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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Transformation

Editorial

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In the following pages, you will find a variety of perspectives and views on personal and communal transformation in the light of God, mediated by Christ in the power of the Spirit. The articles included in this issue of *Vision* blend biblical and theological considerations with experiential and practical concerns for faith and ministry. Together with the diversity of viewpoints with which the authors treat specific topics, you will also find fundamental convergence and complementarity among the essays. In a nutshell, these are the highlights of the material we wish to share with you:

- The place to start is not the agenda of the church but discernment of and involvement in the activity of the triune God in the world and for the sake of the world. Art McPhee describes how participation in the *missio Dei* transforms us, our churches, and our church institutions.
- Scripture is indispensable if we are to understand authentic transformation and be inspired and guided in transforming ways. My article examines the gospel story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman as a paradigmatic illustration of the foundational place and role of the Bible.
- Molly Marshall constructs a theology of spiritual transformation and ongoing sanctification in terms of a "metamorphosis of glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Rebecca Slough makes particular reference to the contributions of John and Charles Wesley, and uses Charles's hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling," to explicate the work of the Spirit in transforming believers' lives "from glory into glory."
- The experiences and the practices of worship play an essential role in the transformation of individuals and faith communities. Marlene Kropf addresses the special significance of praise

(recognizing and naming who God is) and confession (recognizing and naming who we are) for our ongoing conversion.

- June Alliman Yoder contends that authentic preaching persuades and is an agent of transforming change. Preachers should recognize and take into consideration the structures and patterns of the persuasion process in leading people to new faith understandings and commitments.

A loving partnership between the Holy Spirit and our spirit is at the heart of all transformations that really matter in the life of faith and in ministry. May we long for, embrace, enjoy, and share this priceless gift.

- Spiritual direction provides a unique setting to foster and experience personal transformation. Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau describes the triangular design of the conversation involving the directee and the director and the active presence of the Holy Spirit.
- By divine grace in the midst of suffering, the pain of the season of mourning holds the promise of new life against and beyond death. Rachel Nafziger Hartzler offers thoughts on her experience of the transforming power of grief as participation in an intense process of recognizing, reflecting, ritualizing, and reorienting.
- Leaders play a major role in the process of congregational transformation, and faith communities in turn contribute to the formation and transformation of congregational leaders. Erick Sawatzky reviews resources that enhance our understanding of the structure and dynamics of institutions and help congregations engage in meaningful interaction with culture.
- Keith Graber Miller argues that deep personal transformation is especially possible through cross-cultural encounters and experiential learning. For service alongside others as well as conversion of ourselves, God calls us to cross borders and boundaries in our own communities or countries, or overseas.

Transformation is God's will and business. It should not be trivialized. Indeed, the dynamics of genuine transformation often include risk, conflict, surprise, and disorientation, as well as new insight, the release of energy, and reorientation. As one writer notes, "transformation" is a trendy word in our culture; in the vast

majority of instances in which individuals and churches (!) use the word, human beings assume control of the process and anticipate the outcome. But transformation, like life and growth, is a divine gift granted in creative, liberating, healing, and empowering ways. At the same time, transformation in the light of God calls for human participation and collaboration. A loving partnership between the Holy Spirit and our spirit is at the heart of all transformations that really matter in the life of faith and in ministry. May we long for, embrace, enjoy, and share this priceless gift.

The *missio Dei* and the transformation of the church

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One result of the oft-cited fact that "of the making of books there is no end" is the retreading of titles with good mileage potential. One title with such appeal, apparently, is *What in the World Is God Doing?* How many times it has been revivified I cannot say, but I know of four incarnations and own two. The other day a colleague spotted one on my bookshelf. Removing it, he examined the cover and remarked, "Wouldn't we all like to know that!"

A slightly different question asks, "What is God doing in the world?" On that one, I think we have a better handle. No doubt, there are lots of ways to express it, but it boils down to something like this: God is on a mission.

In recent years, missiologists have been giving attention to the *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world. It all began with a paper Karl Barth read at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932. Barth spoke not in the usual fashion about "the mission of the church" or about "our mission" but about mission as an activity of God. "Must not even the most faithful missionary, the most convinced friend of missions, have reason to reflect that the term *missio* was in the ancient Church an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity—namely the expression of the divine sending forth of self, the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit to the world? Can we indeed claim that we do it any other way?"[1]

In that address, Karl Barth became the initial exponent of a new theological paradigm.[2] Following Barth's lead, missiologist Karl Hartenstein not only taught that mission is rightly grounded in the Trinity—that its locus is the redemptive and sending activity that took place within the Godhead—but as early as 1934 he began using the term *misso Dei* to describe mission as an attribute and activity of God.[3] It was, however, nearly two decades later, at the Willingen Conference of the International

Missionary Council, that the idea of mission as derived from the very nature of God began to gain wider attention. There, as David Bosch writes, mission was "put in the context of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."[4] The actual term *missio Dei* was not employed in the Willingen documents. However, even in the planning stages, preparatory reports affirmed, "God's mission, not ours." Thus, out of Willingen came the radical shift in perspective that *missio Dei* would represent, a shift that missiologist Johannes Verkuyl called "Copernican."[5]

The next milestone in the development of the concept came in 1958 in the form of a book, *Missio Dei,* by Georg Vicedom, who used as his starting point the Willingen affirmation that "the missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself."[6] Vicedom's book was not meant for the scholarly world but as an introduction for sending societies and missionaries. He divided his discussion into five parts, beginning with the idea of *missio Dei*. Other sections considered God's lordship and kingdom, God's sending (the Father sends the Son, who is both sent and sender; the Father and the Son send the Spirit), the goal of God's mission (the kingdom fulfilled in the conversion of the nations), and the sending/inclusion of the church (congregations, apostles, and servants) in God's mission.

Since the 1960s, the company of those endorsing the shift from a church-centered or salvation-centered missiology to a God-centered missiology has widened to include leaders from a wide range of Christian persuasions.

Seven years later, Vicedom's book appeared in English, in the thick of mounting cynicism in North America about the missionary enterprise and calls for a moratorium on missions. James A. Scherer's *Missionary, Go Home!*, Ralph Dodge's *The Unpopular Missionary,* and John Carden's *The Ugly Missionary* were all published the year before, in 1964, and some people welcomed Vicedom's elaboration of the mission of God as a more positive offering. However, Vicedom had been concerned not just with the

validity of missions but of the church itself, which was something new. As Vicedom put it, "Although this [legitimacy] question has always been addressed to the mission, what is remarkable in this age of ecclesiology is that this question should also be put to the church, the vehicle of the mission." Because mission was yoked to the church (mission being understood as the church's response to the gospel), the enlargement of the question was inevitable. However, by showing that the ultimate source of the church's missional activity is God's own mission, Vicedom destroyed the argument linking the legitimacy of mission to the legitimacy of the church.

Since the 1960s, the company of those endorsing the shift from a church-centered or salvation-centered missiology to a God-centered missiology has widened to include leaders from a wide range of Christian persuasions.[7] From the conciliar world, where the shift began, Jürgen Moltmann has asserted, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world, it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father which includes the church."[8] From the evangelical world, John Stott at Lausanne has affirmed that "Mission is an activity of God arising out of the very nature of God…so the mission of the church arises from the mission of God and is to be modeled on it."[9] From the Roman Catholic world, the Second Vatican Council has stated: "The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."[10] Likewise, Anabaptist missiologists have woven the first principle of *missio Dei* into their theologies of missions. Wilbert Shenk is a notable example:

> *The mission of the Triune God is to establish* basileia *[kingdom] over the whole of creation. This is being realized through the missio Dei. The character of the missio Dei is defined by the ministry of God's Messiah, Jesus the* ebed *[servant], whose servanthood was empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit that the church is endowed with spiritual gifts and empowered for ministry as the messianic community. The missio Dei will be consummated in the eschaton; but in the interim the eschaton infuses the messianic community with hope and*

> *power as it continues its witness amid opposition and suffering. The interaction of these elements represents the mission dynamic which, in turn, defines the vocation of the disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.*[11]

This shift has important implications for the church. To begin with, if from start to finish mission belongs to the triune God, then whatever missionary activities we engage in can only be deemed appropriate if they coincide with God's mission. As Stephen Neill, David Bosch, and others have pointed out, if the mission is God's, missions (plural) must derive from mission (singular).

Second, because it is God's, mission is not something the church can call a moratorium on, or evade. Because the church is the fruit of God's emerging kingdom, the church will be missional. Nothing it does will be self-serving. It will fully participate in God's mission in the world, not out of obligation but by nature. Because the Spirit of Christ indwells it, the church will spontaneously carry on with the errand on which Christ came. In loving acts and faithful witness it will boldly herald God's new reality. To those for whom the proclamation of the kingdom seems a presumptuous imposition on people who have their own legitimate faiths, the church will humbly maintain that mission is not its undertaking but God's, that God has decided to include the church, and that this is the purpose for which God made the church and indwells it!

Third, the mission of the church cannot be limited to planting churches and saving souls, for with God's kingdom comes *shalom*, of which the church is a sign. The missional church proclaims the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ who, present in the Spirit, is continuing God's mission of establishing the kingdom. And what it preaches it also confirms in ministries of love to its own members and everyone else—even enemies. In priestly service, prophetic speaking and actions, and advocacy for peace and justice, the church models the meaning of kingdom citizenship.

Fourth, God's people do these things not out of obligation but out of a new identity. When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), he was not issuing a command but making a statement about the nature of his followers. Likewise, the New Testament's

metaphors for believers—salt, light, fishers, stars, letters, ambassadors, good seed—are never made into imperatives. They are always indicative, attesting that mission is the natural activity of the church. In Emil Brunner's words, "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning."

Fifth, for some in the church, being in mission will involve a call to a specific place or people. But no longer will mission be seen as something westerners carry to the non-western world. God's mission is to the whole world, so every place of human habitation is a mission setting.

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Although this new understanding of the mission as God's mission clarifies much about the church's role in the world, it also raises perplexing questions about the church and its institutions. For example, the present North American scene is increasingly post-Christendom, post-denominational, and postmodern. What kind of participation in God's mission do these emerging realities demand?

Other questions arise from the new *missio Dei* paradigm itself: (1) What are the implications of this shift in understanding for churches that have traditionally affirmed the role of denominations? (2) What about our enthrallment with church buildings, which tend to draw our focus inward? (3) If the church participates in the *missio Dei* and is not owner of its own mission, what is to be our theology of congregational life? Is it not plain that ingrown churches function less as churches than as fellowship groups (or as hospices, in view of drastic declines in western church membership)? (4) What are the implications for how we do Sunday school, small groups, and other ministries? (5) Does this new paradigm challenge the validity of certain ministries? (6) Can our cherished distinction between clergy and laity hold up in the light of this new way of thinking? (7) What changes are implied for seminaries and their curricula? Do we continue to stress training leaders for pastoral ministry, which we have mainly understood as something done in and for existing congregations?

When we make the *missio Dei* our priority and "seek first the kingdom," we must deal with a host of such issues. Collaterally, in

the light of the Scriptures, we are obliged to appraise the reasons for many of our practices. As we do, we are confronted with the inevitability of transformation in ourselves, our churches, and our church institutions. To put it another way, when our ethos changes and our prayer begins with "thy kingdom come," our priorities, our programs, our preaching, our practices will all change. No longer will we be able to abide an ecclesiology that is not missiological. No longer will we be able to divide church and mission. Isolation (personal or corporate) and respectability will be mutually exclusive. Therefore, we will seek unceasingly to learn what God is doing in our little part of the world and get on board. We will rediscover the meaning of gathering in order to be sent. Our Sunday schools and small groups will recover their missional intent. Our failure of nerve will dissipate. Having been called from our darkness to be God's own people, we will give testimony to God's mighty acts and become lenses for God's marvelous light (1 Pet. 1:9). Our kindness, passion for justice, and engagement in peacemaking will be clearly seen by all to be derivatives of God's mission—we will make sure of it. To paraphrase Mennonite missiologist James Krabill, our mission will smell like God's mission.[12] Finally, we will reclaim our faith and approach each day with anticipation, expecting to encounter in ourselves and others the transforming work of Christ through the Spirit.

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Notes

[1] Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1995), 105–6.

[2] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1991), 390.

[3] Gerold Schwarz, *Mission, Gemeinde und Ökumene in der Theologie Karl Hartensteins* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1980), 130, is a record of Hartenstein's early employment of the term. After the 1952 International Missionary Council in Willingen, Hartenstein's report stated: "The mission is not only obedience to a word of the Lord, it is not only the commitment to the gathering of the congregation; it is participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with the inclusive aim of establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation" (Karl Hartenstein, "Theologische

Besinnung," in *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Vom Festaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Licht der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen,* ed. Walter Freytag [Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag, 1952], 51–68). Another early Hartenstein work in which the concept shows up is his dissertation, *Die Mission als theologisches Problem: Beiträge zum grundsätzlichen Verständnis der Mission* (Berlin: Furche-verlag, 1933), cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 390.

[4] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 390.

[5] Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3.

[6] Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission,* trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Hse., 1965), 5; originally published as *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1958).

[7] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 390–1; Charles van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds., *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1993), 262.

[8] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution of Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Pr., 1977), 64.

[9] J. D. Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Volume, Papers and Responses, International Congress on World Evangelism, Lausanne, Switzerland* (Minneapolis: World Wide Pubns., 1975), 66.

[10] Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1975), 814.

[11] Wilbert Shenk, "The Mission Dynamic," in *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch's Work Considered,* ed. Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzinger (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1996), 93.

[12] James R. Krabill, *Does Your Church Smell Like Mission? Reflections on Becoming a Missional Church,* Mission Insight, no. 17, (Elkhart: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001).

Transformation in the borderlands
A study of Matthew 15:21–28

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Throughout the centuries Christians have interpreted and used the story of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman in many ways. In recent years writings from a variety of perspectives reflect renewed interest in this fascinating story.[1] This essay reports my own work with this Gospel narrative in Bible study and in conversation and collaboration with others. My objective is to respond practically to the pertinent question my friend and colleague Mary Schertz often poses: How does this text minister to us, so that we can minister with the text? In other words, I will address the question: How may this biblical text become foundational for faith and ministry?[2]

I will follow the familiar movements of an inductive study process, in popularized Latin American terms: seeing, judging, and acting. I assume that study of any biblical text should happen within the context of a Spirit-led faith community that prayerfully seeks to become wiser in the light of God in formative and transformative ways. And I also assume that one always brings perspectives, agendas, biases, and other sensitivities to any Bible study, while needing to welcome others' readings and contributions critically as well as creatively.[3]

First, we will take a close look at the biblical passage, trying to grasp its meaning afresh. Second, we will ponder its significance, keeping in mind the social and cultural context. Finally, we will draw implications for our embodiment of the message in truthful and fruitful ways.

On the meaning of the text: Seeing

This story appears only in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew, and we note some significant differences between the

two accounts.[4] These dissimilarities suggest that Matthew has an interest in underscoring and intensifying some features of the story. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on its narrative.

> *Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21–28, NRSV)*

> *From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24–30, NRSV)*

I will succinctly highlight four variations in the two accounts. We recognize first a puzzling ambiguity about the location of the encounter, especially in Matthew's account: Had Jesus entered the

region of Sidon and Tyre, or simply approached it—as suggested in many scholarly interpretations? Had the woman left that area for Jewish territory and only then encountered Jesus?[5]

Second, while Mark identifies the woman as a Gentile (a Greek), of Syrophoenician origin (or, by race a Phoenician from Syria), in Matthew the woman is "a Canaanite woman from that region." The latter account implies that she is unclean and pagan, and possibly poor, perhaps a peasant. According to Matthew's version, a demon possessed and tormented the woman's daughter; this characterization suggests great evil and danger. Further, "Canaanite" evokes an adversarial relationship, dating from the divinely sanctioned conquest of the Canaanites' land by the Israelites, who were taught to view themselves as "chosen…out of all the peoples on earth to be God's people and treasured possession" (Deut. 7:1–6).

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Third, Matthew's account includes not just Tyre but Sidon. "Tyre and Sidon," cities located on the Mediterranean coast, traditionally designated the Gentile/pagan region northwest of Jewish territory. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus characterized Tyre and Sidon as more open to the gospel than the Galilean cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida: "If the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago" (11:20–21).

Fourth, in Matthew's version of the story, the conversation is more involved and the disciples take part. In verse 23, they ambiguously advise Jesus to "dismiss her." Surprisingly, the woman addresses Jesus in the language of Israel's faith, "Lord, Son of David," and lays her need at his feet. In Matthew, not only does she address Jesus directly, but she is the first woman to speak in the Gospel. Correspondingly, in the end Jesus praises the Canaanite woman for her faith, and the whole incident thus becomes a special instance of "praying faith."

