, 1997), 237.

About the author

David Boshart is executive conference minister for Central Plains Mennonite Conference. He has been a Mennonite pastor for more than twenty-six years, primarily in rural settings. David holds a PhD in leadership studies from Andrews University (Berrien Springs, MI) with an emphasis on missional theology. He is the author of *Becoming Missional: Denominations and New Church Development in Complex Social Contexts* (Wipf and Stock, 2011).

Church as prayer

Isaac S. Villegas

When we get together at Chapel Hill (NC) Mennonite Fellowship, we pray: the worship leader invokes the Holy Spirit with an opening litany, another person offers a congregational prayer on our behalf, the preacher prays before the sermon, various people speak joys and concerns during an open time of sharing, and finally the worship leader returns for a prayer of benediction before we depart. There are, of course, other aspects of our worship, but everything we do fits into the category of prayer: collecting tithes as offering our work to God's service, singing as combining our voices in a corporate prayer of gratitude and praise, the Lord's Supper as a *eucharsiteo*—a giving thanks—to God.

Church is for us a corporeal prayer. We pray for the world, for the church, for our community, for ourselves; we pray against the insidious powers of sin and death in all their manifestations. There's so much to pray against, and for.

And our sermons, at their best, are invitations into God's Word, conversations in which we learn God's language as we speak it and hear it, a labor of communication, our struggle to discern the God who speaks in, with, through many voices, the one from the pulpit and the others from the pews who add their own insights during a time of open sharing, a communal wrestling with God's Word made breath, which means a wrestling with the expressions of fellow worshipers as we offer our collective words as prayers: "May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts," I often pray before a sermon, "be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer."

We pray. That's what church is for us, a corporeal prayer. We pray for the world, for the church, for the needs in our community, in our neighborhoods, in our homes; we pray for ourselves, for family and strangers, for friends and enemies; we ask for the

peace of Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit; we pray against oppression and violence, against sickness and depression, against the insidious powers of sin and death in all their manifestations. There's so much to pray against, and for. "We pray for those who have lost hope and for those who have gained hope this week," I remember one church member, Rebecca Buchanan, praying.

With our petitions we confess our faith in the sustaining presence of God's grace, of God's life among us, the Holy Spirit drawing us into the body of the Son. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit," we read in 1 John. In our prayers, our spirits resound the Holy Spirit; worship becomes a lyrical mash-up of the human and divine. Our "acts of worship, petition and thanksgiving," writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, "are borne along and remodeled by the Spirit's infinite and eternal acts, in that ineffable union by which all human doing and being has been lifted up and plunged into the river of eternal life and love."[1] Von Balthasar offers these comments as a reflection on Romans 8, where the apostle Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the one who prays with us, in us, and through us. The Spirit of God breathes through us as we pray, enlivening us, drawing us into eternal life and love, into the life of God. In our worship, in our prayers, we are brought into an ineffable union as the Spirit moves among us, within us, re-forming our disparate lives again and again into the body of Christ, "flesh of Christ's flesh and bone of his bone," as Menno Simons wrote.[2]

The Spirit of God breathes through us as we pray, enlivening us, drawing us into the life of God. In our prayers, we are brought into an ineffable union as the Spirit moves among us, within us, re-forming our disparate lives into the body of Christ.

The body of Christ takes the form of a body at prayer, the church, as it gives itself over to the possession of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who knit together the flesh of the Son in Mary's womb.[3] In prayer, we yield ourselves to the Spirit who now weaves our lives into the identity of Jesus Christ, the one whose life is an embodied prayer, a ministry that calls on God to redeem and restore, to inaugurate an era of healing and salvation, of peace. According to the Dominican preacher and theologian

Herbert McCabe, prayer is not one spiritual discipline among others that we can see in the example of Jesus's life. "He is not just one who prays, not even one who prays best." Instead, McCabe continues, "he is sheer prayer."[4] Jesus lives out a prayer for heaven to fill the earth, a prayer against the demonic forces of hell that ravage creation. His preaching and healing, his walking and speaking, all that he says and does, comes together as a single prayer for God's will to be done. "Thy will be done," we hear Jesus say in the garden of Gethsemane as his hope for heavenly life on earth is threatened with violence and death, threatened with crucifixion.

This is the moment of Jesus's life that I am drawn into during worship at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship. Church, for me, is the body of Jesus in prayer, there in Gethsemane, staring with horror into the overwhelming violence, and refusing to escape from the suffering of the world. In the garden Jesus invites his friends, he invites us, into his posture of vigilance. "I am deeply grieved, even to death," Jesus says; "remain here, and keep awake." Church is a summons to remain awake to the pain of others, to the pain from which I would shield myself if I could live as I wanted, caught up in routines of work and rest and pleasure.[5] Worship draws me into the passion of Christ as the people at church pray us into the agony of the world, into the pain and sorrow of friends and strangers, into solidarity with the oppressed, into the presence of Jesus—the one who, as Blaise Pascal wrote, "will be in agony until the end of the world"; the one whose afflictions, as the apostle Paul wrote, are completed in the suffering of human flesh.[6]

In prayer, we yield ourselves to the Spirit who now weaves our lives into the identity of Jesus Christ, the one whose life is an embodied prayer. All that he says and does comes together as a single prayer for God's will to be done.

During worship last Sunday, Bradley Yoder shared how, when he opened the newspaper that morning, he saw a picture of children in Gaza, surrounded by gray smoke, surrounded by destruction, terrorized by adult war. "My heart breaks for them," he said as he cried, "Lord, have mercy." As we prayed, as we awakened our spirits, as we turned our eyes to Gaza, I was reminded of Jacob Taubes's description of worship in the early church: "You must

imagine prayer as something other than the singing in the Christian church; instead there is screaming, groaning, and the heavens are stormy when people pray."[7] With Bradley's prayer, among others, we let Christ's life flow through us, a life of protest against the forces of death, a life of cries and groans. We let Christ's agony become our agony, God's pain our pain.

To be afflicted with God's compassion arouses in us the power of hope. Not cheap hope. Not escapist hope. But hope engendered by the anguish of the world as it awakens us to God's pain; for, as the theologian Dorothee Soelle writes, to experience God's pain in the suffering world is to touch "the power of life . . . within pain, which is the biological protest of life against sickness and death."[8] In our prayers of protest, of pain, we feel the life of God flow through our church body, life that sustains our hope: that God will hear our prayers and answer by restoring life, reviving creation, redeeming our world.

At the Lord's Table, we gather for a prayer of protest, which is also a prayer of gratitude. Our words turn into bread and wine as we offer a protest of gratitude: a prayer-meal which invokes the presence of a world of grace, of peace, of healing, of merciful justice, the world of God's eternal and abundant life, a new creation that lives against the torments of sin and violence.[9] Communion draws us into the agony of Christ, the crucifixion, the pulse of God's life for the world, as we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again,"[10] while also inviting us into the presence of the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist"—a reality that nourishes the possibility of hope, our prayerful longing for a world of grace.[11]

Last Sunday John Grose invited us into silence as he always does at the end of his prayer: "And now, O Lord, hear the prayers we offer in silence." As we sit in the quiet of worship, we entrust our thoughts to God and rest into Christ's presence, in the holy silence of the Spirit. I returned to the words of Kate Roberts from early in the service, praying that we would "feel the comfort of Christ with us as we sit together as a congregation, remembering his body through being his body."

Later in the week, the body comes with me as I walk the neighborhood, remembering and praying. "A person is a walking relationship," writes Sebastian Moore, a Benedictine monk.[12]

When I walk and pray, I rest into the relationships that sustain my life, the relationships that are my life—friendship with God and God's family. I focus on the people who shared their prayers during worship: on Kara's uncle, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; on Nick, struggling to find meaningful work; on Hannah, as she cares for hurting mothers and sick newborns at the hospital; on the victims of war, especially the communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan that are terrorized by militarized drones; on a visitor, asking for God's sustaining hand for himself and others who live in prison; on Kate, as she sees more doctors this week; on the homeless and hungry in our community, as Cameron reminds us with his prayers every Sunday; on Caren, as the devastating news of her father's prognosis unsettles her and her family.

"Do not be silent," I whisper with an exhale, "O God of my praise."[13] Prayer always leads me into silence as I wait for God's response. "Do not be silent," I pant up a hill, "O God of my praise." The pace of my walk sets the rhythm for my prayer. The psalmist breathes through me; the scriptures inspire me. "Do not be silent," I sigh, "O God of my praise." I do not understand God's silence, but I know of nowhere else to go, no one else to talk to, so I fill the quiet with the psalmist's words again, "Do not be silent." I confess my impatience. I admit that the problem may be with my ears, my inability to listen well.

I write because I hope in God's regard for us, for me. Perhaps God reads my meditations, and by reading is summoned to respond, to speak, to act, to renew all who are remembered in our church, in our worship, in our body at prayer.

After my walk, writing becomes another prayer, a kind of contemplation, words of gratitude for the life of God that flows into me through God's people as they share their lives, as they manifest God's presence, and as they protest against the absence of God's redemption. I write because I hope in God's regard for us, for me; because I hope that God attends to our protests against God's silence, against the silence that swallows the words and breath that express our need for healing and comfort, for peace; because, perhaps, God reads my meditations, and by reading is summoned to respond: to speak, to act, to renew all who are remembered in our church, in our worship, in our body at prayer.[14]

Notes

[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 76. Henri de Lubac also reads the apostle Paul as describing the ineffable union between the church and God: "For St. Paul . . . it is Christ who appears . . . as a center, an atmosphere, a whole world even, in which man and God, man and man, are in communion and achieve union. For it is 'he who fills all in all.'" Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 45.

[2] Menno Simons, "Brief Confession on the Incarnation" (1544), in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 448.

[3] See Herbert McCabe's essay "Prayer," in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987): 215–25. "For us to pray is to be taken over, possessed by the Holy Spirit which is the life of love between Father and Son" (220).

[4] Ibid.

[5] "To be able to hope is to be awake, to be watchful, to be awakened from sleep. Christian worship is not a pastime or an interlude from pain. It is, rather, a pedagogy of watchfulness, a disciplining of attention, an education in attentive reverence for God and for the features of his world." Nicholas Lash, *Seeing in the Dark: University Sermons* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 30–31.

[6] Blaise Pascal, *The Mystery of Jesus*, no. 919, in *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 289; Colossians 1:24. "To understand Calvary as the place where *God* died is to understand all other places of death as Calvary," writes Nicholas Lash in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 214. Cf. Donald M. MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, ed. George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), 96.

[7] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 74.

[8] Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 78.

[9] Communion is both an affirmation of a way of life and a sign of our discontent, the gift of another world in the midst of this world; to borrow the words of an eminent political theorist, Communion is among our "hopeful signs of discontent." Sheldon S. Wolin, "Revolutionary Action Today," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University, 1985), 256.

[10] 1 Corinthians 11:26; NRSV.

[11] Romans 4:17; NRSV.

[12] Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology As If It Mattered*, ed. Stephen McCarthy (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 23.

[13] Psalm 109:1; NRSV.

[14] I'm grateful to the people who allowed me to include their prayers in my essay. I'm indebted to several readers from church who offered criticisms and suggestions: Melissa Florer-Bixler, Ryan Koch, Scott Schomburg, and Katie Villegas.

About the author

Isaac Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship in North Carolina.

God of gardens

Carol Penner

God of gardens,
you are the great Cultivator,
growing faith for the ages.
You aren't picky about the size of the harvest.
You rejoice in the vast prairie field,
one crop from horizon to horizon,
just as you rejoice in the tiny plant
breaking through the inner city cement crack.
You carefully tend the tenderest of plants,
taking deep delight in burgeoning beauty.
Under the light of your gaze,
faith breaks out in different colours
and different stripes
all over the wide world.
You aren't threatened by new cultivars
that change through the generations;
you've grafted in new strains,
cross-breeding for hardiness and vigour.

We come on the scene,
eager gardeners,
anxious to work till kingdom come.
We long for and then write gardening manuals.
We outline what is acceptable and unacceptable,
and what should never be tolerated.
We come to work with books in hand,
ready to raise up something from nothing.
We're shocked and even a bit dismayed to find faith
growing wild and strong
even before we arrive.
We don't know what to make of this faith,

undomesticated by us.
You tour us around, smiling broadly,
remembering the lavish generosity
of those who planted so others could harvest.

Lord, we are the newly planted.
You are growing us all into good gardeners
and we look to you for inspiration.
Reveal to us the mystery of faith
in the eyes of a child,
wide with amazement
as the petal of each new day unfolds.
Reveal to us the work of faith
in the hands of our grandparents,
calloused from decades of labour.
Reveal to us the fundamentals of faith
in the harvest of righteousness
you are growing in the earth today.
Help us to see the harvest
not as something to be owned and controlled
but as something to be celebrated,
pressed down, shaken together, running over.
We ask all this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

About the author
Carol Penner is pastor of The First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ontario. Her prayers and worship resources can be found on her blog, www.leadinginworship.com.

The case for saying no to God

Kevin Derksen

In a homily on Isaiah 6, Origen offers a fascinating commentary on the sending of the prophet. Isaiah, Origen suggests, may have been a little too eager in taking up the summons. Where Moses does his best to escape God's call at the burning bush (Exod. 3–4), Isaiah volunteers himself. "Send me," he says, without knowing what he might be bidden to say or whether in fact he has been chosen at all. Isaiah quickly discovers to his horror what it is that he has signed up for. The words given to him are curses: the people will hear but not understand, see but not perceive meaning. Harden their hearts, says the Lord, until all the cities are destroyed and the country is a wasteland. Perhaps, comments Origen, Isaiah receives the reward of his rashness in the undesirable prophesies he is bidden to utter. Better, like Moses or even Jonah, to do whatever one can to run away. This, Origen suggests, is more in keeping with the example of a servant Christ who stoops to wash his disciples' feet. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over one another in their aspirations to glory, but it should not be so among followers of Christ (Matt. 20:25). Those called do well to protest not only their inadequacy but the fearful difficulty of the call itself. For then God might have space to say, as to Moses at the bush, that God alone makes people to speak and God alone makes people to hear.[1]

Those called do well to protest not only their inadequacy but the fearful difficulty of the call itself. For then God might have space to say that God alone makes people to speak and God alone makes people to hear.