A plain reading of the story presents a clear and unique instance in which Jesus yields. One could argue that here he is bested in an argument! The most striking and problematic part of

the story is, of course, Jesus' initial response to the request of the woman: First a deafening silence, then an uncharacteristic affirmation of boundaries, followed by parabolic refusal. At that moment he appears to regard the woman's request as inappropriate, even as outrageously *out of place!* Only in this gospel story does Jesus clearly ignore a supplicant, place the barrier of ethnicity before a plea for help, and then use offensive language to reiterate the barrier. Without question, "dog" is a disdainful metaphor, though Jesus uses a diminutive form ("puppy," "little bitch"). The implication, of course, is that the Gentiles/dogs have no place at the table. The woman, however, appears to play along with that harsh image and simply urges Jesus to take it one step further. She appeals to him as "Lord," asserts her claim, and demonstrates her faith by arguing that at the very least both children (Jews) and dogs (Gentiles) are under the same caring, compassionate authority.

One need not infer that the woman agrees with the Gentile/dog analogy. Nor do we need to conclude that she considers herself unworthy and less than human, or that she identifies herself as a dog. On the contrary, we may assume that she is requesting that she and her daughter be included, that she hopes for a place at the table and challenges Israel's excluding ideology. When she says, "Yes, Lord…," she agrees with Jesus that it would be wrong to throw the children's bread to the dogs. But she also reminds Jesus that if even dogs may eat what their masters waste, she and her daughter should receive bread, too. The Canaanite woman understands the grave meaning and implications of Jesus' initial response, but she proceeds wisely and daringly to reframe and recast it. Jesus' original challenge to the woman merely restates the status quo of gender, ethnic, cultural, religious, and political division. Her counter-challenge calls him to look to the place of new possibilities across and beyond the established boundaries. Instead of accepting the dichotomy of children (insiders/receive food) versus dogs

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(outsiders/no food), she imagines that both the children and the dogs can be graciously fed inside, within the same household and from the same table.[6]

The dramatic import of this encounter in the borderlands is heightened as we recall its historical and textual background. "Show them no mercy," Moses had said to the people of Israel (Deut. 7:2). "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David," the Canaanite woman implores the New Moses of Israel. This Canaanite woman thus shatters the lingering image of wicked Canaanites, who presumably offer their children in sacrifice to their gods; she pleads on behalf of her daughter, who cannot speak for herself.[7] Well aware of his people's position and privilege as "chosen," Jesus initially reasserts the exclusiveness of his mission. But in the end, he welcomes the woman, and she receives what she had sought with passion, courage, and determination.

Finally, this story parallels that of the Roman centurion, in Matt. 8:5–13. These are the only two healings in this Gospel explicitly involving Gentiles and accomplished from a distance. In both cases Jesus deems the people worthy of the gift of healing. In fascinating reversals, both Gentiles even become exemplar figures. Most commentators indicate that although Matthew's final word on mission to the Gentiles does not come until the last chapter of the Gospel (28:16–20), in these and related episodes the theme emerges that ethnicity does not define the people of God. Intertextual comparative studies indicate that Matthew's positive portrait of Jesus' response to the Gentiles constitutes a partial reversal of the Exodus tradition by focusing on the missional goal of bringing outsiders to the knowledge of the God of Israel.[8] God's purposes include Gentiles, and Jesus the Jew is the agent of divine grace on their behalf.[9] Transformation is happening in the borderlands!

On the significance of the text: Judging

The text before us suggests and calls for several kinds of stretching. Geographic, ethnic, gender, religious, theological, socio-cultural, moral, and political dimensions are involved. No wonder, then, that the intrusion of the woman into his life and sense of vocation and ministry stunned Jesus. Because this narrative has much spatial and contextual import, it is fitting that

our interpretation underscores that this marginal Canaanite woman emerges as the center of the story! In fact, the story is primarily her story. We observe a surprising, transforming reversal: Jesus comes to acknowledge that she has great faith. This Gospel uses that adjective to describe faith only once. The woman's faith encompasses her persistent demand for inclusion in the face of Jesus' resistance; her challenge to the gender, ethnic, religious, political, and economic barriers; her recognition of Jesus' authority over demons; and her reliance on his power.[10] Perhaps Jesus' praise includes a realization we can appreciate today as well: In that encounter in the borderlands, the Canaanite woman became a prophetic and wise teacher. Out of her desire for healing for her daughter, she acted and spoke counter-culturally and counter-politically as she reminded Jesus of the larger vision of the reign of God. And she did so in a way consistent with the converging prophetic and wisdom traditions with which Jesus/Wisdom (Sophia) is interpreted in the Gospel of Matthew.[11]

The most vexing question for us is, of course, why Jesus would act as he did in this encounter. An answer requires that we maintain the tension between two historical realities. On the one hand, we must assume that Jesus had been socialized into the conventional wisdom of his time and dominant culture. According to such socialization, prudence involved keeping clear boundaries; adhering to certain criteria of what is proper, clean, normal, and appropriate; and holding to right categories and patterns of perception, thought, relationships. This socialization was undoubtedly part of Jesus' identity as a first-century Jew. From a human science perspective, we do not expect that Jesus would have been exempt from dealing with prejudice. Neither do we expect that he would have spontaneously developed the kind of understanding enabling him to readily appreciate and communicate with the woman across vast social and cultural differences. On the other hand, we must also recognize that Jesus of Nazareth was himself a marginal person.[12] He was rejected by the dominant groups and became a friend of marginalized people—tax-collectors, outcasts, women, the poor and oppressed,

The story as it unfolds makes clear that both the woman and Jesus became boundary walkers and boundary breakers.

"sinners," and Gentiles. In other words, Jesus related abnormally well to those people, and was accepted by them, because he was himself an outsider, a homeless person (Matt. 8:20) living in two worlds without fully belonging to either.[13] In sum, from a theological perspective, whenever we look at Jesus the Christ we should see that the historical and existential reality of the incarnation is not only about "body" *(sōma)*, but is also about "soul" *(psychē)* and "spirit" *(pneuma)*.

An outsider, a multiply marginal person, challenged Jesus to relate and minister across and beyond those boundaries. She gave him an opportunity to respond in tune with God's alternative wisdom expressed in an ethic and politics of compassion and radical inclusiveness. It is fitting to conclude that Jesus faced a major conflict and temptation, indeed a temptation from within, and that eventually he chose wisely. This conclusion need not compromise our christological conviction about the nature and work of Jesus Christ. As Heb. 4:15 puts it, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." If we accept this interpretation, we must reject three other interpretations: (a) that Jesus was testing (playing games with) the woman while knowing all along what he should and would do, (b) that he wanted to teach the disciples a dramatic lesson about loving enemies, or (c) that he had to be converted (repent from sin). The biblical text supports none of these interpretations.

The story as it unfolds makes clear that both the woman and Jesus became boundary walkers and boundary breakers. By eventually choosing to relate and to minister "out of place," Jesus and the woman pointed the way to God's utopia. "Utopia" means literally "no place," not in the sense of never-never land, illusion, or fantasy, but as the stuff of prophetic dreams. From a biblical perspective, utopias are places that are not yet, not because they are mere ideals beyond reach, but because evil and sinful structures and behaviors resist and contradict God's will for ethnic and racial justice and reconciliation.

Finally, as we judge this text, we must realize its significance in light of the social and existential realities of the Matthean community. On the one hand, we recognize that the Gospel

according to Matthew was written from the perspective of the chosen people of Israel, beginning with "Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). The author writes from the center of the tradition, and from a typically "centralist" point of view.[14] Within this framework Jesus instructs the disciples, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles…, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5–6). The latter expression is unique to Matthew and repeated in our text. The author leaves no doubt about Israel's priority in salvation history. On the other hand, the story of the Canaanite woman can help undermine and even dismantle chosenness as ideology, as justification for excluding and discriminating against the other, the stranger, the foreigner. A powerful paradox is at work here!

We surmise that the early readers of Matthew were Jewish Christians separated from the synagogue and relating both to a largely Gentile Christian movement and to the Jewish community. The story must have aided them to understand their new place and role in God's plan and reign. This story may also have helped free them from the ideology of chosenness so they could be transformed into a more liberating and inclusive faith community. Perhaps they were already beginning to experience such a community, but were unsure about how to cope with, legitimate, and reflect on it.[15] This transition and transformation of the Matthean community would have been crucial for their sense of identity as well as for the mission to the Gentiles. The new community—where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28)—is thus called to celebrate, embody, and be an agent of the coming reign of God, the future in which God is making all things new. Transformation is indeed happening in the borderlands!

On embodying the text: Acting

We may realize the creative and liberating potential of this story in many ways on personal and communal levels. The following interrelated guidelines illustrate how this text has become foundational for me and other Bible study partners, how the text has ministered to us so that we can minister to others. Without trivializing the import of this wonderful story, one can think of ways our text foundationally illumines specific principles—

dependable guides to practice—for faith and ministry. For example, much could be said about multicultural communication and hermeneutics, evangelization and mission, education for peace and justice, care and counseling, among others.[16] I have chosen to highlight just three general guidelines in the following paragraphs.

First, contrary to what dominant cultures hold, the borderlands can become privileged places for the blessings of transformative learning, and for personal and communal growth and creativity. Conventional and pragmatic wisdom favors the safe havens of familiar territory, the shrewd and sensible stance of "playing it safe." The story of the Canaanite woman who confronts Jesus helps us realize that we can see reality better at places of marginality and vulnerability, and from the vantage point available to us at the borders. Our vision may thus be transformed. Hence, we are called to creative "willful contextual dislocations." This story asks us to move deliberately beyond our comfort zones, either by going out or by welcoming into our midst the stranger, the alien, or the different other.[17] By moving from the center to the margins, we will find our perspectives significantly changed: we will become aware of the lenses through which we view the world, and our cultural and ideological captivities will be unveiled. We will be open to see better how God wants us to live and act in creative, redeeming, and empowering ways wherever we are.

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A second guideline suggested by our study is that situations of conflict and suffering can become opportunities for transformation, for renewal and healing, and for witnessing God's amazing grace. People who hunger and thirst for wholeness, justice, freedom, and peace are especially close to the heart of God, because their desire reflects God's own longing for all people. For this reason they are blessed (Matt. 5:3–11). For this reason the Canaanite woman was blessed. That is the meaning of the claim of liberation theologies, that God has a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, for the victim and the weak.

Jesus not only taught about this preference, he also showed concretely what it involves. In our story, the demonstration happened in a context of conflict and against his human inclinations! The church is sent to continue his ministry and to embrace the suffering neighbor seeking healing and hope. As we respond, our hearts will be nurtured and transformed. Places of pain become places of grace as we are led and empowered to practice the virtues essential for caring as representatives of Christ: humility, hospitality, love, compassion, patience, hope, generosity, and courage.

Third, as Jesus himself may have experienced, ministry at its best is a two-way street, a mutual practice and process. For us in North America, the center of the center in the ongoing globalization process, this kind of ministry poses special challenges. To become missional churches our faith communities will need to undergo a conversion to the margins. Many of us Mennonites need to shed our own ideology of chosenness to better attend to our deepest yearnings, limitations, and needs, as well as to the potential of others. We bless and we are in turn blessed, sometimes the hard way, in spite of our blinders and shortcomings. Often we will unexpectedly find ourselves being ministered to. In fact, we cannot truly participate in other people's liberation and healing without allowing them to participate in our own liberation and healing. In this process our common human vocation in the light of God is reconfirmed and sustained. And for us today, this blessing includes an additional realization: Serving and being served in the borderlands, across and against boundaries, again and again becomes the sacred experience of encountering Christ and loving him anew. In due time, it will be revealed to us, as in the eschatological parable of Matt. 25:31–46:[18] "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Notes

[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza took the title of her book, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1992), from the story of the Syrophoenician-Canaanite woman. In her view, the story "represents the biblical-theological voice of women, which has been excluded, repressed, or marginalized in Christian discourse" (11).

[2] As a practical theologian, I use the term "foundational" deliberately and precisely. For me, the Bible is foundational in at least four interrelated ways: (a) It informs my

normative framework and perspective for practice and reflection, especially regarding wisdom (knowing how to live in the light of God); (b) it offers key content disclosed in the teachings, narratives, and other materials (poetic, prophetic, apocalyptic, etc.) which express the written Word in ways that illumine and address our human condition; (c) it calls for engagement in an interpretive process for the sake of discernment and wise living; and (d) it grounds my own spirituality as a man of faith and as a ministering person (teacher and pastoral counselor), theological educator, and theologian.

[3] My personal story includes growing up in Argentina right before Vatican II, when the Roman Catholic Church was the official state church and discrimination against Protestants was widespread. My parents were active members of the local Mennonite church, so I developed a strong separate religious identity. I learned to read the Bible and to live out and reflect on the Christian faith as a member of a marginal community. As an immigrant in the United States I find myself not fully belonging in this country and being reminded frequently of my "otherness" because of my accent, appearance, and certain social and cultural characteristics. I now feel that I no longer fully belong in Argentina either, though I keep close contact and collaborative ties in my country as well as in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. In sum, I have become one of the millions of "hybrid" people living in the United States, and my unique way of being Latin American conditions the way I read the Bible today. Finally, I am blessed with opportunities to teach and work in several contexts, including Europe. I increasingly appreciate perspectives and contributions of countless others with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from a variety of Christian traditions—especially Reformed and Roman Catholic—even as my own Anabaptist convictions have been shared, tested, and enriched.

[4] One is inclined to think that the narrative would also fit well in Luke's Gospel, given what we know about Luke, a Gentile writing to Gentiles, who gives women a significant place in his telling of the gospel (see Reta Halteman Finger, "How Jesus Learned about Ethnic Discrimination," *The Mennonite* [26 December 2000]: 6–7). According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, however, Luke does not include the story because he puts Paul and Peter at the center of the debate about the mission to the Gentiles: "This Lukan historical model has no room for a story about an educated Greek woman, who as a religious and ethnic outsider argues with Jesus for the Gentiles' share in the power of well-being" (Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 97).

[5] See, for instance, Daniel J. Harrington: "It is possible to envision the Matthean episode as having taken place on Jewish soil, with the pagan woman coming forth from her own land to meet Jesus who was travelling in the direction of Tyre and Sidon. This scenario involves translating *eis* in Matt 15:21 as 'to' or 'toward,' not 'into,' and subordinating the prepositional phrase 'from those regions' (15:22) to the participle 'came forth.' The scenario would be consistent with Jesus' directive to his disciples to confine their mission to the lost sheep of Israel (see Matt 10:5–6)" (Daniel J. Harrington: *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1. [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1991], 235).

[6] Elaine M. Wainwright lucidly argues this point in *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1998), 86–92.

[7] For this way of restating the meaning of the encounter, I am indebted to my former student Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, who shared with me a paper written during her doctoral work at Vanderbilt University (summer 1998), "Jesus' Encounter with the Canaanite Woman: The 'Hybrid Moment' of the Matthean Community."

[8] Willard M. Swartley makes this point in *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic*

Gospels: Story Shaping Story (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1994), 70.

[9] See, for instance, the fine new commentary by Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2000), 320ff. Other recent biblical studies done with a "decolonizing" interest and perspective present a different picture as they attempt to unveil and deconstruct certain perceived biases in the biblical text. See, for example, Musa W. Dube, "A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Matthew 15:21–28," pt. 3 of *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Pr., 2000). For this African scholar, "the divergent receptions accorded to the centurion and the Canaanite woman reflect the imperial and patriarchal currents at work in Matthew…. No doubt, the implied author, writing in the post–70 C.E. period, wishes to present the Matthean community as a nonsubversive community" (132–3). Duba's work includes serious critiques of the work of several white, western, middle-class feminist writers on this text (169–84). Her thesis and overall discussion are provocative; nevertheless, my appraisal is that she and other authors with similar perspectives often neglect to acknowledge inherent tensions and dialectical import within biblical texts, and thus fail to appreciate one key aspect of their liberating and transformative potential.

[10] Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 324–5.

[11] Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another?*, 88.

[12] For a scholarly treatment of the marginality of Jesus, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

[13] Jung Young Lee has insightfully discussed the question of Jesus and marginality in *Marginality: The Key to a Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 1995). Writing from an Asian (Korean) American perspective, Lee proposes "a new theology based on marginality, which serves not only as a hermeneutical paradigm but as a key to the substance of the Christian faith" (1).

[14] Lee, *Marginality*, 116.

[15] See Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz's helpful discussion of this question in "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21–28," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 69–81.

[16] For instance, in multicultural and anti-racism education we might focus on the reality of our perspectives, ideological captivities, and incomplete personal visions; dynamics of openness to the stranger and hospitality; embracing and dealing creatively with conflict on different levels; affirmation and transformation of identities; reconciliation and community building.

[17] I have described the notion of willful (or voluntary) dislocation in several places; see, for instance, Daniel S. Schipani, "Liberation Theology and Religious Education," in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. Randolph Crump Miller (Birmingham: Religious Education Pr., Inc., 1995), 308–10; and "Educating for Social Transformation," in *Mapping Christian Education: Approaches to Congregational Learning*, ed. Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1997), 37–8.

[18] Matthew's judgment scene in 25:31–46 is the culmination of a two-chapter eschatological discourse, and it has been interpreted in diverse ways. In any event, two things should be kept in mind. First, for Matthew, Jesus is identified with the (marginalized) community of disciples, and he is present with them as they engage in mission to communicate the gospel (18:20, 28:20). Second, in this text Jesus praises the actions of the righteous from "all the nations" (presumably Gentiles as well as Jews and Christians) because they have lived out the gospel by caring for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized; the actions of these "sheep" blessed by the Father are the practices of service expected of gospel bearers, followers of Jesus Christ.

"Finish then thy new creation"
A metamorphosis of glory

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"Love divine, all loves excelling" is a glorious hymn of Charles Wesley, beloved in churches far beyond Methodism. In verses two and four, Wesley succinctly outlines a theology of the transforming work of God in the lives of people of faith.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find the promised rest;
Take away our bent to sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Wesley recognizes two things: we are not yet finished, though we may profess Christ as Lord; and we must have the aid, the very breath of the Spirit, to be "changed from glory into glory." This transformation will not occur by sheer effort alone, although spiritual discipline offers welcome space for the work of grace.

What does it mean to be unfinished? It simply means that we have not yet arrived at our true identity; we do not yet fully

reflect the image of God within the communion of saints. Our lives are still hobbled by a selfishness that "neither regards God nor humanity" (Luke 18:2, 5). Regarding both God and humanity is ingredient to being finished as God's new creation.

How do we become what God created us to be? Only by working collaboratively with the Spirit of God do we begin to strip away our false selves and undergo the transformation that is our destiny as people joined to Christ. Only within the *koinonia* of other Christians are we formed after the likeness of Christ, for it is in the participatory communion created by the indwelling Spirit that we become fully ourselves.

"Beholding" is more than simply seeing. It is a deeply attentive, faithful act that allows the beholder to perceive the presence of the holy in the ordinary.

In this article, I will construct a theology of spiritual transformation, to suggest how the Spirit of God works with receptive human partners. I will use Wesley's hymn, selected biblical texts, and a familiar short story as points of reference for this interpretation. I hope readers will come to a deeper understanding of the comprehensive transformation that God is beckoning from our lives.

Unveiling our faces

In 2 Cor. 3:17–18, the apostle Paul encourages believers to remove the veil that has kept them from seeing clearly the full compass of the saving work God has brought through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. A long history of interpretation stands behind his instruction about "beholding God with unveiled faces." This text draws from the well of ancient understanding about Moses' encounter with God at Mount Sinai, to which Paul is adding his own rabbinical flourish.

Traditional interpretations revolved around the idea that after God delivered the law to him, Moses' face glowed with such incandescent splendor that he had to put a veil over his face so that others would not be afraid to approach him (Exod. 34:29ff). When Moses went before the Lord, he removed the veil; in the sight of the Israelites he put it back on, apparently to protect them from the glorious radiance he reflected. Was it because when they viewed the transforming power of God in the visage of Moses, they feared such change in themselves?

The apostle now gives that idea a radical twist: he suggests that Moses put on the veil in order to cloak the fact that the luminous radiance was fading (2 Cor. 3:13), just as the splendor of the law fades in comparison to the new covenant in Christ. Further, Paul views the veil as a deliberate unwillingness to accept God's self-disclosure in Christ. As long as people fear encountering God, they will hide themselves behind a barrier, a veil that cloaks their identity and obscures their vision of God. With this resistance hanging between them and God, they lack understanding, because they cannot see the Lord.

But how can one look on God? Does not the Scripture explicitly warn against demanding to see the Holy One? Surely the apostle knows of that other tradition in Exodus: Moses is not allowed direct encounter, face to face, but can only observe the divine back passing before him (Exod. 33:18–23). Martin Luther was so fascinated with this episode that he preached a whole sermon series on "the hind parts of God." The church folk of Wittenberg got homiletical variety from their professor/monk!

The intertextual work that Paul demonstrates in this passage, carrying into the next chapter, is nothing short of stunning. Humans can only "see" God in human form; thus, the Spirit conceives and brings forth the Son. So that we can be changed "from glory into glory," God reveals the divine glory in the humility of one who took our form (Phil. 2:8), Jesus the Christ. As God wears a human face, we can begin to see glory "after our likeness." Transformation occurs when we behold the glory of the Lord, with unveiled faces; this glory is revealed to us "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Beholding the true icon

"Beholding" is more than simply seeing. It is a deeply attentive, faithful act that allows the beholder to perceive the presence of the holy in the ordinary. This quality of attention is what John referred to: "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son" (John 1:14). In the visage of the one whose own did not receive him, we meet God. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), the true icon.

The Eastern Church has long known the power of visual depictions of Christ, his mother, the apostles and saints. These

images, or icons, function as windows into heaven. They are not worshiped, but are venerated as helpful in learning to behold the glory of the Lord, who comes to us in the media of earth. We are invited to become like, to reflect, what we behold.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Great Stone Face" offers a wonderful portrayal of transformation into another's likeness through beholding. Hawthorne tells the story of Earnest, who lived in a small village across the valley from a magnificent, almost divine visage that jutted out from the rock face of the mountains. As a child, Earnest heard the prophecy that some day a great man who bore a close resemblance to the expansive, generous face would come to the village. Earnest took the story seriously and spent much time contemplating what sort of man this might be, as he gazed reflectively across the valley.

Transformation requires effort, even as it depends on grace. The battle of "holy obedience," of great intentionality, cannot be accomplished quickly; rather it is only in the span of our lives (and perhaps beyond) that we come to our true selves.

The years passed, and three men of renown came to the village, each acclaimed by the people as the one who fulfilled the prophecy. Each time Earnest was profoundly disappointed, both by the gullibility of the townspeople and by the visitors' lack of resemblance to the kind and loving figure with whom he conversed daily, deliberately emulating the beneficent character he observed in the great stone face.

Earnest continued to mature, and became a preacher whose wisdom and profound perceptions about people were known far beyond his close-knit community. One day a poet came to the village, intent on meeting Earnest, whose reputation had reached him far away. By fortuitous circumstance, Earnest had read much of the writer's poetry and was immensely grateful for the artistry that shone through his works. After pleasant, mutually appreciative conversation, the poet accompanied Earnest to his usual place of preaching, an outdoor gathering place where the villagers eagerly awaited his thoughtful remarks. As Earnest stood in his pulpit, with the great stone face on the mountain behind him, the poet suddenly exclaimed: "Behold! Behold! Earnest is himself the likeness of the Great Stone Face!"[1] All the people,

who earlier had deluded themselves into thinking others fulfilled the prophecy, now realized that Earnest was the one who truly bore the image. Earnest was less convinced, and walked homeward slowly, "still hoping that some wiser and better man…would by and by appear."[2]

From this lovely story, we can draw theological impressions about transformation: (1) it is a lifelong process; (2) attentiveness to the true icon is a necessary discipline; and (3) great humility allows one to be receptive to the Spirit's work. Let us examine these in turn.

Transformation is a slow, almost imperceptible process that requires lifelong vigilance. As *The Rule of St. Benedict* advises:

> *We must prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience…. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Holy One to supply by the help of grace. If we wish to reach eternal life, then—while there is still time, while we are in this body and have time to accomplish all these things by the light of life—we must run and do now what will profit us forever.*[3]

Similarly, John Wesley suggests that one will not become a saint unless one intends to become one.[4] In other words, transformation requires effort, even as it depends on grace. The battle of "holy obedience," of great intentionality, cannot be accomplished quickly; rather it is only in the span of our lives (and perhaps beyond) that we come to our true selves. This is why many theologians will not speak of the image of God as something we already possess or reflect, but as the goal or destiny of our lives. Paul describes the fulfillment of our salvation as "being conformed to the image of God's son" (Rom. 8:29).

Spiritual practices greatly assist the metamorphosis of glory, which the Spirit superintends. Specifically Christian behaviors or practices, once thought to be the exclusive preserve of monastic communities or more sectarian communities, are once again in the foreground for constructive theologians[5] and for Christian interpreters of spirituality.[6] Practices both express our understanding of our faith and form us more fully in it. Over time, our lives begin to demonstrate what these "transforming initiatives"[7] evoke.

Attentiveness to Christ, beholding the glory of the Lord, allows us to be changed into his likeness. Just as Earnest gave himself to constant observation of the beloved countenance that seemed to follow his every step, so we must orient our lives by "looking to Jesus" (Heb. 12:2). This sounds too simple, perhaps, like a grown-up version of wearing a WWJD [What would Jesus do?] bracelet. But simple it is not, for transforming change is often wrenching. Attending to the ways of Christ calls us to daily death—death to our presumption, death to our sense of goodness, death even to our illusion that we can determine how we will die.

Transforming change is often wrenching. Attending to the ways of Christ calls us to daily death—death to our presumption, death to our sense of goodness, death even to our illusion that we can determine how we will die.

A couple years ago my husband and I made a radical choice about where we would live. We moved from the comfortable, secure sanctity of a suburb to a noisy, threat-filled neighborhood up against the inner city. We were proud of our downward mobility. We could live more simply, give more away, make our home near the seminary where I teach, and try to be anchors in an area where nothing seems to stay put.

We had not been here long when our determination to be mature disciples (or was it a vaunted sense of *noblesse oblige?*) was put to the test. One neighbor began to demand that we buy some of her property to address her need for extra cash. Another neighboring household has a revolving door, with many members of an extended family inhabiting too little space. Spilling out of their yard into the neighborhood, the children need more watchful eyes than weary, sometimes absent parents provide. Two houses down lives a retired African-American couple; their anger regularly boils over at some presumed slight.

How would Jesus care for these neighbors? How would Jesus welcome these children? How would Jesus respond to the racial tensions that are never far from the surface? The questions are no longer abstractions for us, but pressing demands. Our sense of goodness ebbed as we realized the cost of authentic discipleship in our new place. We are being called to transformation as we learn to live differently.

Our neighborhood church also lives daily with cruciform challenges. Once a thriving congregation, it has more building and bills than it can easily manage. Seeking to be welcoming of those who live nearby, it knows the strain of trying to worship in ways that are sufficiently varied to be inclusive. It knows that many who come cannot help with financial stewardship. It knows that it cannot, must not, remain in its idealized past. It, too, must face deaths to be transformed.

These places from which we attempt to "behold the glory of the Lord" make clear that we will likely meet him as he comes to us in the distressing guise of our neighbors. The true icon of God, the disfigured suffering servant, is never far away. We must not look for him in all the wrong places; rather, as we are attentive to these God has placed near us, we are learning "to behold."

Remarkably, others may more easily recognize the transformation of our lives into the likeness of Christ than we do. Just as Earnest refused to claim that he had fulfilled the prophecy, so we must remember that although Christ has begun "a good work within us" (Phil. 1:6), it is not complete. Humility recognizes that our lives "do not yet gleam in glory" (as one of Martin Luther's prayers bluntly states), but we are "being purified." According to Benedictine writer Joan Chittister, humility is the "lost virtue."[8] Transformation requires our patient receptivity to the searching light of the Spirit. It is a humble undertaking in which we allow others to be formative agents in our lives.

The first winter I spent in Kansas City was bitterly cold, at least to my southern bones. When a brief mid-winter thaw came, some of my students suggested that I go down to the banks of the Missouri and "watch the river breaking up." I expected to see jagged floes clogging the river, but instead I was amazed to observe large round discs traveling in concourse down the middle of the river, spinning as they went. It seemed to me to be a parable of the transformative work of Christian community. The rough edges of the ice were being rounded off as the pieces bumped into each other in their journey toward the Mississippi. Our lives, too, are formed by our shared vocation in the community of Christ, as we sculpt our sisters and brothers into the likeness of the human face of God.

Changing from glory into glory

"Glory" is not a prominent part of the vocabulary of church people today. The hymnody of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, and even the gospel songs of the early twentieth century regularly used images of glory—usually detailing the rewards or acclaim the Christian could hope to gain in heaven. In that context, "glory" evoked crowns, mansions, golden streets, and the like. Such an emphasis severely truncates the biblical understanding of glory as it describes the character of God and relates to the ongoing work of transformation. Wesley's hymn more nearly captures the reciprocal movement between God and humans.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the word "glory" (*kabod*) described the heaviness, awesome grandeur, shining majesty, and holiness of the divine presence. Only God is intrinsically glorious; humanity can only participate in glory because God shares it with us. As we have seen, the New Testament regularly speaks of Jesus sharing in the glory (*doxa*) of God. Because we are joined to Jesus, we also participate in the glorious vocation of reflecting the splendor of God, albeit in earthen vessels. We are works in progress, to be sure; however, the collaborative work of transformation continues until we can see face to face the one whose likeness we share. This work requires a radical metamorphosis, which comes about through our contemplation of God's glory. Our lives are brought to completion through a shared life, by which the Spirit burnishes us to a new brightness.

Humility acknowledges that perfection is God's alone, but our willingness to be changed allows us to draw ever nearer the shining glory of the one in whose light we live.

The idea of moving from glory to glory was a favorite theme of fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa. According to his understanding, humankind was created to be made one with God. Human life is a progressive movement toward God-likeness, a growth in goodness that is ongoing. For Gregory, spiritual growth has many stages. It is a perpetual re-creation, a constant beginning again at ever more transformed levels of being. In this process, one never arrives. Each "glory" or stage of the journey, when reached, gives way to the next glory which rises up beyond.[9] For Gregory,

Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai was the metaphor of Christian pilgrimage: One can draw near but cannot penetrate the darkness of divine mystery. Only God can disclose the divine face.

Gregory's vision remains helpful, because he understands that Christian living can never be static but must continue as a journey of transformation. Humility acknowledges that perfection is God's alone, but our willingness to be changed allows us to draw ever nearer the shining glory of the one in whose light we live.

Conclusion

We live in hope that the transforming work of God in our lives will finally reach completion, when we see God's "great salvation perfectly restored," in the words of Wesley's verse. Our labor will not have been in vain, nor will God's creative and transforming work fail to reach its consummation. Our lifelong attempts to be attentive to Christ will etch his likeness in our faces. For "when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Our beholding will have proved to be transformative, and we will reflect his glory.

And so at last we may sing with all Christians the words of the ninth-century hymn:

> *Bring us with your saints to behold your great beauty,*
> *There to see you, Christ our God, throned in great glory;*
> *There to possess heaven's peace and joy,*
> *your truth and love,*
> *For endless ages of ages, world without end.*[10]

Notes

[1] *Greatest Short Stories* (New York: P. F. Collier, 1953), 1:120.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Timothy Fry, ed., prologue to *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes and Thematic Index* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1981), 39–44.
[4] See his generative work, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Pr., 1952).
[5] See the three-volume work in "baptist" theology by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., especially *Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1986), 41. McClendon contends that ethics (practice!) must take methodological precedence over "foundations" or "doctrine."
[6] See the volume edited by Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), which details various Christian practices, including forgiveness, caring for the body, keeping sabbath, and hospitality,

as formative enterprises that shape Christian identity in community.

[7] I borrow this term from my esteemed former colleague, Glen Stassen. It is drawn from his text, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville: Westminister John Knox, 1992).

[8] Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 51.

[9] See *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Pr., 1979), 29. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Pr., 1978); see especially the introduction by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, 11–13.

[10] *Ubi Caritas*, Latin, 9th c., trans. Richard Proulx, in *Worship: A Hymnal and Service Book for Roman Catholics* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1986), no. 598, verse 3.

Changed from glory into glory

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John Wesley and his younger brother Charles sparked a revival in the Church of England that focused on the disciplines of prayer and small group Bible study. Their intent was to aid the transformation of the heart, to help believers accept salvation with full assurance and grow in loving God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Rejecting the strict Calvinist belief in predestination, the Wesleys adhered to an Arminian theology that stressed the availability of salvation to all, free will, and Christian perfectionism.