Confronting the absurdity of our calling

Origen's reflections give me pause, because I have just recently received ordination in the Mennonite Church. I have publically embraced God's call, had it affirmed and confirmed by the church,

and been commissioned for a lifetime of ministry. I have heard it said that you should go into ministry only if you absolutely cannot avoid the call, counsel that leaves me to wonder whether I have put enough effort into resistance. Responding to God's call, it seems, involves a critical moment of rejection. There is something important about saying no to God, about confronting the absurdity of a calling that sends an unworthy vessel to a task that is doubtless distasteful by most worldly standards. And though this theme catches me in the context of ordination, it extends beyond the call to ministerial leadership. Ordination is a baptismal act, extending in a particular way God's summons to the waters of baptism. Any faith that passes through the waters must also confront the call that stops Moses and Jonah in their tracks. All the more so in an upside-down church that marks its difference by the baptism of adult believers.

There is something important about saying no to God, about confronting the absurdity of a calling that sends an unworthy vessel to a task that is doubtless distasteful by most worldly standards.

No one has pleaded more eloquently than Søren Kierkegaard for the faithfulness of saying no to God. The Christendom church of nineteenth-century Denmark, he complains, contains no shortage of those who have said yes to God. But it also contains little evidence of particularly Christian faith. In this context, Kierkegaard picks up the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 21:28–31.[2] A man has two sons, and to each he gives instruction to go work in his vineyard. The first son answers that he will not, but he later changes his mind and goes to work. The second son answers with much respect that he will go, but then he does not. Jesus asks: "Which of the two did the will of the father?" Kierkegaard replies that the one who says no is much closer to obedience than the one who makes an easy promise. The yes of the promise made by the second son is a trap. The one who promises easily deceives both himself and others that what was promised has actually been done. The yes of the promise is sleep inducing, like a repetitive habit. It skirts obedience by failing to ever confront the seriousness of the task. The no of the first son, by contrast, is closer to obedience, because it leaves him closer to repentance. The no is like a wake-up call, a splash of cold water that brings him to himself. Repentance, says Kierkegaard, is not usually far away. It is

better to say no and in so doing confront the great difficulty of obedience. The first son at least recognizes his own prodigality, something the second son avoids with his deferential response.

Rethinking the visible church

The upside-down church of Anabaptist sensibility has, we might say, taken Kierkegaard's advice. It is a church given shape by those who have actually gone out into the vineyard—those who have claimed the path of obedience for themselves and submitted to baptism as adults. In the context of mainline Christian tradition, Anabaptist parents say no to God on behalf of their children in refusing to have them baptized as infants. They say no so as to create space for repentance and obedience, cutting off the possibility of an empty promise that never enters the vineyard but never confronts the reality of its own prodigal nature either. The true prodigal, according to upside-down Anabaptists, is the son who says yes to the father and so becomes part of a church undisciplined by the rigors of actual obedience in the way of the cross.

The true prodigal, according to upside-down Anabaptists, is the son who says yes to the father and so becomes part of a church undisciplined by the rigors of actual obedience in the way of the cross.

For the upside-down church, then, visibility becomes an important category. It protests against the invisibility of a mixed church composed alike of those who actually work in the vineyard and those who have never darkened its gates. A church of prodigal-yet-repentant vineyard workers takes on a concrete shape in the world, and Mennonite theology has made much of this visibility as the crux of its witness. An upside-down church requires an other, a standard of human convention against which it can reasonably be called upside-down. Often this other is the "world," but equally often it is the rest of the church that remains tragically right-side-up. As Anabaptists, we have a veritable obsession with our own distinctiveness. Contemporary Mennonite church literature and conversation is deeply concerned with what distinguishes us, with what provides the visibility on which an upside-down church trades. The literature is saturated with efforts to identify the "Anabaptist difference," be it cast in terms of core values or vital rhythms or naked essentials.

Given this state of affairs, I find it striking that what concerns Kierkegaard as he reads Jesus's parable is also a certain kind of visibility, the visibility of promises that are easily made but are fulfilled only with much greater difficulty and in less evident ways. At the level of surface visibility, the son who says yes responds faithfully. But the one who truly enters the vineyard is the one whose heart is shaped and re-formed through a process of repentance which may be harder to see. Visibility can easily become a site of admiration, a return to oneself in pride, which for Kierkegaard is the mark of non-Christian love of self.

Finding ourselves in an infinite debt of gratitude

It is always possible for the upside-down character of the church to become a source of pride rather than a fearful cross to bear. The strangeness of the church in its visible otherness can be a temptation to claim for itself the shape and means of God's activity in the world. But upside-down or not, the church exists to point away from itself and toward the God revealed in the scandal of a crucified Messiah. The posture of this witness is ever penitential, ever repeating the movement of the first son from rejection to repentance to the vineyard.

At the level of surface visibility, the son who says yes responds faithfully. But the one who truly enters the vineyard is the one whose heart is shaped and re-formed through a process of repentance which may be harder to see.

The one to whom we bear witness, says Kierkegaard, is the one who said neither yes nor no, "because his food was to do his father's will."[3] Christ is one with the Father, his love finally fulfilling the law. This is good news for us, but it is good news that leaves us in an infinite debt, to which we are called infinitely to remain. It reduces us to nothing, to the "rubbish of the world" (1 Cor. 4), no matter how obedient, how faithful, how loving, or how upside-down we might be. We do well not to say yes to this good news too quickly, for truly it is a fearful and even offensive summons. The one who will enter the vineyard in imitation of Christ will doubtless first recoil and turn away. Perhaps it is, then, that the faithfulness of an upside-down church depends on a reinvigorated no to God. The movement of this response chastens the pride of visibility, recalling with Origen that the shape of the church's

strangeness is the stooping of its master to wash his disciples' feet. Though the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over one another in their aspirations to glory, it should not be so among you.

Now I find myself on the far side of ordination's yes to God. Is it too late to run away?

Notes

[1] Origen, "Homily 6.1 on Isaiah," in *The Pastor: Readings from the Patristic Period*, ed. Philip Culbertson and Arthur Shippee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 37–39. Origen was a third-century theologian who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. His many writings include exegetical works and commentaries as well as homilies on most biblical texts.

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 91–95.

[3] Ibid., 99.

About the author

Kevin Derksen is a pastor at St. Jacobs (ON) Mennonite Church, where he was ordained on February 17, 2013.

A spirit of power
An ordination sermon

Dan Epp-Tiessen

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:7; NRSV)

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:11–12; NRSV)

What does it mean to ordain someone? Many of us may have only a vague notion of what we are actually doing today. Most of us do not attend many ordination services, and we rarely hear sermons or have Sunday school discussions or read articles about ordination. So what are we doing today as we ordain a pastor?

Ordination is about a particular person

On one hand, ordination is about a particular person. By ordaining Melissa Miller today, we as a church are acknowledging that God has called her to pastoral ministry. We are declaring that we have undergone a process through which this congregation and the denomination have discerned her call to ministry, her gifts for pastoral leadership, her theological training, and her personal life of faith. By ordaining her, we as a church place on her the mark of Christ and the mark of the church, as we declare, "We commission and empower you to proclaim the gospel, to shepherd the flock, to lead us, to challenge us, to inspire us for ministry in the church and the world."

Ordination symbolizes God's call of a particular person, the church's affirmation of this call, the pastor's acceptance of her call, and the whole church's blessing and affirmation of her ministry.

Melissa has already been involved in such ministries here at Springstein Mennonite Church ever since she was installed as pastor two years ago, so what difference does ordination make? When we install someone, we affirm and empower him for ministry in a particular setting for a limited period of time, but ordination sets him apart for life. Ordination in our denomination normally occurs after a period of testing pastoral gifts and calling, and after the larger church has conducted an extensive discernment process. Ordination sets the person apart and claims him for a lifetime of ministry, both in the local congregation and the broader church.

To sum up, ordination symbolizes God's call of a particular person, the congregation's and the larger church's affirmation of this call, the pastor's acceptance of her call and her dedication to pastoral ministry, and the whole church's blessing and affirmation of her ministry. All these things and more are what we are doing here today. And what we are doing is very much about a particular person.

Ordination is also about the church

But ordination is also about us as the church, because ordination is about the church's office of pastoral ministry, and this ministry belongs to the church.[1] To whom does this pulpit behind which I am standing belong? This pulpit was here long before Melissa Miller arrived on the scene, and it will stand here long after she leaves. By virtue of her calling and ordination, Melissa is granted the privilege and responsibility of occupying this pulpit for a period of time, but this pulpit belongs to Springstein Mennonite Church.

But ordination is also about us as the church, because ordination is about the church's office of pastoral ministry, and this ministry belongs to the church.

This pulpit symbolizes the ministry of leading worship, preaching, and proclaiming the gospel, a ministry that lies at the heart of church life. Other people in this congregation also exercise this ministry, but by ordaining Melissa, we designate her to carry out this ministry in a special way both here at Springstein and beyond. But the ministry of leading worship and preaching from this and other pulpits belongs to the church.

What is true of preaching is also true of other ministries, such as pastoral care. Caring for one another, and extending the love, grace, and healing power of Christ to each other, is the ministry of the whole church. This ministry of pastoral care has been happening here at Springstein long before Melissa arrived. Although many people in this congregation extend pastoral care, by ordaining Melissa we confer on her the authority to exercise this ministry on our behalf in a special way.

Ordination is about Jesus Christ

This ordination is about a particular person. It is also about the church. And even more importantly, it is about Jesus Christ. Why does the church engage in the ministry of preaching and proclaiming the gospel? Because Jesus came proclaiming the good news.[2] The church has pulpits so that this ministry of proclaiming the good news will continue in every generation. The church engages in pastoral care because Jesus came as the good shepherd to pastor the flock, to heal the sick, and to comfort the broken-hearted. The ministries of preaching and pastoral care, like the other faithful ministries of the church, continue the ministry that Jesus Christ initiated and then entrusted to the church after his ascension.

Ordination is about a particular person. It is also about the church. And it is about Jesus Christ. Why does the church engage in the ministry of preaching and proclaiming the gospel? Because Jesus came proclaiming the good news.

So what are we doing here today? We are ordaining Melissa to empower her, not to carry out her own ministry, but to carry out the ministry of the church. And thereby we are today empowering the ministry of the whole church, and the ministry of Jesus Christ. Ordination is about far more than just the person being ordained. Ordination is about the church and the church's need for leadership as it carries on the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Ordination confers God's power

But we are ordaining a particular person, and so it is fitting to read 2 Timothy 1:3–7. Paul is encouraging the young Timothy, whom he has mentored into church leadership: "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the

laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6; NIV). The laying on of hands is a ritual symbolizing that the person is set apart for a particular ministry and receives special power from God to carry out this ministry. That is why Paul adds, "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7; NRSV). Paul encourages Timothy to fan into flame this spirit of love and power that he has received.

Melissa, today we will lay our hands on you and claim you for the ministry of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ. We declare that this ordination confers God's power on you. We declare that God gifts you with a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

The power and authority that come with ordination are not for the benefit of the person being ordained. The office of ministry for which we ordain someone belongs to the church, and so the power and authority conferred by ordination exist for the sake of the church and the sake of Christ.

If ordination does not confer power and authority, then there wouldn't be much sense in ordaining anyone. The power and authority that come with ordination are not for the benefit of the person being ordained, as we may sometimes think. The office of ministry for which we ordain someone belongs to the church, and so the power and authority conferred by ordination exist for the sake of the church and the sake of Christ.[3]

The purpose of ordination is not to grant someone prestige or status in the eyes of the church or world but to empower them to minister to the church and the world on our behalf and on Christ's behalf. This conferring of power is important because if pastoral ministry depends only on the pastor's own gifts and abilities, then both pastor and church are in trouble. Human gifts and abilities, as crucial as they are for pastoral ministry, are still human and fallible. They are essential but by themselves inadequate to sustain someone for the long haul in the demanding role of pastoral leadership. Pastors need the ongoing spirit of power and love from God that Paul speaks of. At least in part, this spirit of power comes from God through the office of ministry to which we ordain the pastor.

Pastors represent the whole church and its ministry

Pastors need the empowerment that comes from knowing that as they minister they represent the whole church, and that they also represent Jesus Christ. Pastors offer themselves to the church, but what they give is more than themselves, by virtue of their office.[4]

Why is it that when a church member is in hospital, the pastor must visit? Won't the visits of an ordinary sister or brother in Christ do? When a person is at death's door, why is it so important that the pastor visit and speak a prayer releasing the dying person into the tender mercy of God? Can't ordinary church members pray with someone on their deathbed? When the pastor visits, prays, preaches, or offers pastoral care, then the whole church visits, prays, preaches, or offers pastoral care. When the pastor visits the sick or the dying, we intuitively recognize that this visit is different from the visits of ordinary church members, as important as such visits are. When pastors offer themselves in service to the church, by virtue of their office what they give is more than themselves and their own gifts and abilities.

When the pastor visits someone who is sick, dying, or in crisis, then the whole church visits, and Jesus Christ visits. The pastor's presence brings the resources of the church and the Christian faith and the healing power of Christ into the situation of need.

The pastor fills a powerful symbolic and representative role. We ordain a pastor so that the pastor will represent and embody the whole church and its ministry, and so that the pastor will represent Jesus Christ the Lord of the church. When the pastor visits someone who is sick, dying, or in crisis, then the whole church visits, and Jesus Christ visits. The pastor's presence brings the resources of the church and the Christian faith and the healing power of Christ into the situation of need. In their ministry, pastors give more than themselves by virtue of the office that we ordain them to.

For this reason the pastor need not necessarily be the most intelligent, wise, sensitive, loving—or even the most pious—person in the congregation. Pastors should be gifted in these areas and demonstrate depth in Christian character, but ultimately a pastor's ministry does not rest only on his own gifts. Pastoral ministry is rooted in the claim of Jesus Christ and his church on the pastor, a claim symbolized by ordination. The paradox of

pastoral ministry is that the pastor is like any other church member, a frail human being in need of God's grace and healing power, and yet the pastor is set apart to serve and lead on behalf of Jesus Christ and his church.

Ministers equip others for ministry

The ministry for which we are ordaining Melissa does not belong to her. It belongs to the church and to Jesus Christ, and so Melissa's ministry finds its proper place among the ministries of many others here at Springstein who lead worship, preach, offer pastoral care, and minister in countless other ways. It is fitting that we read two scripture texts today. Second Timothy 1:3–7 relates more closely to Melissa's call to pastoral ministry, while Ephesians 4:11–16 reminds us that ministry belongs to the whole church. Christ has gifted believers in a variety of ways to equip them for ministry so "that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11; NRSV). All these gifts and ministries serve the same end: to build up the unity, faith, and witness of the church. We call and ordain pastors not so that there will be less work for the rest of us but so that the pastors will help equip all of us for ministry and help set free the gifts that Christ bestows on us.

We call and ordain pastors not so that there will be less work for the rest of us but so that the pastors will help equip all of us for ministry and help set free the gifts that Christ bestows on us.