Wesley scholar Frank Whaling claims that although the Wesleys had a theological system, their legacy was a distinctive spirituality.[1] What John preached and wrote in prose form, Charles cast in poetry. Charles's hymns, set to durable tunes, penetrated deep into the soul. John's prodigious organizational skill established networks that served both to evangelize nonbelievers and to nurture believers at all levels of spiritual maturity. Together John's patterns of local organization and Charles's substantial collection of hymns served the Methodists long after the brothers died.

Although the Wesleys had a theological system, their legacy was a distinctive spirituality. What John preached and wrote in prose form, Charles cast in poetry.

A brief overview of the Wesleys' understanding of assurance and their view of Christian perfection will provide a backdrop for our examination of the hymn "Love divine, all loves excelling." By "assurance" John and Charles Wesley meant that receiving salvation involves both intellectual acceptance and felt experience. They did not define or delimit this experience, but taught that it entails an inward movement of the heart, soul, or spirit, a recognition that salvation has been received. This experience is not primarily emotional, not a feeling

but a deep sense of Christ's justifying love. Calvinist theologians, in particular, challenged this teaching, contending that people cannot know for certain whether they are saved.

Like their views on assurance, the Wesleys' understanding of Christian perfection was controversial, and it is still easily misunderstood.[2] They claimed that the work of sanctification might be completed, in some rare cases, when one freely accepts the gift of salvation. In the lives of most believers, however, sanctification is a continual process culminating at the time of death. Sanctification is the ongoing transformation of the heart into full love of God through Jesus Christ. Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit of Christ, believers' minds are conformed to Christ, their hearts fill with love for God, and their own desires, needs, interests, and purposes are transformed so they pursue God's will.[3] This understanding of justification is radical and far-reaching.[4] When believers confess their sin on receiving salvation, they freely choose to open themselves to the indwelling of Christ. Using 1 John, John Wesley made the case that believers are thoroughly forgiven and justified; their love is made perfect through Christ.

In the process of sanctification believers continually need the merit of Christ's atonement to cover their errors and mistakes. The Wesleys did not overlook the fact that Christians don't always get it right, that they require God's grace even after receiving salvation. Christians commit errors in judgment that lead to mistakes in practice. They are not perfect in knowledge or infallible, they suffer infirmities, they are tempted. But the Wesleys were not inclined to call such mistakes "sin" in believers who are willingly being transformed by God's love at work in them, who are striving to let Christ's mind and heart dwell in them fully, making them new creatures.

One can see why this position provoked vigorous debate among the Wesleys' theological contemporaries. One can see that this view, applied most appropriately to Christians maturing in sanctification, could be misinterpreted and abused. But the strength of the Wesleys' understanding of Christian perfection lies in the belief in the ongoing sanctification that God in Christ effects in the mind and heart of the believer.

"Love divine, all loves excelling"
Almost all Protestant groups include "Love divine, all loves excelling" in their hymnals or song collections. Roman Catholics have also discovered it. The text follows, as it originally appeared in 1747 in *Redemption Hymns:*

1. Love Divine, all Loves excelling,
Joy of Heaven to Earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble Dwelling,
All thy faithful Mercies crown;
Jesu, Thou art all Compassion,
Pure unbounded Love Thou art,
Visit us with thy Salvation,
Enter every trembling Heart.
2. Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled Breast,
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find that Second Rest:
Take away our Power of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of Faith as its Beginning,
Set our Hearts at Liberty.
3. Come Almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy Life receive,
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy Temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as thy Hosts above,
Pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect Love.
4. Finish then thy New Creation,
Pure and sinless let us be,
Let us see thy great Salvation,
Perfectly restor'd in Thee;
Chang'd from Glory into Glory,
Till in Heaven we take our Place,
Till we cast our Crowns before Thee,
Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise.

This hymn has been in continuous use since 1747, although some textual variations have been introduced, in part to address certain theological concerns. In 1780 an editor changed "Jesu" to "Jesus" in verse one; the same editor changed "that Second Rest" in stanza two to "the promised rest." Not long after the hymn was written, a fellow Methodist proposed "Take away the love of sinning" as a substitute for Charles's original "Take away the power of sinning," which suggested an extreme view of Christian perfectionism and a loss of free will. Some written evidence indicates that John Wesley may have disliked this stanza from the beginning; he omitted it in his subsequent hymnals. At some point the stanza was reclaimed, with the change. In 1780 "pure and sinless" in verse four became "pure and spotless," and beginning in 1889 various editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* printed the revision.[5]

Rather than analyzing the hymn line-by-line, I'll summarize each half stanza in a prose phrase. Hymn analysts often use this technique to get to the heart of the text. You may want to make your own summary before you proceed to mine, which is hardly definitive.

1a. Dwell in us and bless us, heavenly Love who has come to earth;
1b. Jesus, bring your salvation into every waiting heart.
2a. Breathe your Spirit into all people so we can receive eternal life:
2b. Be our beginning and end so our hearts no longer desire to sin and are free.
3a. Come back and never leave us so we may receive your life.
3b. We will worship you continually and shine in the fullness of your love.
4a. Restore us as new creatures;
4b. We are continually being changed by your redeeming love until we will worship you in heaven.

This rendering lacks the vibrancy and energy of the hymn, but the exercise isolates four points of interest: (1) Jesus' divine character is love, and to participate in his character is to experience love as salvation, freedom, and new life. (2) This love is not some distant

object of devotion or romantic abstraction. It penetrates the body, and specifically the heart, and takes it over. (3) Our response to love is love: worship, service, wonder, and submission. Our love for love increases our desire to be free from the power of sin. (4) We are continually changed by love until we are pure.

The hymn gains strength and dynamism from its verbs, many of them in the imperative mood:

Fix in us thy humble dwelling
Visit us with thy salvation
Enter every trembling heart
Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
Let us all in thee inherit
Let us find the promised rest
Take away the love of sinning
Set our hearts at liberty
Come, Almighty, to deliver
Let us all thy life receive
Suddenly return and never, nevermore thy temples leave
Finish then thy new creation
Let us see thy great salvation

Urgency and fervor sound in this hymn. It conveys no doubt about whether we can save ourselves: we can't. Until the second half of the third stanza, we do nothing but pray the hymn. We depend completely on Jesus' indwelling presence in the form of love; our posture is passive. The hymn's energy (helped by a stable meter, strong rhyme pattern, and a lively tune) expresses the desire of our wills to be molded and reshaped by Christ's Spirit. It assumes that our petitions will be answered. By the third stanza we can respond in worship and service on receiving new life; in the fourth stanza we are brought to perfection and participate in the heavenly worship of God, as prefigured in the Revelation to John.

"Changed from glory into glory"

"Changed from glory into glory" is an explicit allusion to 2 Cor. 3:18. "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into

the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (NRSV). In the third chapter of the letter, Paul contrasts the glory revealed in Moses with the glory of God revealed in Christ. Moses' veil prevented the people of Israel from seeing the glory in Moses' face. In contrast, Christians not only see the glory of God in Christ but also participate in that glory as they are transformed and conformed to Christ's image by the Spirit. In the beginning of chapter four, Paul continues to make his case for the basis of his ministry. He proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6, NRSV). The knowledge of God's revelation in the incarnate Christ rests in the hearts of believers; it shines from a place where no light is visible to the eye.

The meaning of "glory" in the Bible is itself a study in transformation.[6] The Hebrew *kabod* carried a cluster of meanings, including "weight," "honor," "dignity," "splendor," "power," "presence," and "beauty." At times in Israel's history this term and others took on greater significance in describing the presence of God and the people's experience of God. *Kabod* has little obvious connection with the Greek *doxa*, which generally meant "opinion." For reasons that are not entirely clear to scholars, the Septuagint translators used *doxa* to render the various Hebrew meanings of *kabod*. Our English translation of *doxa* as "glory" tends to flatten a whole range of meanings into one or two favorites. According to Pauline scholar Carey Newman, the range of Paul's meanings, which he inherited from the rich Hebrew and Greek traditions, includes "praise," "honor," "status," "image," "representation," "radiance," "brightness," "boasting," "pride," "greatness," and "divine presence."[7]

In these impatient times we expect transformation to be immediate; we frequently measure the effectiveness of a transformation process by the speed of its completion, by how quickly we feel its benefits. Changes over months, years, and lifetimes may entirely escape our notice.

Charles Wesley, echoing Paul in a way consistent with Wesley's view of Christian perfection, likely intended that "glory" in this hymn would carry meanings including "image," "radiance,"

"brightness," "greatness," and possibly even "divine presence." As Christ's Spirit changes our minds and hearts, we increasingly take on the image of Christ and participate in God's glory. As sanctification continues, our lives, including our worship and our work, begin to emit radiance, brightness, and greatness that demonstrate Christ's indwelling presence.

Both the line "changed from glory into glory" and the Pauline text to which it refers give us much to ponder about the nature of transformation. "Transformation" is a trendy word in our culture. Energy transformers dot the countryside. Children play with robotic toys that morph into fighting machines. Movie and TV special effects transform images before our eyes. Managers transform organizations and businesses to enhance cost effectiveness and improve products. Volunteers serve on committees to transform church structures and denominational identities. In the vast majority of instances in which we use the word "transformation," human beings control the process and the outcome. And in these impatient times we expect transformation to be immediate; we frequently measure the effectiveness of a transformation process by the speed of its completion, by how quickly we feel its benefits. Changes over months, years, and lifetimes may entirely escape our notice.

Charles Wesley's hymn comes to us from a different world. What separates us from the world of the hymn is not just the 250 years that have passed since its composition but also its alien (to us) understanding of human agency, particularly as agency relates to spiritual growth. The imperative mood of the hymn text bears witness to the conviction that Christians cannot change themselves by themselves. We are transformed by the active presence of love, of Christ in our hearts (a synecdoche for mind, image, entire being). What we can do is accept the gift of salvation in Christ, will our minds and hearts to love the Lord our God, and pray for Christ's Spirit to carry out its sanctifying work throughout our lives. Even the passive verbal form, "changed," shows that our being transformed from glory to glory is accomplished by an agent who works on us and in us—and perhaps even works us over.

Recently church people have displayed increased interest in the related subjects of holiness, purity, righteousness, and

godliness. Some of the overtones I've picked up in discussion of these concepts make me wonder whether we adequately understand the nature of these qualities, or—more importantly—what their source is. Much of the talk seems to center on how believers can (should, must) make themselves holy, pure, righteous, or godly. I wonder whether our concern for these Christ-like qualities is breeding a new legalism. Perhaps we're thinking backwards. Holiness, purity, righteousness, and godliness do not begin with our agency, but are the fruits of Christ's Spirit doing its sanctifying work by making our love for God more complete. We will see these fruits evident in the lives of maturing believers. But God, not our good intentions, is the source of these qualities. Relying on good intentions alone guarantees that we will fail to know holiness, purity, righteousness, and godliness.

The exuberance of Wesley's hymn may mask the challenges and resistance that are part of letting the Spirit of Christ do its work in our lives. The will to love God can easily be subverted in the midst of daily responsibilities.

The exuberance of Wesley's hymn (especially when sung to a rhythmic tune) may mask the challenges and resistance that are part of letting the Spirit of Christ do its work in our lives. The will to love God can easily be subverted in the midst of daily responsibilities. Letting Christ's love grow in us to its fullest extent will reorder our priorities in ways that can put us in conflict with family, friends, business associates, and even brothers and sisters in our congregations. The heart's radical openness to Christ's Spirit and its work does not exempt it from suffering or pain. To be remade in the image of Christ is to expect the possibility, if not the likelihood, of suffering. Contrary to many cultural assumptions in North America, transformation does not guarantee that our lives will be easier, better, more fun, more successful.

The ultimate purpose of the Spirit's transforming work in us is worship, our unending songs of love, praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. We were created to worship God, and for worship we are changed from glory to glory. Our worship, in all its forms of service to God and the world's peoples, begins on earth and reaches into the future until creation is fully restored. Our sanctification is not simply for our own benefit, but looks forward to the fulfillment of God's larger project of redemption. This

awareness lends a needed corrective to our understanding of personal salvation. Our salvation is not an end in itself. To be saved is not only to have one's soul rescued from eternal death (important as that is); it is also a participation in God's re-creation of the world and its people. As Charles Wesley knew, the end to which the transformation of our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits is aimed is the fullness of worship, when we find ourselves "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

Notes

[1] Frank Whaling, ed., *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Pr., 1981), 43.

[2] The following summary is drawn from John Wesley, "A Plain Count of Christian Perfection," in Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley,* 297–377.

[3] The Wesleys' theology was unashamedly Christocentric. In today's use, the connection between the Holy Spirit and the person of Christ is sometimes unclear. Use of the term "Christ's spirit" or "spirit of Christ" in this essay is meant to clarify the connection.

[4] Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley,* 328.

[5] Frank Baker, ed., *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Pr., 1962), 94–6. "Love divine, all loves excelling" appears as no. 592 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Pr.; Newton: Faith & Life; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992). The changes in this text are the work of prior editors, not the work of the *Hymnal* committee.

[6] For an overview of the development, see Carey C. Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

[7] Ibid., 162.

God brings us out to a spacious place

The transforming role of praise and confession in worship

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A worshiper enters the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Tired and stressed, she admits to herself, "For two cents I'd have stayed home this morning, read the newspaper, and enjoyed a good cup of coffee. Why in the world did I come?"

The force of habit, however, is great. The worshiper picks up a bulletin, makes her way to a familiar seat, prays for those preparing to lead the service, and then waits in silence.

There's nothing unusual about the service. The worship leader gathers the congregation into God's presence. They sing an opening hymn. A prayer is offered, inviting the Spirit to move in their midst.

The worshiper hears a young adult read a psalm, which is interspersed with a refrain spoken by the people: "I will praise the Lord as long as I live." And then the congregation sings several songs of praise, the last of which is a sturdy setting of Psalm 100: "All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice…."

During the prayer of confession, the leader acknowledges that the praise of God is not always a priority in the congregation's life. Sometimes their adoration is anemic, weak, half-hearted. Distracted by daily tasks, troubled relationships, and worries about the future, they forget the God who is worthy of praise.

In the spacious silence of personal prayer, the worshiper recognizes that during the past week she too has lost sight of who God is. Immersed in her own concerns, she has not recognized God's hand reaching out to guide or sustain her. "Have mercy," she prays. "I belong to you. I want to love and serve you with my whole heart." As God's cleansing grace flows freely during the song of assurance, the worshiper's world shifts back into focus. Creature and creator are reunited in a loving embrace.

A perceptible surge of energy flows through the congregation. Alert and attentive, they wait expectantly for the proclamation of God's Word. Simple, truthful words are offered, and worshipers hear God speaking to them personally, as well as to the entire body. As they respond to the good news, they are restored, made whole, and renewed for their return to daily life.

What magic has happened? What alchemy has transformed sluggish, reluctant Sunday morning worshipers into loving, attentive, receptive disciples? The mystery of the divine-human encounter at the center of worship is, of course, the catalyst. We cannot meet the true and living God and remain unchanged. When Moses returned from his regular encounter with God in the tent of meeting, his face shone with reflected light (Exod. 33: 7–11; 34:33–35). In the same way, the act of opening ourselves to God's love and grace sets in motion a dynamic transformation by which ordinary worshipers are changed "from one degree of glory into another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Although all the elements of worship (singing, praying, giving, preaching, etc.) play important roles in transformation, two ordinary, even routine, acts have special significance for ongoing conversion. Praise and confession are essential actions of worship in which Christians are brought face-to-face with God. In praise, we recognize and name who God is; in confession, we recognize and name who we are. The resulting clarity creates a fertile context for the ongoing transformation of God's people and the redemption of the world.

How does praise transform?

The praise of God is the purpose for which human beings are created. In Walter Brueggemann's words, praise is our "duty and delight."[1] Yet praise is not an action that originates with human beings. Ancient Israel understood that worship and praise are a response to a God who acts first. With images of intimacy and abundance, the prophet Isaiah describes God's lavish gestures of grace and persistent desire for relationship:

I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,

the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise. (Isa. 43:20–21)

As the initiator in the divine-human drama, God moves us to seek God's face. In the beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine wrote: "You move us to delight in praising you—for you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you."