So, what are we doing here today in this ordination service? We are claiming Melissa Miller for the ministry of the church and the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are affirming her calling from God, and we are inviting God's blessing on her and her ministry. But this ordination service is also about us as a church. By acknowledging Melissa's calling, we also acknowledge and embrace our own calling to be the church, the body of Christ that ministers in his name. So Paul's words are addressed to all of us, "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Thanks be to God for the gift of this Spirit.

Notes

[1] See John A. Esau, "Recovering, Rethinking, and Re-imagining: Issues in a Mennonite Theology for Christian Ministry," in *Understanding Ministerial Leadership: Essays*

Contributing to a Developing Theology of Ministry, ed. John A. Esau (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1995), 14. I am indebted to John Esau's insightful article for many of the ideas in this sermon.
[2] For an excellent discussion of this point, see David Buttrick, *Homiletic Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 449–52.
[3] Esau, "Recovering, Rethinking, and Reimagining," 15–16.
[4] Ibid., 15.

About the author

Dan Epp-Tiessen teaches Bible at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. A member of Charleswood Mennonite Church, he appreciates invitations to preach in a variety of congregations. This sermon was given on the occasion of Melissa Miller's ordination as pastor of Springstein (Manitoba) Mennonite Church, October 18, 2009.

Widening the circle of church

Joanna Shenk

"Where do you see hope in the church?" he asked me. I could hear sadness and pain in his voice. I thought for a moment and then named people and communities that give me hope. My response wasn't enough to brighten his outlook, but he responded by saying, "Maybe your job is to look for corners of hope in the church and share them with others."

People in discipleship communities are saying prophetic and pastoral words to the church. They are looking for hope. And they are looking for co-workers committed to embodying the kindom of God on earth.

For a few years my friend had participated in an intentional community affiliated with Mennonite Church USA. He decided not to join the community and subsequently also stopped participating at church. He is a thoughtful person, expecting integrity of himself and others. He came to the Anabaptist tradition looking for embodied faith. He found some of that, but he also found disappointment. In his experience, the hospitality, peacemaking, and reconciliation to which church people said they were committed didn't extend to everyone, and many Mennonites seemed comfortable with the North American status quo. He told me, "I didn't find anyone I could really follow."

What can we learn from discipleship communities?

Since the fall of 2009 I have had the opportunity to get to know many nontraditional church communities—or discipleship communities. Some identify as Mennonite and others don't. In my role with Mennonite Church USA I've been learning and sharing about how the institutional Mennonite church can be shaped by these communities.

My travel has been in the United States, but I have gotten to know some communities in Canada as well. One outcome of this

work is the publication of *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship* (Herald Press, 2011), which tells nineteen different stories about discipleship communities.[1]

If the term *discipleship community* is new to you, here is a definition offered by Ched Myers, a mentor, who (with his partner Elaine Enns) co-wrote the introduction to *Widening the Circle*. *Discipleship* is rooted in the biblical call to follow Jesus as expressed in solidarity with the poor, creative peacemaking, the inclusion of the excluded (because of race, class, and gender), and the formation of alternative communities. These *communities*, committed to the journey of transformation through discipleship, generally work for renewal from the margins and engage ecumenically with other likeminded groups.

The communities I have gotten to know have been largely but not exclusively made up of white people. Many of the people currently writing and speaking about alternative church expressions in North America are white and male. I wanted *Widening the Circle* not to perpetuate this reality but instead to wrestle with it, so I intentionally sought people of color and women to write. Some of the writers grew up within the Anabaptist tradition, but more than half did not.

In this article I will reflect on what people rooted in discipleship communities are saying to the Mennonite church. Their words are prophetic and pastoral. They are looking for hope. And they are looking for co-workers committed to embodying the kindom of God on earth.

Institution and movement, movement and institution

The Anabaptist tradition, on which we've built many institutions, began as a movement. It was the anti-institution of the Reformation, in the eyes of the established church a blight that needed to be wiped out.

It's interesting that persecution and the passage of time have worked together to that end. What would our Anabaptist foremothers and fathers say about our wealth (or burden?) of institutions and respectability in North American society? Because of my work, I will focus on Mennonites in North America, but there are many thriving Anabaptist-Mennonite groups around the world from which we can learn.

And even as I write this, I navigate the tension of being supported by an institution in my work with "movement" communities. I've recognized that it is unwise to pit movements against institutions. After all, movements birth institutions and institutions birth movements. We see this pattern over and over again throughout history, the Anabaptist movement being only one example of this continuing cycle.

Problems arise when we rigidly choose one manifestation over all others, when we are not open to the Spirit guiding new birth. Both movements and institutions can be guilty of this effort to constrain the Spirit. This is a concern that discipleship communities carry about the institutionalized Mennonite church today. So it is exciting to tell them about my work with Mennonite Church USA, and it's challenging to face the journey before us. Part of this journey is to widen our identity as Mennonites, to allow ourselves to be shaped by those who claim the Anabaptist tradition but don't fit within whatever Mennonite stereotypes we carry.

It is unwise to pit movements against institutions. After all, movements birth institutions and institutions birth movements. We see this pattern over and over again throughout history.

Unfortunately, I am no longer surprised when people tell me their story of how they read *The Politics of Jesus* and then visited a Mennonite church for the first time. Where they thought they would find a radical counterculture, they instead found a group of middle-class white people who asked about their last name. Those who have told me these stories visited churches made up of white people, which is not representative of all the churches in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

What kind of witness do we have when some of the brightest and most creative Anabaptist converts are let go from our institutions, misunderstood by church leaders, or told to "put a lid on it"? One example that comes to mind is the story of Vincent Harding, whom I interviewed for the first chapter of *Widening the Circle*.

March out of conformity!

Dr. Vincent Harding connected to the Mennonite church in the 1950s. He co-pastored Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago

for a few years in the late 50s. He was one of the first African American pastors in the General Conference Mennonite Church. In the early 60s, he and his spouse, Rosemarie, moved to Atlanta to lead Mennonite House, an interracial Mennonite Voluntary Service unit. It was the first interracial voluntary service unit and the first interracial household in Atlanta.

At Mennonite House (see chapter 2 of *Widening the Circle*, taken from Rosemarie's memoir), they lived around the corner from Martin and Coretta King and became good friends with the Kings. Vincent and Rosemarie were deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement. According to Dr. Harding, the term "Civil Rights movement" is the product of lazy journalists. A more correct title is "the black-led movement for the deepening and broadening of democracy in the United States."

In this black-led movement, Vincent and Rosemarie Harding were specifically tapped by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to meet as a couple with white pastors in the South who wanted to get involved in the movement. At the time Rosemarie still wore a Mennonite prayer covering, and this made them a curiosity and perhaps less threatening to the white pastors with whom they met. Even so, Dr. Harding said that many of their meetings with these pastors happened at night.

They also spoke at Mennonite churches and conferences about issues of race and Christianity. Dr. Harding, now in his eighties and a renowned educator, reflected to me that Mennonites gave him his first public platform from which to talk about the church and social change.

At a Mennonite World Conference gathering in Amsterdam in 1967, Dr. Harding had this to say in a plenary address. At this point he had been connecting with Mennonites for more than ten years. And this was also the year when he penned Dr. King's famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech, which King delivered at Riverside Church in New York City.

> *Mennonite Christians, men [and women] who love humanity, where are we? If . . . Jesus is our guide to life, where are we? In conferences shaking hands and taking pictures? In seminars formulating tidy doctrines of the Spirit? In churches singing and preaching excellent*

theology to the same names for generations? In quiet communities proclaiming law and order and free enterprise? Huddled behind the barricades of the status quo, praying the storm will soon be over so that life can continue undisturbed? March out saints and be counted. March out of the buildings, march out of the denominations, march out of the churches if need be. March out of the conformity and terror of the roaring night. You have nothing to lose but your lives and a world to gain. The Master is already on the road and he says, I am the way, follow me.[2]

After the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, Dr. Harding was asked to be the first director of the King Center in Atlanta and also helped to found the Institute of the Black World, an organization committed to creating and defining the field of black studies.

If Jesus is our guide, where are we? Huddled behind barricades of the status quo, praying the storm will soon be over so that life can continue undisturbed? March out and be counted. March out of the churches, if need be.

He told me that at that point in his life he felt compelled to stand in the heart of the black community. This meant he wasn't able to engage with the Mennonite church as much as in the past, and some Mennonite church leaders were concerned. They sent him letters saying, essentially, are you still with us? Are you a part of us? Dr. Harding commented that he never felt that he stopped being Mennonite. What he did was fully embrace his identity as a black man. However, this identification felt like a rejection to many white Mennonites. To them, being Mennonite (as *they* understood it) was the most important identity; everything else was secondary. What they weren't able to grasp was that being Mennonite in the United States at the time was very much wrapped up in Eurocentric norms.

How is it that the Anabaptist movement of radical nonconformity to culture (meaning: conformity to Christ) has become a denomination known for its stifling practices producing conformity in community? How is it that our conformity more often mirrors the status quo of the dominant culture? During the "Civil Rights movement," this tendency manifested itself in ambivalence

about protesting racist laws and engaging in nonviolent direct action.

What would it have looked like for Mennonite leaders to affirm Dr. Harding on his journey, to say: We celebrate the fact that you're deeply exploring your identity as a black man. We also need to think about what it means for us to be white in a racist society. Instead the message seemed to be: You must be like us. You must make sense to us within our understanding of what it means to be Mennonite.

Do we let those who join us reshape us?

For close to a decade, Andrea Ferich lived and worked in Camden, New Jersey. Originally she was among the cofounders of the new monastic community there. In chapter fourteen of *Widening the Circle*, she writes about her decision to leave the new monastic movement and also about her formation at a Mennonite church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Do we recognize ourselves as a changed body when new people join us? Do we allow ourselves to be changed and shaped by those who join us?

Her father was drafted into the United States army and fought in the Vietnam War. While serving there, he had a life-changing experience when he encountered a group of Buddhist monks. Without weapons they walked for peace to a village that the soldiers were occupying. Andrea writes,

> *Dad committed himself to finding a group of Christians that carried out their faith commitments in the same way, following Christ in simplicity, peace, and community. It led him to the Mennonite church when he returned to Lancaster. This war brought my family to the Mennonite church, and shaped a great journey of justice for me. The Mennonite church taught me to pursue justice. In the purest sense, justice means changing the oppressive systems that are in place to new systems that allow us to fully love each other.*[3]

Andrea goes on to talk about how justice and nonviolence were themes for her in this Mennonite congregation. This in-

cluded caring for the earth and learning about service done by Mennonite Central Committee all over the world.

"Yet," she laments, "even with these embodied understandings of justice, the hierarchy of the church loved their accomplishments more than seeking equal partnership with those they 'helped.' "

> *After five years of church attendance we were still being introduced to visiting clergy and outsiders as 'the Ferich family from the city that came to know Christ through the urban outreach ministries of the church.' We realized we were never going to be full members. The church leadership chose to remember what they 'gave' us rather than recognizing our vital contributions to the community. . . . For these reasons my family left the Mennonite church.*[4]

The experience of Andrea's family raises important questions about the hospitality of Mennonites. On the one hand we see ourselves as welcoming to strangers. We eagerly share food and invite travelers to "Mennonite your way." But do we recognize ourselves as a changed body when new people join us? Do we think about the ways the Ferich family could have led the church in walking alongside other Vietnam vets who were disillusioned by war? Do we allow ourselves to be changed and shaped by those who join us?

Gelassenheit is not a pietistic relic but a necessity

Mark Van Steenwyk, co-founder of The Mennonite Worker (formerly Missio Dei) in Minneapolis, writes about *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness) in chapter thirteen of *Widening the Circle*. Mark grew up in a variety of conservative evangelical churches in Minnesota. After working with the emergent church movement for a few years, Mark and Misso Dei decided to affiliate with Mennonite Church USA through Central Plains Mennonite Conference in 2008.

In his chapter he connects *Gelassenheit* with the practice of baptism, calling baptism the initiation into the life of self-surrender. The word *Gelassenheit* was borrowed from the mystics, he notes, but was understood in practical terms by Anabaptists, through the relationships people have with each other.

"*Gelassenheit*," he goes on, "is about ridding one's life of all obstacles to love of God and neighbor."

> *As the early Anabaptist Hans Haffner wrote in his devotional tract* Concerning a True Soldier of Christ*: "When we truly realize the love of God we will be ready to give up for love's sake even what God has given us."*
>
> *This commitment to yieldedness was central to the early Anabaptist understanding of discipleship. Unfortunately, it has largely disappeared from modern Anabaptist awareness. I am convinced that a spirituality of* Gelassenheit *is central to discipleship today. Far from being a pietistic relic of the past, it is a timely necessity.*[5]

He explains this new spirituality of *Gelassenheit* as a means to remove "all the obstacles to our love." It does not allow us to separate our love of God from love of others.

> *The most powerful thing a community can do in our oppressive world is to come to terms with those things within themselves that prevent them from loving their neighbor and their God. If we are committed to this, we should at least start where Jesus did. Jesus' life and message directly confronted religious, economic, and socio-political inequities. Before we can really understand how to be a part of God's project to transform these inequities, we need to commit to lives of repentance.*[6]

Many people are looking to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition for hope. Our repentance can be a source of hope. We have a lot to learn. We also have a history and an embodied life together to offer.

Love trumps ideology

What are the ways that we as Mennonite bureaucrats, scholars, pastors, and church members have cut ourselves off from relationships of *Gelassenheit*? Where have we valued the stability or survival of our institutions over the prophetic words offered to us? This question is complex because there is a lot at stake.

But we're not alone. There are many people looking to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition for hope today. Our repentance can also be a source of hope. We're on a journey, and we have a lot to learn. We also have a history and an embodied life together to offer. We may never perfectly live out this calling, but I don't think that's the point. The point is living honestly, with repentance, and with a deep commitment to each other.

According to Vincent Harding, it is only when we are in familial relationships that we can wrestle together—that we can "get messy and connected and involved and angry and sorrowful and everything else that deeply engaged people are supposed to get." And, he goes on, "Love trumps ideology every time."

May we, no matter our context, embrace this complex and joy-filled journey of discipleship and church.

Notes

[1] Portions of this article are adapted from from *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship*, edited by Joanna Shenk. Copyright © 2011 by Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA 22802. Used by permission. For more information about the book, visit http://www.mennomedia.org/WideningtheCircle.
[2] Vincent Harding, "The Beggars Are Marching . . . Where Are the Saints? in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and John Howard Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 128–29.
[3] *Widening the Circle*, 164.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, 158.
[6] Ibid.