Yet praise is also a choice we make. While God is always wooing us into relationship, we must choose whether to open ourselves to the lover of our souls. If we respond to the divine grace, our eyes are opened to see who God is. In that moment, the fragmented pieces of our lives begin to cohere around a center, we regain focus and perspective, and our hearts are filled with gratitude and peace. Out of that reorientation, we offer praise and thanksgiving to God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.[2]

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For praise in worship to become a powerful agent of transformation, however, we will need two things: more time for praise and a redefinition of praise. Praise that does its work of restoring our relationship with God demands more time than the perfunctory two hymns of praise sung near the beginning of worship. When we consider the demands and stresses of people's lives (which they bring with them to worship), we realize that we need more time to let the words and songs of praise fill our hearts, minds, and bodies and begin to do their work. It also takes time to recreate the community each Sunday. If I could suggest one thing to transform Mennonite worship, it would be that we devote at least fifteen or twenty minutes to the act of praise (well-chosen songs as well as words from the psalms) immediately after the gathering actions each week. If that means lengthening the service, it would be time well spent.

For praise to transform us may also require a fundamental redefinition of praise. More than upbeat words or happy songs, praise is fundamentally a recognition of who God is, a declaration

of God's greatness, and an offering of adoration and loyalty to God. Praise is not a conditional response offered only when we have had a good week or a trouble-free life; praise is our duty and delight in the midst of whatever comes—heartache, sorrow, peace, or joy.[3]

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The songs and poems of Israel are our best tutor in this more expansive practice of praise. The psalms do not describe some never-never land where life is blissful and people are always true to their ideals; rather they are concerned with the struggles and sufferings of real life where God meets people and people are transformed in such an encounter. Thus a psalm of lament, such as Psalm 13, 79, or 143, is just as much an act of praise as more jubilant psalms, such as Psalm 65, 100, or 148. Not the particulars of our lives but God's identity as covenant-maker, steadfast companion, and giver of mercy is the foundation of our faith and praise. In the act of recalling and proclaiming God's deeds, we remake our world, regain perspective, and rediscover a solid, more trustworthy foundation for living.

How does confession transform?

When we enter God's courts with praise, another amazing transformation occurs. Having gained renewed clarity about who God is, we also see ourselves in a new light. Human beings typically fall into two categories with regard to self-awareness. Some of us "think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think" (Rom. 12:3); others can only see abject unworthiness—"all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (Isa. 64:6). Neither extreme is an adequate identity for a child of God. Yet only the act of praise makes it possible for us to claim our true identity.

Again, the songs and prayers of Israel can tutor us. The psalms do not hesitate to tell the truth about reality, even when failure and brokenness are evident. Psalm 130 cries out, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (v. 3). Israel's poets have no doubt about the depths of human depravity, the human potential for sin. What is significant, however, is that the

sinner need not slink away in shame. Instead of hiding the truth about sin, the psalmist persists in claiming a place before God and waits confidently for mercy.

How does the worshiper find such courage? The answer rests in the comprehensive vision of the God whom Israel praises. This God is both holy and forgiving. Psalm 130 goes on to proclaim, "But with you there is forgiveness" (v. 4). Just as the psalmist harbors no illusions about human shortcomings, so the psalm leaves no doubts about God's abundant mercy. Patrick Miller explains: "The character of God is neither bent against us, nor neutral in God's justice and righteousness, but is bent toward us in grace and mercy."[4] God is on our side.

Confession is a simple act of truth-telling. Without fear or groveling, and trusting our creator and redeemer, we speak what God already knows. We name who we are—our faults, limitations, perfidy, incompleteness, sin. In so doing, we enter the spacious territory of mercy where grace flows freely and we are cleansed and restored.

If we tend to misunderstand praise as an "upper," we also tend to misunderstand confession as a "downer." When the prayers of confession in worship leave us feeling dispirited or morbid or guilty, we haven't met the true and living God. Just as Jesus spoke with compassion to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11), so our savior invites us to leave our haunts of wretchedness or shame and walk in newness of life.[5]

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As a way of connecting the actions of praise and confession in worship, worship leaders may use a simple but helpful planning tool. Identify the particular "face" of God that is the focus of the acts of praise and then shape the prayer of confession in response: Who are we in light of this revelation of God? What do we need from God? To what transformation are we called?[6] For example, the face of God chosen as the focus for worship on a particular Sunday might be "our shepherd God." Music texts that invite us

to meet and praise our shepherd would prepare the way for a prayer of confession in which worshipers consider the ways we wander from our good shepherd's care.

Without words of assurance or a celebration of grace, the act of confession in worship is incomplete. A biblical theology of repentance requires such a response, for when we confess, God is always faithful to cleanse and forgive (1 John 1:9). One of the best ways to accomplish this act of worship is by singing an energetic hymn of grace such as "Wonderful grace of Jesus" or a robust hymn of affirmation such as "There's a wideness in God's mercy." The power of these hymns provides momentum for the process of transformation, filling us with courage and joy as we face the challenges of living faithfully in the world.

What does the spacious place of transformation look like?
When the people of God regularly meet their maker in worship, when they truly claim both the fragility and strength of their humanity, and when they rejoice in God's goodness and power, their faith is fortified and they become living signs of God's reign in the world. The spacious place toward which praise and confession lead the people of God is nothing other than the realm of God, the just and peaceful reign of Christ.

Psalm 146 describes this spacious place in much the same way that Mary, mother of Jesus, describes it in her song:

> *The Lord sets the prisoners free;*
> *the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.*
> *The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;*
> *the Lord loves the righteous.*
> *The Lord watches over the strangers;*
> *the Lord upholds the orphan and widow. (vv. 8–9)*

Praise and confession change us. They transform us into God's people who not only give our ultimate allegiance to God but who live generously, freely, and peaceably as God's agents in a world not yet fully redeemed. Thus praise and confession not only equip us for the ordinary daily challenges of faithfulness but enlarge our vision of the fulfillment of God's gracious reign in the world.

If praise and confession are so powerful, why don't they always work in worship?

Having made these claims for praise and confession as significant elements of transformation in worship, we must also admit that singing a few songs or hymns of praise and offering a prayer of confession may not always bring about the desired change. Though there can be many reasons for this lack of efficacy, one obvious impediment could be lack of readiness or willingness on the part of worshipers. An even more significant impediment may be the worship leader. Those who lead worship carry enormous responsibility for guiding people into God's presence, into the spacious place of transformation. If worship leaders do not understand their role and do not inhabit it with conviction and grace, they will have difficulty creating a space where the Spirit can move.

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Three images of the worship leader may offer clarity and guidance for this work of transformation: *shaman*, *host*, and *prophet*. In traditional societies, the shaman is a person of spirit, one who has encountered God, who knows the ancient stories and ritual pathways, is trusted by the people, and is equipped to guide others on the path to God.[7] Sometimes we unwisely entrust the work of worship leading to people who have not yet come to know God deeply enough to guide others into God's presence. Recently a friend complained to me about an ineffective prayer of confession led by a teenager during Lent. Though there is certainly a time and place for training apprentice worship leaders, the time is probably not Lent, the high season of confession and repentance in which we face our deepest transgressions, move toward the suffering of the cross, and wait in the darkness at the tomb. Few teenagers have gained enough maturity to guide others on such a path.

The second image of worship leading, the image of host, identifies the horizontal axis of attention: an intimate knowledge of a particular body of believers. A gracious host understands

their language, identifies with their joys and sorrows, cares deeply for their souls, and seeks out creative ways to prepare the space and shape the service so people can enter in without hindrance. In this mode of worship leading, the hospitable leader creates a safe, inviting place where people can open their hearts and lives to God, offer authentic praise, make bold and honest confession, and receive God's abundant grace.

For those who are comfortable in pastoral roles, the images of shaman and host may seem sufficient. But if worship leaders stop there, they will not have led true biblical worship. Worship that is faithful engages the world; it moves out of the sanctuary into the neediness, pain, and injustice of our world. And so the image of worship leader as prophet is also necessary if transformation is to occur. In this role, the worship leader embodies a deep, abiding trust in God's good purposes, acts courageously to name the truth about the faith community and the world, and faithfully proclaims God's will and way.

When these three images of worship leading interact as complementary parts of a whole, congregations are truly blessed. As leaders find fresh, vigorous language and actions as well as evocative symbols to guide God's people in worship, they create a spacious place for transformation where worshipers meet God face-to-face, where they know and are known, and where the miracle of new life springs forth.[8]

Given such spirited leadership, the next time a worshiper is tempted to stay home on Sunday morning, she will be powerfully drawn to join the community of faith who together proclaim:

Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of God's praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
…you have brought us out to a spacious place.
(Ps. 66:8–9, 12b)

Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1988), 1. Brueggemann's phrase is a restatement of the answer to the Westminster Catechism's first question, about the "chief end" of humanity: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Interestingly,

Article 6 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1995), on the creation and calling of human beings, makes no such claim for humankind, and instead emphasizes the work to which humans are called in the world. Article 5, on creation and divine providence, does state that God alone is worthy of worship and praise.

[2] For a more complete discussion of the transforming role of praise and confession in worship, see two books by Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Hse., 1984) and *Israel's Praise,* as well as Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1983).

[3] For a moving account of the transforming role of praise in the midst of suffering, see Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope: Thresholds to Purpose* (Waco: Word Bks., 1987).

[4] Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1986), 141.

[5] A helpful historical account of the role of confession in worship can be found in Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).

[6] For more discussion of the idea of the face of God as a planning focus in worship, see "Worship and Ritual," in *Minister's Manual,* ed. John D. Rempel (Newton: Faith & Life Pr., Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1998).

[7] Though one could also use the word "priest" for this role, Protestants—and Mennonites in particular—often resist or reject the image of priest. This role may also suffer from over-identification with established religion. The word "shaman" connects more immediately with the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, which is the source of transformation.

[8] Among the most imaginative contemporary worship resources, both songs and written material, are those created and published by the Iona Community in Scotland. Drawing on their Celtic heritage, this community combines the roles of shaman, host, and prophet in remarkable ways. GIA Publications, Inc., is the North American distributor for Iona Community resources; contact GIA at 7404 South Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638; www.giamusic.com; (800) 442-1358, (708) 496-3800, Fax: (708) 496-3828.

Preaching as agent of change

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Because I teach preaching and regularly attend worship, I have heard all kinds of sermons, thousands of them, by preachers from many countries and cultures. In the preaching arena, nothing irritates me more than a sermon that just sits there. What is the point of a sermon that doesn't try to do anything, a sermon that is a speech about a religious topic rather than a powerful proclamation of God's desire to make us new people?

Often when I talk with preachers about a sermon they are preparing, they tell me, "I am going to talk *about*…," and then name a general theme or topic. I try to guide the conversation by asking, "What is your sermon going to do? What is it trying to accomplish?" I firmly believe that a sermon that is not clear about what it wants to do will usually do nothing. It will not move the hearts and minds of listeners.

Why is some preaching anemic?

Why do preachers preach sermons that lack purpose? I'll suggest several possible reasons. One is that some preachers think that deciding what they will accomplish in preaching is God's business, not theirs. They fear they will overstep the boundary between human and divine responsibility. They forget that they are collaborators and partners with the Spirit of God in the preaching process.

A second reason that preaching lacks purpose is that some preachers have lost their faith that preaching accomplishes anything. How sad this is. If people who preach see their task as giving a talk in a worship service, as a ritual that lingers because of tradition, their sermons are unlikely to nourish and motivate. Perhaps all the jokes about dull sermons and bad preaching have convinced these preachers that their task is a benign pastime.

A third reason some preaching lacks purpose is that even preachers who believe sermons can change lives may be vague about what they want to accomplish with a particular sermon. So they may speak about a topic, hoping to say something someone in the congregation will connect with and find interesting and valuable. But if the preacher is fuzzy about the sermon's purpose, listeners are unlikely to discern it. As someone said, "If it's misty in the pulpit, it will be foggy in the pews."

A fourth reason why some preachers do not articulate what they hope to accomplish with the sermon is that they are reluctant to own a desire to influence listeners. Perhaps Mennonite teaching on humility inhibits their ability to embrace the task of swaying others. For these preachers the sermon does not pour out over the congregation in rousing proclamation but barely dribbles over the edge of the pulpit.

Some preachers have lost their faith that preaching accomplishes anything. How sad this is. If people who preach see their task as giving a talk in a worship service, as a ritual that lingers because of tradition, their sermons are unlikely to nourish and motivate.

A fifth reason why some preachers lack clarity of purpose in their preaching is that in relatively recent times, in parts of the church, persuasion has been understood to be synonymous with manipulation or coercion. Certain branches of the revivalist movement were given to scaring people into the kingdom with hellfire and damnation sermons that left new believers quaking with fear rather than with the Spirit. These preachers had a purpose for their preaching, and all who heard understood what they expected to accomplish. But their evangelistic practice left a bad taste in the mouths of some preachers of future generations. Because these revival preachers abused their position of influence in the pulpit, some who followed are unwilling to serve as agents of change. Shying away from acting as catalysts of transformation, they became teachers who merely try to inform their congregations about the content of the Scriptures.

Restoring persuasion to preaching

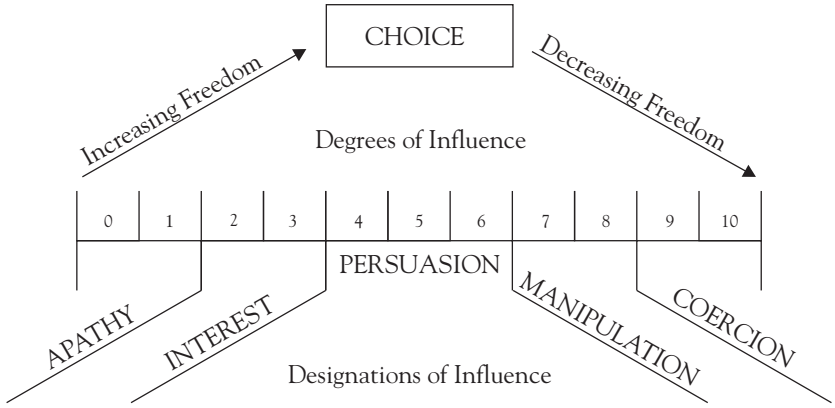
It is time for us to redeem the word *persuasion* in the arena of preaching. It is time for us to understand the full meaning of the

term, to give it its rightful place on the influence spectrum, and to bring it back into the heart of preaching.

A key element in classical oratory is persuasion, and it ought to be one of the chief elements of preaching as well. Rhetoric is defined broadly as the art of speaking well, or more narrowly as the art of persuasion. The goal of rhetorical training was eloquence, but in part eloquence is achieved by balancing one's style of speaking with one's aims. The ends of rhetoric were to teach, to delight, and to persuade.

Paul Wennes Egertson, in his dissertation, *Sacramental Rhetoric: The Relation of Preaching to Persuasion in American Lutheran Homiletics*, diagrams the relationship between persuasion and other designations of influence.[1] This diagram focuses on the connection between influence and freedom to choose.

THE RELATION OF INFLUENCE AND FREEDOM



Freedom to choose is an important factor in the distinction between Egertson's levels of influence. We observe that freedom of choice is as absent at the *apathy* end of the spectrum as at the *coercion* end. At the apathy position the speaker makes little or no attempt to influence; the listener has nothing to accept or reject. As one moves along the spectrum, one has increased opportunity to choose how one will respond to the material presented. Opportunity increases through interest and into persuasion, where choice is at a maximum. Here the listener is free to accept or reject the presented material. After persuasion listeners again

begin to lose the freedom to choose, but now because of diminishing liberty to reject the material. Manipulation entails decreased freedom of choice, and by the time listeners reach the extreme of coercion they have no freedom left.

In the Mennonite Church, a church that holds believers baptism dear, the idea of choosing faith, deciding what one will believe, is precious. Oddly enough, in the arena of preaching North American Mennonites seem to fear loss of choice because of the excesses of manipulation and coercion much more than we fear loss of choice because of apathy and mere interest.

In the arena of preaching North American Mennonites seem to fear loss of choice because of the excesses of manipulation and coercion much more than we fear loss of choice because of apathy.

To summarize Egertson's diagram: Persuasion represents influence that achieves the speaker's purpose in ways that maximize listeners' knowledge and consent. Hearers remain free to choose how they will respond.

Our ideas about persuasion have become confused because we associate persuasion with hard-sell marketing. I want to outline some characteristics of persuasion that will lead to a working definition of the concept.

- Persuasion involves at least two people whose joint actions determine the outcome: Persuasion is something you do *with* another person, not *to* another person.
- Persuasion is always a conscious activity; it is intentional. We can unintentionally influence others, but we cannot unintentionally persuade them.
- For persuasion to happen, one party must perceive another party as needing to change, and must help the other understand the needed change. A need can be described as inconsistent, inappropriate, or ineffective thought or behavior. The perceived need must be based on a standard that both parties agree on. The Bible and the life of Christ could be the standard to which we all aspire.

In defining persuasion as a two-party activity, involving conscious intent, that seeks to reconcile thought or behavior with an agreed-on set of standards, I hope I have persuaded you that preaching should entail persuasion.