About the author

Joanna Shenk is a part of the Prairie Wolf Collective, a co-housing community in Elkhart, Indiana. She is a member at Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church and works for Mennonite Church USA as communication coordinator and interchurch relationships associate.

Limping to the finish
A sermon on Hebrews 12.1–17

Donita Wiebe-Neufeld

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to do some sort of epic endurance event, like swim the English Channel, bike in the Tour de France, or run the Boston Marathon? Those are events for people with strong bodies, time for practice, and access to money. The winners are the elite of the athletic world. Regular people, with jobs, wrinkles, and flat feet, we are the dreamers, who watch from the couch and only vicariously compete with the best. Maybe we are inspired by what they accomplish, but more likely we reach for the chips and quietly despair, knowing we struggle to run across the parking lot without pulling a muscle.

When we watch elite athletes, we see an ideal. We celebrate winners. We listen to their stories of making it to the top. However, reality, for the vast majority of also-rans, is quite different. Reality is the hard work behind the scenes. It may not have visible rewards. It is about coming in fourth or maybe not finishing at all. Sometimes it's about limping while others run past. Reality is slower and much more pear-shaped than the ideals perched on the podium.

Hebrews doesn't tell us to run the race to win. It simply tries to get us to finish, whole and somewhat healthy. The Hebrews race is about reality, not unattainable ideals.

The life and work of the church can be compared to an endurance event. It is something we dedicate our lives to; it takes practice and none of us will ever do it perfectly. We may not be recognized for our efforts, but it is worth the work and the sacrifice to make it across the finish line, and we cannot do it alone.

We spend years going to school to learn how to speak and write and think. Our friendships and marriages and work and community are all built on how we talk or do not talk to each other. If we avoid practicing communication skills in any organization, things fall apart. I mentioned that elite athletes represent a

physical ideal for us. What kind of communication ideal do we have that unites us as a church, a team with the ability to make it to the finish line?

I would like to say our congregation gets it right, that we always know how to speak and listen well to each other, but that is not reality, even in a relatively healthy church like ours. The dysfunctions of any church group are often on clear display, part of the regular discussions over a Wendy's burger on Sunday afternoon. We in the church, however, and even people who have nothing to do with the church, still expect it to be a place of love, understanding, and kind words. We expect it to be an organization of people who consider each other's needs and strive to be servant leaders, following the example of Jesus Christ. But as in epic races like a marathon, the overwhelming majority of us simply are not in the winner's circle. Our reality is struggle. Every one of us could tell a story of nasty words spoken or heard in a church foyer, of congregational meeting train wrecks, of misunderstandings and power struggles and the undercurrents of things we are afraid to talk about.

Hebrews 12 picks up on the idea of an epic race as a useful metaphor for the life of the church. And unlike the more familiar piece in 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews doesn't tell us to run to win. It simply tries to get us to finish, whole and somewhat healthy. The Hebrews race is about reality, not unattainable ideals. Here, the Christian runners, the athletes, are a sorry bunch. They need a lot of encouragement, because they are in danger of quitting. Their race has been hard, they have many distractions, and their resolve in the face of opposition has faltered. They are described as needing to throw off the sin that hinders them. They require discipline. Verse 12 says they need to strengthen their feeble arms and weak knees and take care of the lame people limping along beside them.

New Testament scholar Thomas Long suggests that this picture of the Christian church in Hebrews looks like the back half of a marathon: "There we find the ordinary runners, a few more years under the belt perhaps, a little extra weight over the belt, a lot more pausing to stop and sip water and catch one's breath. There are also the contestants on crutches and in wheelchairs, courageously out on the course nonetheless."[1] It is at the back of the

race, where the people are less than ideal, that the stuff the church is supposed to be about can happen. It is the place where healing and hope are visible. Where one runner might falter or faint, others will stop to help. No one should be so concerned about their own success that they run past each other. The runners at the back are encouragers; they want everyone to finish. Back there, it's not about competition, it's about compassion. It's about personal growth and accomplishment, and community for everyone, regardless of the challenges they bring with them.

This is a remarkable bit of scripture. The whole tone of Hebrews 12 is communal. There's almost nothing in it directed toward individuals. Christians are called, strongly, to work together, to make every effort to live in peace with the variety of strangeness and weakness found in the church. The writer talks about being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who encourage those who are trying. He uses plural language; he instructs us to pay attention to each other so that no one misses out. The hard to love, the ones who make bad decisions like Esau in verse 16, are to be encouraged. If they fail, it should not be because they were ignored by others in the race.

It is at the back of the race, where the people are less than ideal, that the stuff the church is supposed to be about can happen. It is the place where healing and hope are visible.

This counsel is in striking contrast to Greek culture of the time, which celebrated the individual winner, encouraged fierce competition, and demanded excellence. The idea of limping along at the back of a race or surrendering a chance of winning in order to help a lesser athlete was unthinkable to the Greeks. To hang back and help out instead of pursuing personal interest was a shocking message, a failing in the eyes of the dominant culture. The church, if it manages to run this way, will be moving against the flow of traffic in society. It will require endurance and sacrifice to finish well and receive the promised kingdom, but more than just one of us will finish. The Christian life is not a solitary pursuit. It is a team event, and that is why the church is so important. Church life is not about the elite; it is about regular people with problems: the stubborn ones, the self-righteous, the lonely, and the addicted. It is about real people with real faults doing something epic, extraordinary—something they could not do on their own.

But this kind of teamwork doesn't happen without communication. When I was in high school, we had a volleyball coach who hammered home the importance of communication. We learned to watch for the setter's signals as she called the plays; we had to call out if we were ready; we had to yell "Mine!" before going after the ball. When we listened and talked to each other, our team played as if we had one mind, and it felt great. When we quit talking, we became a bunch of individuals with separate agendas. We ran into each other, missed plays, and went home grumpy.

The teamwork that makes a church also relies on communication. Hebrew 12:14 says: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (NRSV). The church is always growing and dealing with different people and evolving issues. It should continually welcome new people and therefore will always contain a mix of us at different stages in the Christian journey. It will feature unique abilities and disabilities, wonderful and difficult people. Basic communication abilities, care for each other, and patience are skills that all of us "church athletes" must keep practicing.

There is a grace-filled give and take needed as we offer and accept help from each other as we run this race. We need to know that our church community is working to be a safe place for us to be able to speak and hear each other. This is always a work in progress in any church, even a healthy one. Years ago my husband Tim and I had been invited as guest speakers to another church. After the worship service, we were verbally attacked by one person in the foyer. It put us in an awkward spot, but then something wonderful happened. A member of that church gently stepped in between this person and us. He directed her comments to a local church leader and called us away to attend to something else. His caring intervention helped both the irate person and us to feel cared for and listened to. We are called, and expected, to do this for each other! We found out later that this person was living with mental illness. Her congregation, by its actions that morning, showed us she was a valued part of their community; at the same time they did not allow her behavior to cause harm to us.

The Hebrews metaphor of being at the back of the race and helping other runners is a great image as we think about how to

work at being church together. Its goals are realistic and attainable; all of us imperfect believers can finish the race well. Eugene Peterson, a pastor and scholar, writes: "The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world."[3] Is the church an ideal model of communication? Definitely not, but we are not called to be perfect. We are called to keep learning together with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. We will never, as a congregation, be able to claim we are the role model for communication that all others should follow.

We run this race together, encouraging each other, working to strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees. Our healthiest members run at the back of the pack in order to look out for those who falter and need help.