The persuasion process

Many theorists have sketched a sequence for persuasion, outlining how they think persuasion works. Of these, the Monroe Motivated Sequence embodies most of the stages identified by other theorists, and is particularly useful for preaching. The sequence includes five steps.[2]

1. *Attention.* The task of the attention phase is to create interest or desire in the mind of the listener. The speaker attempts to upset listeners' tranquility and begin to produce a desire for something. The primary task is to capture listeners' attention to the topic at hand.
2. *Need.* In this step (commonly referred to as the motivation step) the speaker outlines the problem in a way designed to create a sense of need in listeners. Somehow the speaker must help hearers see the gap between things as they are and things as they should be. This step creates tension that listeners will want to relieve if they care deeply about the matter.
3. *Satisfaction.* In this relatively brief step the speaker presents a proposal to alleviate the inconsistency or address the need defined in the previous step. A speaker who proposes several solutions at this stage will conclude with the preferred one.
4. *Visualization.* At this stage the speaker paints a picture of the tension relieved: If one applies the proposal of step three to the need of step two, this is how things will look. Listeners begin to picture the difference between what is and what could be.
5. *Action.* The persuasion sequence has ended with the visualization step. Now listeners seek appropriate responses. This step calls for action or commitment or change in response to the persuasion.

These five steps are the basic elements or the substructure of influence, whether the persuasion in question is auto sales or political debate or biblical preaching.

Persuasion and transformation

James Loder's *The Transforming Moment* follows a pattern similar to that of the Monroe Motivated Sequence, but Loder attempts to describe theologically what he calls convictional knowing.[3] This

knowing is influential and creates change, and its impact is deep and lasting as it centers on the very heart of what we believe. The result of conviction is transformation, which is any change in commitment or new understanding. Preaching is a persuasion mode that focuses on change in commitment and new faith understanding.

These are Loder's steps for transformation. Keep Monroe's sequence in mind as you read them.

1. *Conflict.* In this step we experience a rupture in the knowing context, and the more we care about the conflict the more powerful the eventual transformation will be. The initial conflict must be adequate to activate our attention and our concern. Often the deepest learnings begin in conflicted, scrambled disequilibrium. Knowing comes out of the chaos or disorder.
2. *Interlude for scanning.* In this phase we scan through the problem, trying to understand it and all its components. This step also draws us into the process of seeking out possible solutions. We search for answers outside the problem, but also scan the problem and differentiate its terms, and play possible solutions against various interpretations of the ruptured situation. In this phase the conflicted one holds together the problem, partial solutions, and the whole state of non-resolution.

If the goal of preaching is transformation, if it is change-oriented communication, then using the structures of rhetorical persuasion is both appropriate and necessary.

3. *Bisociation.* Here two familiar but separate ideas merge to create a new entity. Bisociation brings two notions together into a relationship that creates a new construct. The ruptured situation is transformed and we receive a new perception. Knowing occurs, and the knower will never be the same. This is the turning point of the transforming event.
4. *Release of energy,* our involuntary response to the fact that the conflict is over, is the first facet of the fourth step. This unconscious response indicates that we have reached a resolution. *Opening of the knower to the context* is the second facet. It is our conscious response to being freed from the

conflict; in it we become aware of the expanded relationship with the context.

5. *Interpretation*. Here the knower is called on to interpret the imaginative solution in the context. Somehow the effects of the transforming event must be assimilated into the patterns of the past and into what will happen in the future.

These two theories differ in significant ways: Monroe deals in influence, while Loder explains the patterned dynamic of transformation as a creative process. Monroe tries to create change while Loder looks to another source for change. In fact, he has sought to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit collaborates with the human spirit for the sake of redemptive transformation. Thus Loder's contribution is especially foundational for preaching.

Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* builds on what we have learned from Monroe and Loder.[4] His constructive model of narrative preaching is a motivational design to precipitate transformation. The following five steps describe the homiletical plot. Read them keeping Monroe and Loder in mind.

1. *Upsetting the equilibrium*. Here Lowry brings together getting listeners' attention and creating ambiguity. Within us lives the deep need to resolve ambiguity, so in this step the preacher plants an itch to grab hearers' attention and get them to scratch until it is satisfied.
2. *Analyzing the discrepancy*. This step incorporates analysis and diagnosis. If we are to fully appreciate the resolution, we must know the complexity of the dilemma.
3. *Clue to resolution*. Pivotal to the sequence, the clue to resolution points and suggests. The full revelation comes later. This clue prepares the way for proclamation of the Word of God. Up to this point the sermon focused on ambiguities and needs. The preacher helped dig a deeper hole and thickened life's messy plot. Now, in the murkiness, light begins to dawn.
4. *Experiencing the gospel*. Now listeners discover how the gospel of Jesus Christ makes right the human predicament. The energy—experienced as gospel—intersects with the human dilemma. Listeners are free to open themselves to new understanding.

5. *Anticipating the consequences*. This final step takes listeners into the future. The climax of any sermon is step four, experiencing the gospel. Step five focuses on the human response as those who appropriate the sermon experience grace and freedom. Traditionally we call this step the application.

Conclusion

The Acts of the Apostles is sprinkled with references to persuasion. Some involve people who are not yet believers and others involve people who are. King Agrippa asks Paul, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" (Acts 26:28). And the Jews and devout converts followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and persuaded them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43).

No preacher stands in front of a congregation hoping that everyone will go home exactly as they were before the sermon. Every minister is dedicated to bringing the life-changing love of God into the lives of those who gather for worship. If the goal of preaching is transformation, if it is change-oriented communication, then using the structures of rhetorical persuasion is both appropriate and necessary.

Notes

[1] Paul Wenns Egertson, *Sacramental Rhetoric: The Relation of Preaching to Persuasion in American Lutheran Homiletics* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1976), 273, fig. 4.

[2] Douglas Ehninger, Bruce E. Gronbeck, Alan H. Monroe, *Principles of Speech Communication*, 9th ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1984).

[3] James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, Pubs., Inc., 1989).

[4] Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon As Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Pr., 1980).

Spiritual direction
Space for transformation

Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau, Associate Pastor
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I open the door to enter the building, and I check my watch. As usual, I'm a minute or two late. On my way in to the office, I find my steps losing their sense of urgency. My pace slows, not in hesitation but in anticipation and preparation. I enter the office and move to my seat. I take a deep breath and exhale as I bend to take my place. Another deep breath helps me become aware of tight muscles. I try to release them and let the couch hold me up. My heart rate slows, as does my breathing. I am here. For the next hour I will receive spiritual direction. I wonder what will happen.

For six years I have been receiving spiritual direction. Over time, I have noticed that these physical changes occur as I enter the office of my spiritual director. I notice because so often my body is in a different mode of being. I am a woman, I am a mother of three young children, I am a pastor, I am a wife, I am a church member, I am a friend, I am a spiritual director, I am a daughter. While all these callings have their element of receiving, they often involve giving. My body is often in an active mode. It is creating, it is bearing another up, it intervenes, it resists the urge to intervene. This active mode is good. My body was made for it. But for one hour, once a month, my body welcomes the change offered in spiritual direction.

My experience of physical change as I enter my hour of spiritual direction each month stands as a sign, signaling to me that transformation is possible here. Clearly, transformation is not a guaranteed outcome of the encounter, nor does it occur only within the boundaries of spiritual direction. Nevertheless, I believe that transformation and spiritual direction are linked. I know this in my body.

The task, then, is to explore at least some of the links between spiritual direction and transformation. Even an initial definition of

these two terms will begin to reveal such links. Spiritual direction is a conversation between two Christians. This conversation is one context in which the Holy Spirit actively reveals the believer's search for God and God's search for the believer in the midst of life. Marlene Kropf helpfully expands this concept of spiritual direction by identifying some of the questions this conversation probes. "What is the quality of the relationship [between the directee and God]? How is God's presence being made known? How is the person responding to God? Where is the Spirit calling for transformation and growth?"[1] As you can see, the word "transformation" is already linked to this understanding of spiritual direction.

My experience of physical change as I enter my hour of spiritual direction each month stands as a sign, signaling to me that transformation is possible here.

My dictionary defines transformation as "any change."[2] But in the context of spiritual direction, the word needs further definition. Transformation is any change that frees us to claim and live out of our status as God's children (Eph. 1:5–6).[3] In other words, to participate in transformation is to move ever closer to God's intention for humanity in creation. This is a lifelong journey. We cannot travel this way alone. The Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ sustain us on this transforming journey. Spiritual direction is one aspect of this sustaining and transforming ministry. But how does it happen?

Transforming conversation

I must turn slightly to face my spiritual director. She does not sit directly opposite me but slightly to my left. We greet each other warmly and exchange friendly chat for a moment. To anyone else, it might appear that we are engaged in a typical conversation. But we are not, and we both know it. Soon our chatter quiets.

Silence.

Into the silence, in a gentle unhurried way, my spiritual director offers Scripture, a poem, or a reading.

Silence.

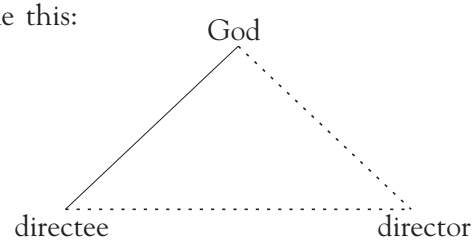
In those profoundly simple moments, my spiritual director has welcomed the Holy Spirit into our midst. The Holy Spirit is the third party to our conversation. I understand again why my

spiritual director does not sit directly across from me. The space to my right leaves plenty of room for the Holy Spirit.

When I am ready, I add my voice to the silence. I speak of me. In the speaking of me, an opening is created to witness God's activity. This truly is no typical conversation.

I often emerge from spiritual direction with a different sense about the world. The chaos does not seem quite so chaotic. The busyness does not seem quite so pressing. I leave with a spaciousness in my soul for myself, for others, and for God. When I first began direction, I attributed this change to the revelations I received there of how God was active in my life. Spiritual direction seemed so fruitful at the beginning. I was forever hearing invitations from God. Sometimes the invitation was a nuance of one I had already received, and sometimes it was a new invitation. But over time I have probed aspects of me that require more exploration than can happen in one hour. I have left many sessions with no new revelation of God's activity in my life, yet the different sense about the world is still mine. Even in the midst of difficult grief work, I have experienced this change. I now attribute this different sense about the world to the transforming power of spiritual direction.

Let me explain. The conversation offered in spiritual direction becomes transforming precisely because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In training to become a spiritual director, I became aware of the triangle shape of the conversation. It looks something like this:



In many instances, a triangle is used to diagram unhealthy forms of communication.[4] But I believe that in spiritual direction, conversation that takes this shape becomes redemptive.

As noted, the focus of the direction hour is exploring the relationship between the believer and God. The directee's job is to bring the stuff of his life into the conversation. The director's job is to listen to this story carefully and prayerfully. Thus, a

conversation is going on between two people. But the director is simultaneously participating in another conversation. She is also in active conversation with the Holy Spirit.[5] The director may be asking the Holy Spirit, "What is God's activity in this story?" The Holy Spirit may be nudging the director to a particular Scripture, or to keep quiet, or to ask a question. Before the director speaks, she often checks with the Holy Spirit to confirm that sense. The director cannot be absolutely sure of God's revelation, of what invitation God is giving to the directee. She asks questions and probes possibilities arising from the directee's experience. When the director actually engages with the directee in the conversation, then, she offers as possibilities these nudges by the Holy Spirit. She offers them tentatively, because it is the task of the directee to claim the working of the Spirit in his life.

The triangular shape of the spiritual direction conversation assumes the active presence of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit offers clear revelation in the context of the conversation. Other times, the Spirit abides, waiting, creating space and readiness to receive the revelation. However it works, this Spirit is the same Spirit who was at work in creating order out of chaos. This same Spirit empowers the church to carry out its ministries. This Spirit brings us into relationship with God.[6] This is the Holy Spirit at work in the conversation of spiritual direction, empowering transformation.

Transforming space

My body is no longer calm. I feel the weight of grief bearing down on me until it makes my shoulders stoop. I feel it compress my heart and my lungs. I struggle to breathe. Grief spills out of my mouth and eyes and fills the room. I look for the Holy Spirit in that space to my right, but I see no one. I cannot find God at all. All my crying out is met with nothing. I get no relief or comfort for this pain.

My director does not jump up to help me bear this pain. She does not ease the tension in my shoulders. Rather my director sits there, not fixing anything. There is no urgency in her; in fact I almost get the sense that she is lingering. She offers a lot of silence, the occasional question that probes my experience, and absolutely no answers. However, I do not want to stay here. This

hurts. This is difficult. I long to revel in God's love again. But quick fixes are not offered here. I think I knew they wouldn't be.

This willingness to linger in a disorienting experience is a gift given to me, although I may have trouble recognizing it as gift. My director's lingering opens a transforming space. First, she does not recoil at the intensity of my experience, nor does she claim the intensity of the emotion. She simply remains, listening. Nancy Pfaff writes, "Perhaps this is the greatest gift we can give the journeyer, a physical representation of God's presence, listening."[7] And that is precisely what my director has done. In making space for the grief, or rage, or despair, she becomes God's messenger, bringing the assurance that I have not been abandoned. Not even by God. The recognition of God's faithfulness is a transforming moment in my life.

I often emerge from spiritual direction with a different sense about the world. The chaos does not seem quite so chaotic. The busyness does not seem quite so pressing. I leave with a spaciousness in my soul for myself, for others, and for God.

Second, my director sees this experience as something to be explored. She does not view it as something over which one can triumph. Rather she sees an invitation to participate with God in a new ways. Nancy Pfaff is helpful here, too. "God's purpose for the dark night [is] a new kind of seeing God, of being with God."[8] If I eventually say yes to this invitation, it is an opportunity for further transformation. For as I move toward God, changes will occur that offer freedom to claim and live out of my status as God's child.[9]

Transforming celebration

Silence. I feel welcome again. I can rest here. Presence. God. I am at home. I smile and begin to speak of me. I share places where I recognize God's activity in my life and in the lives of those around me. I may recall situations my director has heard many times before, but they are new now with this new revelation of God's activity. I must tell the story again, but this time in its new framework. I may share new experiences of God's activity in my life and in the lives of those around me. These stories must be added to the framework, giving it support and colour. But I am not restricted to recounting the ways God has been active in my

life. I am also free to share the choices I have made to participate actively with God, although I may be shy about this at first. But the delight my director expresses at these stories makes me bold. I join in the celebration.

I don't always find these stories easy to tell. These stories are not without their own pain. But they stand as testimonies to God's faithfulness and to my own transformation. And so we celebrate with laughter and tears.

I am still myself. I am a woman, I am a mother of three young children, I am a pastor, I am a wife, I am a church member, I am a friend, I am a spiritual director, I am a daughter. But now I engage in these callings with eyes that see in more Christ-like ways. I celebrate now not because I will never again experience the pain I have just come through. That is not the way of Christ. I celebrate now because celebrating will sustain me as I continue my journey. I need the light of celebration to stand in my various callings as a testimony to God's activity in the world. I need the laughter of celebration to stand in my various callings as a sign of God's justice in the world. I need the joy of celebration to stand in my various callings in opposition to the despair of evil in the world. I need the tears of celebration to know that I do not stand alone in any of these callings.

Next month I will find myself opening the door to enter the building. If I check my watch, I will see that I am a minute or two late. On my way in to the office, I will find my steps losing their sense of urgency. My pace will slow, not in hesitation, but in anticipation and preparation, for I will be at the beginning of a new hour of spiritual direction, wondering what transformation the changes in my body foretell.

Notes

[1] Marlene Kropf, "Spiritual Direction: Sisters and Brothers to Keep Us Faithful on the Way," *Gospel Herald* (April 29, 1997): 2. Another helpful definition of spiritual direction can be found in William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 3–12.

[2] *Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1982).

[3] As the Ephesians text makes clear, claiming our status as God's children is not only an individual endeavour. As soon as people recognize their status as children of God, they are immediately invited to participate in the community known as the church.

[4] See Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and*

Synagogue (New York: Guilford Pr., 1985), 35–9.

[5] I believe that this call to pay attention to the activity of the Holy Spirit means that spiritual directors must be trained not only in spiritual direction but also biblical studies and theology. It is imperative that directors participate in a congregation and that they receive direction themselves. For it is the church and the Scriptures that give the context in which we discern the movement of the Spirit.

[6] See Article 3, "Holy Spirit," in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1995), 17–20.

[7] Nancy Pfaff, "Spiritual Direction and the Dark Night of the Soul," *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International* 4 (May 1998): 35.

[8] Ibid., 36.