What we can do, what we are called to do, is to make every effort to live in peace with all. We run this race together, encouraging each other, working to strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees. Our healthiest members run at the back of the pack in order to look out for those who falter and need help. We learn to accept help from others when we are the ones who are injured or weak. We are a lot like the church described in Hebrews, full of sinners and handicapped by many things. Working together, supporting, challenging, and helping each other, we can run, limp, crawl, or be carried across the finish line. Following Christ, we can succeed in our calling to be God's church together.

Notes

[1] Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 135.
[2] Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

About the author

Donita Wiebe-Neufeld and her husband, Tim, have been copastors at First Mennonite Church, Edmonton, Alberta, since 2002. Donita is the Alberta correspondent for *Canadian Mennonite Magazine*. She preached this sermon on November 7, 2010, as part of a series on communication in the church.

Naming tomorrow's church

Carol Penner

What will we call next year's church? Every name is taken.
Church of God, Church of Christ, Church of the Holy Spirit,
Grace Church, Church of the Sermon on the Mount,
Church of the Saved, Church of the Redeemer,
the Apostolic Church, the Disciples Church,
the First Church, the Best Church, the One True Church,
my Church.
We have named them all.
But the world is pregnant with next month's church,
and it doesn't have a name yet.
We have hopes and dreams
formed from our best practices and deepest disappointments.
A church where God is present, mysterious and creative.
A church where Jesus is worshiped.
A church where the Holy Spirit enlivens and moves.
Praises are sung, prayers are breathed, the word is preached,
service is rendered, confessions are made, offerings are accepted,
brothers and sisters are embraced, the poor are comforted,
the Lord's table is crowded.
The church of next week grows and stirs, wanting to be born.
A church confident yet humble, centred but diverse,
conservative and radical, tactful and unapologetic,
faithful, playful, joyful, devout.
The birth pangs begin.
Who will name tomorrow's church?

About the author

Carol Penner is pastor of The First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ontario. Her prayers and worship resources can be found on her blog, www.leadinginworship.com.

Being church
Print and electronic resources for church renewal

Arlyn Friesen Epp

Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening, by Diana Butler Bass (New York: HarperOne, 2012). The data are clear: religious affiliation is plummeting across the breadth of Christian denominations. And yet interest in "spirituality" is on the rise. So what is behind the sea change in religion? Here, Bass offers a fresh interpretation of the "spiritual but not religious" trend. She argues compellingly that we are at a critical stage in a completely new spiritual awakening, a vast interreligious progression toward individual and cultural transformation, and a wholly new kind of postreligious faith.

The Power of All: Building a Multivoiced Church, by Sian Murray Williams and Stuart Murray Williams (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012). Whenever renewal occurs, everyone in the church is drawn into involvement in the church's mission. But within a generation or two, vitality wanes and ministry is left to religious specialists. In *The Power of All*, renewal leaders Stuart (author of *The Naked Anabaptist*) and Sian Murray Williams confront this dilemma by asking: How can a New Testament model help empower and renew the church in today's post-Christian society?

Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults are Leaving, Staying and Returning to the Church, by James Penner et al. (Toronto: Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 2011). Are young people leaving your church? This 2011 Canadian study of 2,049 young people provides a wealth of findings and suggests ways to reverse the trend.

Following Jesus in Invaded Space: Doing Theology in Aboriginal Land, by Chris Budden (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications,

2009). Christianity is never just about beliefs but is also about habits and practices, for better or worse. Theology always reflects the social location of the theologian—including her privileges and prejudices—all the time working with a particular, often undisclosed, notion of what is normal. Therefore, theology is never "neutral"—it defends particular constructions of reality, and it promotes certain interests. *Following Jesus in Invaded Space* asks what—and whose—interests theology protects when it is part of a community that invaded the land of indigenous peoples. Here the conversation dares to speak of God, church, and justice in the context of past history and continuing dispossession.

The Church Made Strange for the Nations: Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology, by Paul G. Doerksen and Karl Koop (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011). Christians have sometimes held that the church ought to be "in the world but not of it," yet the meaning and significance of this conviction has continued to challenge and confound. In the context of persecution, Christians in the ancient world tended to distance themselves from the social and civic mainstream, while in the medieval and early modern periods, the church and secular authorities often worked in close relationship, sharing the role of shaping society. In a post-Christendom era, this latter arrangement has been the subject of heavy critique and has been largely dismantled, but there is no consensus in Christian thought about what the alternative should be. This collection of essays offers new challenging and provocative perspectives.

Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South, by Conrad Kanagy et al. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012). In this ground-breaking study, the authors make an unsettling claim: Anabaptist churches of the Global South have more in common with the church of the first three centuries than they do with contemporary churches in Europe and North America that claim the Anabaptist name. With data from eighteen thousand church members in ten countries, the authors show how historical patterns of church renewal are repeating themselves today in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The study does more than crunch statistics; it probes the sources and nature

of the renewal and growth. And it pushes readers to ask what these trends can teach the churches of the North in their own quest for faithfulness and vitality.

Church Matters Podcasts, hosted by Dan Dyck, Mennonite Church Canada. Monthly 15-minute podcasts explore why the church matters in the world today. Each episode features either a local or a global Mennonite or ecumenical guest who from his or her own experiences tells stories about why the church matters today. Podcasts are available for free download at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1893.

Lifelong Faith Journal: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation, edited by John Roberto. *Lifelong Faith* is a quarterly journal that helps congregations develop faith formation opportunities for all ages and generations, increasing the capacity of leaders and communities to nurture faith growth. Issues are available for free digital download at http://www.lifelongfaith.com/.

2012 Peace Audit Report, by Robert J. Suderman (Mennonite World Conference, 2012). This report summarizes the responses the MWC Peace Commission received to their question: "How is your church doing in its desire to be a Peace Church?" The audit reports: "The good news is that it is evident that the consciousness of being a Peace Church is deeply embedded in the identity of the MWC member-churches that responded. The bad news is the pervasive complexity in moving from what is desired and written on paper, to becoming a bedrock part of the life of the Christian life and community." The report is available online in English, Spanish, and French at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1975.

Pilgrimage Project of Mennonite Church British Columbia. This series of short online videos highlights the work and ministry of MCBC leaders. Each church leader is asked questions about church ministry, missional church identity, today's "Anabaptist vision," our present cultural agenda, and the issues they expect that the church will face in the next two decades. Visit http://www.pilgrimageproject.com/.

What Is the Spirit Saying to the Churches? Mennonite Church Eastern Canada Gathering, 2011. In the format of the seven letters to the churches from the book of Revelation, this set of videos available online brings you "letters" from several church leaders, including David Martin, Lucy Roca, Ralph Lebold, Brian Bauman, Rebecca Steiner of MCEC, Willard Metzger from Mennonite Church Canada, and author/activist Shane Claiborne. This set of videos is available online at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1976.

Embracing Emergence Christianity, by Phyllis Tickle (Denver: Morehouse Education Resources, 2011). A six-session study on DVD, with guide, based on Tickle's book *The Great Emergence*. She examines the changing face of Christianity and culture, asking: "What are the implications of today's 'Great Emergence,' both culturally and spiritually? What are the key questions and issues that need to be addressed? Are we an "emergence church"?

About the author

Arlyn Friesen Epp is director of Mennonite Church Canada Resource Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba; resources.mennonitechurch.ca. Within Canada, resources from the centre (including the items listed above) can be borrowed; items for sale or free download are available to all. Check www.resources.mennonitechurch.ca for more information.