[9] For insight into the spiritual growth of a directee, see the first chapter of Frank J. Houdek, *Guided by the Spirit: A Jesuit Perspective on Spiritual Direction* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Pr., 1996).

The transforming power of grief
A widow's story

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Adapted from a sermon given at AMBS chapel, November 8, 2000.

Given a choice, none of us would choose suffering or grief as a means of transformation. Yet everyone has faced or will face losses, and these experiences can be an opportunity for personal growth and transformation.

My husband, Harold Hartzler, had a heart attack and died unexpectedly on October 6, 1999. It was a beautiful fall day. I was making a blueberry pie when Harold gave me his usual good-bye kiss and left to run on the millrace path in Goshen. He didn't come back. During the next few days I experienced an outpouring of love from family and friends as they surrounded my children and me. One week later, Harold's ashes were brought to me, and my children and I took the ashes out onto Lake Michigan in Harold's boat and scattered them there as the sun set on another day and on the life that I had known and loved.

I was making a blueberry pie when Harold gave me his usual good-bye kiss and left to run on the millrace path in Goshen. He didn't come back.

Thus I entered a season of mourning far more painful and intense than I had ever imagined grief could be. Each of us has experienced the pain of loss: the death of a loved one, a spouse, parent, child, perhaps an unborn child; the death of a marriage through divorce; the loss of health or job; some other unexpected transition. As I share from my grief story, I invite you to enter into my suffering or to allow yourself to feel your own pain. Let it carry you to a place deep inside yourself where you can meet God.

I will borrow from Joyce Rupp four aspects of praying a goodbye: recognition, reflection, ritualization, and reorientation.[1] Grief is irregular, and these four acts do not follow a linear

pattern. The stages of grief overlap and mourners often cycle back through stages again and again. We each experience grief differently, but for many of us a season of grief is full of paradoxes and confusion, with backward, upside-down, and inside-out times.

Recognition

When Harold died, my children ranged in age from 15 to 25. Telling them that their daddy had died was one of the most difficult things I did in those first days. When I told my 18-year-old daughter, she sobbed inconsolably, first in my arms and then in the arms of pastors, mentor, guidance counselor, and friends. I told my 25-year-old son in Portland, Oregon, over the phone. He screamed "No. No. No." I cry as I remember, because that first telling made Harold's death even more real for me than seeing and touching his lifeless body.

I entered into a stage of shock and numbness. Later I wrote in my journal: "I have felt numb a lot during these past three weeks. Then sometimes I feel a big aching emptiness, and when the pain seems too much to bear, I begin to feel numb again." I couldn't deal with the full reality of my loss in those first weeks, so I went about many of my tasks by rote. Tumultuous feelings interrupted my dazed days. I felt suspended between the world as it had been and the world as it is now—without Harold. I was being transformed by his death, but from what and into what I didn't know. At times Harold's absence was palpable. Each day I felt as much of the pain of his absence as the protective numbness would allow. I knew that I needed to walk into the darkness, embrace my grief, and feel the pain deep within.

In those early months I talked about walking *in* grief. I couldn't say, "I am walking *through* grief," because I didn't know if I would ever get to the other side.

As the weeks went by I concluded that what I felt was unimaginable. This pain can be known only by experiencing it. One acquaintance told me that she knew exactly how I felt. I said, "You do?," thinking her husband must have died and I hadn't heard. She said, "Yes. My mother died 10 months ago." I must have stared at her dumbfounded. I know the pain of a parent's death, and it is not the same. Many friends said, "I can't imagine your pain." They were right. Just as in marriage there is mystery in

the two becoming one, so in the death of a marriage partner there is mystery in the depth of the pain caused by the loss. In *A Grief Observed,* C. S. Lewis says that the death of a beloved is an amputation.[2] It is. A part of me is gone forever. We humans don't get over an amputation.

Great comfort has come from others who have been widowed. One widow embraced me, then stood looking into my eyes with tears filling her own, and without words communicated much: I knew that she knew. On this journey words are often unnecessary.

For months I found it difficult to pray. But I wanted to be in the presence of praying people, so I continued to go to the prayer group. As others prayed, I wept.

In those early months I talked about walking *in* grief. I couldn't say, "I am walking *through* grief," because I didn't know if I would ever get to the other side. Harold's absence was always present with me. The fact of his death was so deeply etched in my psyche that his absence was the last thing I thought of before I went to sleep at night and the first thing I thought of when I awoke. Some people talk about waking up and reaching to the other side of the bed to touch the one who is no longer there. I never did that. I was aware even in my dreams that Harold had died. And his absence made that valley of grief seem deep and dark and long.

Then I realized that I was in the valley of the *shadow* of death. And in order for there to be a shadow, there must be a source of light. Suddenly I knew clearly that God's presence was that light for me. I felt the wonderful mystery that is God's presence. In good times I have often been aware of God's blessing, but never had the divine presence been so real and so comforting.

For months I found it difficult to pray. But I wanted to be in the presence of praying people, so I continued to go to the prayer group on Wednesday evenings at College Mennonite Church, my home congregation. As others prayed, I wept. This grief plunged me into the depths of my being, depths I hadn't known existed. There, in my pain and anguish and lament, I have communed with God. And in that divine, holy, loving, sustaining presence, words are not needed.

Music has often taken me to places that I had not known before Harold's death. It has also been prayer beyond words. One

of my first outings after Harold's death was to a retirement center where my brother and his family were singing. Some of the residents requested songs. I thought I would cry when we sang "Shall We Gather at the River" and other old songs about heaven, but I didn't. But then we sang "Nearer My God to Thee," and I began to weep. The tears didn't stop until long after the hymn ended.

Reflection

My acts of recognition and reflection overlapped from the beginning. Some widowed people say they cannot return to the places where they had special times with their spouse. But I needed to go to those places, even knowing that I would feel deep sorrow there. So I went, and as tears ran down my face, I moved slowly forward on my grief journey. Remembering is sometimes the best way to forget.

As we grieve, we need to tell our stories over and over. The telling confirms the reality of loss, and only when we fully accept the reality of death can we move toward a time when we will experience some healing. Todd Davis, associate professor of English at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, says that we tell our stories to try to make sense of life. As I tell my story I remove some of grief's power over me and I "become empowered to reconstruct [my] present reality" in a way that accounts for my loss and lays to rest some of the past "without obliterating the continued healing presence of memory."[3] In the telling, I open doors to the living and to life, without closing the door to the past and to Harold. Thus I establish reference points for making sense of both my past and my present life.

Grief work is hard work. For me, the work of reflection was complicated by so many other difficult tasks, my widow's work: dealing with mountains of paper work, legal matters, financial issues, income taxes, health insurance questions; making a new will; writing "deceased" in the blanks when I filled out forms; and being a single parent to my two adopted teenage daughters who both have multiple health issues. During those early months it was difficult to find time and energy to reflect on life-and-death issues, on my spiritual journey, and on my future as a single woman. So I enrolled in my first seminary class four months after Harold died,

and began daily journaling. Writing has been a means of reflection that has served me well. It has helped me move along in this mixed-up, unpredictable season of grief.

Ritualization

As I have reflected over the months, rituals and symbols have become important to me. So ritualization also overlaps with reflection. I entered into some rituals, knowing they were important to me without fully understanding why. I wore black most days during that first year out of a desire to identify with widows throughout the world and throughout the ages who give me hope that life does go on. I have burned many candles. Candles in my windows glow day after day and night after night. Candles somehow represent a glimmer of hope, a beacon in a storm, and the Light of the world.

I wore black most days during that first year, out of a desire to identify with widows throughout the world and throughout the ages who give me hope that life does go on.

As the anniversary of Harold's death approached, I felt a need to mark that occasion with ritual and symbol. Many cultures have traditions for the first anniversary of a death. Since we do not, I learned about other cultures, I read, and I talked with my widowed friends. I learned that rituals and symbols are the language of the soul; they express what words sometimes cannot. Rituals and symbols open doors of transformation.

I considered what Jim Lapp did on the first anniversary of his wife Nancy's death.[4] He gathered family members and friends, and they remembered Nancy and had a time of worship. Jim wrote about what followed: "On the table burned two candles in candleholders used at our wedding 39 years before. To mark the change, I transferred the light from Nancy's candle to a small lamp as a symbol of the different but enduring place she will hold in my life. With great poignancy, Nancy's wedding candle was then snuffed out. My light was transferred to a new candle and candleholder to symbolize a fresh beginning. Then my wedding candle was also extinguished."[5]

I was not ready to do what Jim had done. I decided that I wanted to walk in silence along the millrace in Goshen on October 6. I invited family and close friends "who aren't afraid to

weep, or walk with those who weep" to join me. We remembered and honored Harold as we walked along the path that now feels like holy ground to me, the place where Harold's spirit left his body, where his body began the process of returning to dust. A park bench has been placed there in memory of Harold and beside it is a rock on which his name is engraved. We continued our walk to the dam, and I felt carried as I was surrounded by God and the congregation of family and friends behind me. Like a great cloud they cheered me on with their presence. We did not speak because words were not necessary. A blue heron escorted us part of the way, which to me was a beautiful symbol of hope and of the unexpected gifts I have received on this journey.

We returned home to continue remembering Harold. My son Jon had baked bread for the occasion and my son Joel had helped me make grape juice. I arranged candles on my dining room table: A Christ candle is in the center. It is for me a symbol of God's abiding presence in the past, of light for this day, and of hope for the future. It is also a symbol of my commitment to keep Christ in the center of my life in my ongoing journey. Around the Christ candle I placed other candles in memory of loved ones who have died untimely deaths: Harold, of course; my father, who died when I was 21; Eric Liechty; Gerald Kauffman; Keith Gingrich; Marlin Miller; Roger Unzicker; Charlotte Holsopple Glick and others in that great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before.

Reorientation

At the end of the evening we told stories. And we laughed. It feels good to laugh again, and I have learned that sometimes laughter brings even more relief than crying! Reorientation has been occurring slowly over the past months in the midst of my reflecting and ritualizing. I believe that God dwells within each one of us, at the center and the core of our being. Remembering that images are the language of the soul, I understand Joyce Rupp when she says that images "connect our outer world to this inner world of our self where the divine dwells…. It is there that life is gradually reoriented or given renewed direction and energy."[6] It is then and there that healing and transformation can occur.

But even in healing there is pain. About six months after Harold's death I awoke one morning and began to think about my

day. I thought about a person I was going to meet later that day. Suddenly I realized that Harold had not been my first thought, and I cried. I cried because letting go seemed even harder than hanging on. But I am learning that I need to let go so that my life can go on, and so that I can more fully dwell in God's presence.

In grief a gift eventually emerges if we open ourselves to it. My most treasured gift during this season of grief is experiencing God's presence. In God's presence, I have found a new joy. As Henri Nouwen explained, the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy are one and the same.[7] There is an old saying, "When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit laughs for what it has found." It is a paradox that pathos and joy can co-exist in the midst of suffering.

I awoke one morning and I thought about a person I was going to meet later that day. Suddenly I realized that Harold had not been my first thought, and I cried. I cried because letting go seemed even harder than hanging on.

And yet, that is what I am learning. Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet* says that "your joy is your sorrow unmasked. The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall write, "The secret to joy in suffering…is not in denying the pain, but in focusing on…God's great love and care for us. When we feel intensely loved in the midst of our suffering, suffering cannot take our joy away."[8] I have experienced God's love and care as I have been surrounded by the people of God. For "just as God's love was made incarnate…in the person of Jesus," so "God's love becomes incarnate for us in the body of Christ."[9] Thus, as I drink this cup of sorrow in the presence of God and my community, I am also drinking the cup of joy!

These lessons of grief are leading me toward a greater understanding of the meaning of life and toward transformation into wholeness, and for that I am grateful.

It has been like a **year** *of Lent,*
of giving up one thing after another.
Only this Lent will not be followed by Easter Sunday
when I resume doing or eating what I have given up.
For I am giving up a life
with Harold's companionship and friendship.

But now I know a different kind of Easter.
With faith restored, I look forward to bright new days,
even knowing that clouds will appear
and storms will come again.
But having survived a year of deep sorrow and grief,
having lived through what seemed like
insurmountable difficulties,
I have hope that I can face whatever comes my way.
My life will cycle through more days of Lent,
and Good Friday will come again,
but it won't last forever,
for now I know that the hope of Easter
follows a season of grief
and in the Resurrection is the promise of life after death.

Notes

[1] Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 78–89.
[2] C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961).
[3] Todd Davis and Kenneth Womac, "Reading the Ethics of Mourning in the Poetry of Donald Hall," in *Mourning and Literature*, ed. Christian Riegel (forthcoming).
[4] James M. Lapp, "On Losing a Spouse," *Christian Living* (June 2000): 21–24.
[5] Ibid., 24.
[6] Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, 87.
[7] Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1996).
[8] Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life Press, 1994), 105.
[9] Ibid.

Improbable? Transformation and the congregation
A review of some resources

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

Oh, the building was not the problem. It was modern; it had a beautiful sanctuary, offices, Christian education space. Everything was there. But the connection with the seminary was not. People thought differently, people worshiped differently, people lived their Christian life in different ways, pastoral leadership took different forms. How could it work?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nevertheless, this experience has been a positive one for the congregation. Not only do we feel privileged to be able to channel some 'conservative' input into one of your students, but we feel the broader exposure of AMBS through your student has helped penetrate some of our ecclesiastical isolation."[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, in *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1996), write about the congregation as a transforming system (46). The church exists for mission in society: "The fundamental purpose of the transforming system is to convert the raw materials taken in from the environment into energy, which the congregation needs to survive and to carry out its mission" (49). The church exists for worship and worship exists for God and to change society. When we worship the true God, transformation occurs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Building a megachurch may not be bad, but perhaps the heart of the matter lies elsewhere. Denham Grierson, in *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984), is concerned about what shapes and sustains a faith community. In his estimation it is not ideas, formal confessions, and erudite academia that form a community, but local culture, necessity, and local mythology. He suggests that in order to understand a faith community we should study how it perceives space and time, language and intimacy, consensus and circumstance.

Transformation is not automatic. Change does not happen in a mechanical or robotic manner. How one includes people, how the church makes decisions, how information is shared, how programs are envisioned all have an impact on the transformation process.

Roy Oswald, writing for the Alban Institute, has communicated something of the same vision, in "Planning with Norms, Myths, and Meaning Statements," *Action Information* 14, no. 5 (September/October 1988). He suggests that instead of doing strategic planning and following someone else's recommendations, a better use of time and resources is listening to people's self-perceptions and becoming acquainted with their community's expressions of faith. This approach offers greater possibilities for reaching the depths of people's lives and changing them through and through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Note

[1] Used by permission.

Crossing cultures, transforming lives

Keith Graber Miller, Professor of Bible, Religion, and Philosophy, Goshen College, Goshen, Ind.

"Going into a different culture, in which I find myself again like a child, can become a true psychotherapeutic opportunity," writes Henri Nouwen in his Latin American journal *Gracias*. "When we walk around in a strange milieu, speaking the language haltingly and feeling out of control and like fools, we can come in touch with a part of ourselves that usually remains hidden behind the thick walls of our defenses." That part, says Nouwen, is "our basic vulnerability, our need for others, our deep-seated feelings of ignorance and inadequacy, and our fundamental dependency."[1] Confessing these feelings and embracing the God whose grace emerges in the muddle provide fresh understandings of Christian service, a pathway for healing, and a chance for conversion.

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In his opening remarks at a Wingspread Conference on "The Role of Service-Learning in International Education," J. Lawrence Burkholder, president emeritus of Goshen College, said he humbly claimed only one credential for speaking at the event: he is a "born again" believer in international education.[2] I write as one similarly reborn, as one revived and renewed by the God who lures us into the muddle. Through leading four units of Goshen College's Study-Service Term (SST) in the Dominican Republic, two groups in 1989 and two more in 1997, I became a believer in the conversion possible through cross-cultural encounters and experiential learning. And in the spirit of some Dominican evangelicals, I'll testify to a series of rebirths during my years of association with Goshen College, re-commitments to God and to graceful living, as well as to

international education, and to service or experiential learning. Now, as my wife, Ann, and I prepare to facilitate another SST group experience, this time in China in fall 2002, I am reminded of Nouwen's powerful observation, and Burkholder's rebirth.

Goshen College's Study-Service Term takes students to the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Germany, Mali, China, Indonesia, or Ethiopia, for six weeks of study in an urban area, followed by six weeks of service in a rural or small-town setting. Assignments include teaching English, working in clinics, construction, day care, and agriculture. SST and parallel programs at other liberal arts colleges take participants into the realm of the unfamiliar, and that space makes transformation inevitable for those with eyes to see, ears to hear, or hearts to embrace. For service alongside others as well as conversion of ourselves, God calls us to cross borders and boundaries, in our own communities or countries or overseas.

Wilbur Birky, director of Goshen College's Study-Service Term, writes in the orientation materials for program leaders about the "vision, history, and ethos" of SST. Birky draws on the biblical metaphor of the incarnation, and proposes that the incarnation is "an act of divine imagination rooted in a profound realization that even God could not *know and understand* the human condition completely without *entering into* it, to experience it in the body. That was a true cross-cultural experience." Birky says a description of the early parts of Jesus' incarnation aptly apply to SST: "It is to give up one's customary place of comfort, to become as a child, to learn a new language and to eat in new ways, to be received into a new family, to work in the mundane 'carpentry shop,' to attend the local house of worship, to question and be questioned, to experience frustration and success, and to learn to serve in the very 'thick' of life. This is *service-learning* in the context of *crossing over* into the life of the 'other.'"[3] Birky says if such encounters are necessary for God, "how much more so for us in this *knowledge by experience for compassionate action*."

Before going to the Dominican Republic, our group prepared for the experience through orientation. The campus network of returned SSTers also briefed us about what to expect. Even with that preparation, we often felt out of control and like fools, most

of us speaking the Spanish language only haltingly. A decade after the Study-Service Term's 1968 inception, the student newspaper charged then-director Arlin Hunsberger with not adequately orienting students for their study abroad. In response, Hunsberger appealed to the program's original design, which he implied "actually proposed a healthy amount of initial disorientation abroad as a primary goal of the undertaking."[4] Disorientation, when it does not overwhelm, contributes toward humility and receptivity. Disorientation engages us, draws us out, makes us open and vulnerable, teachable.[5]

Disorientation, when it does not overwhelm, contributes toward humility and receptivity. Disorientation engages us, draws us out, makes us open and vulnerable, teachable.

Nouwen says our transformation comes in cross-cultural experiences when we embrace the scary feelings and learn that "our true value as human beings has its seat far beyond our competence and accomplishments." In settings where we are out of control, we find ourselves being loved "not for what we can do, but for who we are." That frees us to live with others in a "fellowship of the weak," which is true healing. "In the presence of God," writes Nouwen," we are totally naked, broken, sinful and dependent, and we realize that we can do nothing, absolutely nothing, without God."[6]

As leaders in education and the church, and as North Americans, we are often perceived not only as being in control of our own lives, but also as being powerful in others' lives. Although we may often feel out of control, we frequently hide that reality and live with our illusions. Cross-cultural experiences strip away that thin veneer, and graciously allow us to *be* how we often *feel:* dependent on others, lacking in confidence, and hungry for love. After her experience in SST leadership in Central America, my colleague Ruth Krall wrote:

> *Previously my conception of teaching and learning was that the teacher was responsible to be strong, not weak; to be informed, not confused; to be loving and perceptive of students, not needful of love and perceptivity…. But in Costa Rica, I was not an expert. I was not always*

strong. I was not always loving and culturally perceptive.... Honesty about painful feelings and confusion did not appear to destroy [my students'] inner security nor did it seem to cause a lack of trust. Walking the same road as they did each day made us into co-learners.... One enduring result of SST in my personal life has been this basic challenge to my theories of teaching and learning. I am more committed to relational teaching.[7]

For Ann and me, too, in the Dominican Republic, it became clear that in spite of our incompetence, or perhaps because of it, our students and our hosts graciously accepted us, even loved us, as we came to love them.

In our second experience in the Dominican Republic, our greatest vulnerability came when we visited Haiti for four days. Haiti and the D.R. share the same island, and the two nations have long had a tempestuous relationship. We wanted to learn about the Dominican Republic through the eyes of Haitians, whom the Dominicans often fear. We wanted to hear about service and development from Mennonite Central Committee workers in Port-au-Prince because no MCC or Mennonite Board of Missions workers were based in our primary host country.

Although we may often feel out of control, we frequently hide that reality and live with our illusions. Cross-cultural experiences strip away that thin veneer, and graciously allow us to *be* how we often *feel:* dependent on others, lacking in confidence, and hungry for love.

When we crossed the border at Jimani, stopping overnight in Fon Parisien, we immediately were in the land of the unfamiliar. The language switched from Spanish to Creole, which none of us had studied, and we were forced to communicate with our faces and hands, and through traditional dances and games with the young people of the village. We ate indigenous foods we had not encountered in the Dominican Republic. In Port-au-Prince we lived in an orphanage with former street boys who had undergone religious and quality-of-life changes we could not fully understand.

One of our Haitian lecturers was Father Roger Desir, an Episcopal priest who spoke to us about Haitian and Dominican

history, philosophy, and religion. Father Desir lived through the turbulent history of Haiti's last six decades, and spent seventeen years translating the Bible into Creole so his people can read the text in their own language. He had been imprisoned for his advocacy work on behalf of fellow Haitians. Committed to a life of service, his passion and commitment gave him credibility. His character made us want to sit at his feet. His riveting presentation, which concluded with a blessing, moved me nearly to tears. His intellectual and spiritual integrity left me humbled.

What made Father Desir's lecture so powerful, I came to realize, was its experiential authenticity. His heart and soul were in his words, and he had engaged the world, on behalf of others, in a way that made his words truthful. When we returned to the Dominican Republic, we asked our host lecturers to speak not about traditional subjects but about the topics about which they felt passionately. We learned about deforestation, for instance, rather than about the previously assigned subject of "Flora and Fauna in Dominican Republic." We also recruited new Dominican lecturers, primarily people who worked for social service agencies, or in politics, or with church organizations. When people spoke out of their passions, and out of their engagement with the world, rather than only out of their academic locations or disciplines, they had much to teach us. How could I—one who also purports to teach—have missed this lesson before?

Graduate school had catapulted me into the classroom with vigor, and what I lacked in teaching experience I made up for in rookie zeal. But after only a few years of teaching I sensed I was getting boring, and that I needed more outside stimulation. I needed fresh insights from the world beyond the campus. Leading our international education program did that for me, for a time. My hope is that I never forget how needful I am, how needful we all are, of passions and experiences outside the classroom, or beyond the pulpit. As teachers and ministers, we need ongoing experiential learning if we are to have something to teach. And with such learning, we also will be better able to value such opportunities for conversion, and a pedagogy that draws on and analyzes our day-to-day encounters with the unfamiliar.

Those who have lived or traveled abroad, even as sensitive tourists, often have glorious stories of "aha" moments or

revelatory breakthroughs in critical thinking. One mundane revelation, but with far-reaching implications, came to our students in the Dominican Republic. Most of the student transportation there is in *carros públicos*, usually beat-up, taped-together (literally), decades-old Toyotas that scuttle down Santo Domingo's primary streets, picking up anyone wagging the Dominican finger. As a hitchhiker signals his need for a ride with thumb raised, here the prospective passenger points downward with her index finger. In these ancient, tiny wrecks, two people are expected to sit in one front bucket seat while four more crowd into the back.

Several weeks into the summer term, some of our students were remarking about the insanity of a common occurrence. They briefly would be alone in a *público* with the driver, sitting comfortably in the front bucket seat, when another passenger-to-be would finger the car to a halt. Then, though the backseat was empty, the new rider would open the front door and pile nearly onto the lap of our student. Some of our SSTers saw this as an unwelcome attempt at physical intimacy, others as a sign of Dominican senselessness.

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At Casa Goshen, the weekly group-processing time in our home, we sought to understand *público* behavior. Most students realized that for our Dominican hosts physical contact with friends or strangers was not a problem, so that was one mitigating explanation. But few had thought through the truth that emerged from our conversation: because of traffic patterns and the dangers surrounding exiting and entering cars, all passengers are required to exit *públicos* from the right doors rather than into the roadway. If the person who sat on our student's lap had instead gotten in back, he eventually would have been pressed against the driver's side door. If he needed to exit the car before the other backseat passengers, all of them would have had to get out before he could. Seen in this light, his scrunching into the front seat was sensitive, appropriate, and eminently rational.

The outcome of the discussion bowled over the student who had raised the subject. What she had regarded as senseless was transformed through seeing from another perspective, and the chastening that came through the revelation carried over into the remainder of her experience. Experiential learning requires us to think *about* and *from* other perspectives, and to think critically about our own narrow perspectives.[8]

During our days in Haiti we met with Mennonite Central Committee representatives, one of whom spoke about occasional "cowboy missionaries" who enter a culture "with their six-shooters a-blazin'." Students were pleased to recognize more clearly than before the sensitivity with which Mennonite development and mission workers approach their host cultures. They realized then, if they had not done so already, what limited "service" they could do in the final six weeks of their Study-Service Term.[9] Through what they heard, and through what they later experienced, our group came to know that service includes "being" and "understanding" and "accompanying" as well as "doing." Service sometimes simply means being taught, and affirming the giftedness of those with whom you are living. It means receiving, having your feet washed, as well as washing another's feet. The night of our meeting with the Mennonite Central Committee workers, student David Roth wrote in his SST journal:

> *I'm going to bed tonight tired, but a good tired that has come from thoroughly extending myself in every intellectual, emotional and physical way during the Haiti trip. I am spent intellectually—I pushed so hard to soak up every word from every speaker, pushed my brain constantly for three days, examining/connecting/critiquing ideas presented to me. I spent myself in staying up late all the nights to talk among wonderful people in fascinating subject areas. And I've never learned so much in three days, never. I think my life/views/opinions have been altered permanently in some areas, like thinking about poverty, and about dependence/service issues, and about entering a culture you have little knowledge of. And it feels good to be spent. The rush I got from all the input has given me so much to ponder in a long-term sense.*[10]

Most of us came away from Haiti and the Dominican Republic changed, converted, humbled by our vulnerabilites, impressed with the wisdom of our overseas Mennonite workers, grateful that our colleges offer cross-cultural experiences, and committed to lives of Christian service. Thank God for breaks from the routine, encounters with the unfamiliar, and learnings from those whose perspectives are rich with truth.

In *Gracias*, Nouwen writes that the more he thinks about the meaning of acting and living in the name of Christ, the more he realizes that what he has to offer others "is not my intelligence, skill, power, influence or connections, but my own human brokenness through which the love of God can manifest itself." This, he writes, "is what ministry and mission are all about."

> *Ministry is entering with our human brokenness into communion with others and speaking a word of hope. This hope is not based on any power to solve the problems of those with whom we live, but on the love of God, which becomes visible when we let go of our fears of being out of control and enter into God's presence in a shared confession of weakness.... This is a hard vocation. It goes against the grain of our need for self-affirmation, self-fulfillment, and self-realization. It is a call to true humility. I, therefore, think that for those who are pulled away from their familiar surroundings and brought into a strange land where they feel again like babies, the Lord offers a unique chance not only for personal conversion but also for an authentic ministry.*[11]

As pastors and teachers, may we seek out such unfamiliarity. May we go into the muddle with open hands and hearts. And may our transformation grace us with vision and passion to contribute to God's reign.

Notes

[1] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Gracias: A Latin American Journal* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 17.

[2] J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Idea of Service in International Education," in *The Role of Service-Learning in International Education: Proceedings of a Wingspread Conference*, ed. Stuart W. Showalter (Goshen: Goshen College, 1989), 25.

[3] Wilbur Birky, "SST: Vision, History, and Ethos," *2001–02 SST Faculty Handbook* (Goshen: Goshen College, 2001). Birky's italics.
[4] Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College, 1894–1994* (Goshen: Goshen College, 1994), 270.
[5] On disorientation, see, e.g., William A. Beardslee, "Stories in the Postmodern World: Orienting and Disorienting," in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art,* ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State Univ. of New York Pr., 1990), 163–75. See also Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann on personal development changes coming about through discontinuity, displacement, and disjunction rather than in stages of equilibrium. Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Pr., 1987), 9.
[6] Nouwen, *Gracias*, 17–8.
[7] "Leading SST Convinces Krall Relational Teaching Is Best," *Goshen College Bulletin* (November 1988): 5. Ruth Krall teaches peace, justice, and conflict studies at Goshen College.
[8] Anne Colby and William Damon argue, in *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: Free Pr., 1992), 77, that "the ardent truth seeker shakes up comfortable presumptions, including those of the truth seeker herself." They add that not *all* other beliefs may be up for grabs, since "a core commitment to honesty can coexist with other articles of faith."
[9] About the time Goshen College began the SST program, Ivan Illich gave a provocative address at Guernavaca to the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects. In the speech entitled "To Hell with Good Intentions!" Illich told his listeners to voluntarily "renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you (as 'vacationing do-gooders') to impose American benevolence on Mexico." He entreated his audience to "use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to *study*. But do not come to *help*." Cited in Alexander A. Kwapong, "Some Reflections on the Role of International Education in the '90s," in Showalter, *The Role of Service-Learning*, 16.
[10] Used by permission.
[11] Nouwen, *Gracias*, 18.

Book Review

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Church Planting: Laying Foundations, by Stuart Murray. Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Pr., 2001.

Stuart Murray is Director of Church Planting and Evangelism at Spurgeon's College in London, England. He is involved in the Anabaptist Network, a growing ecumenical network of people in the United Kingdom drawn together in recent years around their common discovery of Anabaptist history and values. He writes out of a uniquely Anabaptist-Baptist orientation and has been involved in the planting of a church in East London, in the failed planting of another, and in recent teaching and consultative work on the topic of church planting. His perspective demonstrates the wisdom of experience sharpened by the scholarly discipline of asking deep questions.

This book explores the premises and methods of church planting and growth. Many of these models are advocated by the proponents of an evolving branch of evangelical theology given prominent expression in the Church Growth Movement (associated with the Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary). Proponents include Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. Thus, at one level this book can be understood as a British-evangelical response to a British, dominantly Anglican cultural context; at another level, it is an ecumenical response to a North American evangelical vein of missiology.

This book is not another church planter's connect-the-dots manual. Murray's agenda is not to tell any Christian person or group exactly how to plant a church in a western context. Instead, he sets out to provide a critical survey of the topic, seeking a theological framework for the way forward. His historical-critical treatment tends to be even-handed, neither descending into mean-spirited attacks nor offering unqualified

praise of the strategies and gurus of previous how-to literature in this field.

Murray's stated intention is to write for practitioners, not theorists. He deems this undertaking necessary because the foundational and critical-reflective tasks have too often been ignored or left to expert theorists, so that people engaged in the activity of church planting have not been encouraged or taught to relate critically to their own projects.

Murray acknowledges and deals with common criticisms of the very idea of church planting. With care, he seeks to point out the strengths and limits of some of the various models that have come to the fore. He challenges the reader to recognize multiple shapes that a church plant may take, as well as multiple motivations that may (or may not) justify the enterprise in a given instance. Common planting principles and arguments for biblical foundation are assessed, and then reshaped or qualified when Murray perceives that they claim too much or are insufficient.

For Murray, the quality of a church plant is always more important than quantity. A chief measure of quality for Murray is contextual integrity; this demonstrates his commitment to contextualization as a key missiological lens for the twenty-first century. He thus confronts armchair blanket-strategies in postmodern fashion, arguing that every strategy should be shaped in relationship to the particular context and its discrete participants. Every local planting endeavor should aspire to be an indigenous expression of people seeking the reign of God in local forms. This approach allows new churches to emerge that are always more than replications of a parent missionary culture.

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Murray is not interested in invoking the book of Acts or the life of Jesus in ahistorical fashion, as absolute grounds for church planting in western, post-Christendom environs. Recognizing the broadly-supportive nature of the New Testament, Murray views church planting as only one missional form that faithful Christian discipleship should sometimes take in some situations, in light of

current realities. Murray is convinced that in responding to the theological foundations of *missio Dei* (mission of God), incarnation, and kingdom of God, Christians today are sometimes called to plant churches, and sometimes not! For example, sometimes perhaps existing churches should be replanted instead.

This book could have been improved by the addition of some real-life stories to provide anecdotal illustration and color, and to encourage the reader's attention when the analysis starts to feel overwhelming. Also, while rejecting the master-blueprint approach, Murray himself tends to remain too much in a strategic mindset. The book's tone assumes that all church planters regard themselves as strategists or experts in some sense of these words. It is also directed toward individuals, not groups. Murray seems unaware that some church-plant groups simply find one another and covenant in a local context, or result from a journey of group discovery or empowerment, without any master strategy or set of principles to guide the process. Refugee- and migrant-founded churches, and daughter churches that evolve out of a parent church community are other groups that are not strategically born but simply happen in God's providential freedom. Such groups who have no plan or expert leadership could benefit from this book as much as groups endowed with an excess of planning or leadership.