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Inspired by the Word: Forming God's People

Part III of V

The formation of God's people is enabled through the development of faithful leaders who nurture congregations and grow disciples. In turn, every member of the Body of Christ, – from families and congregations to church schools, Area Churches and the National Church – can contribute to leadership formation.

–Deborah Froese

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — As more pastors retire and fewer young people choose pastoral ministry as a vocation, finding and developing church leaders has become a growing challenge.

Karen Martens Zimmerly, Mennonite Church Canada's Denominational Minister and Director of Leadership Development, points to a 2007 survey of MC Canada pastors. It revealed the importance of "shoulder-tapping" – affirmation by church members, school teachers, and families – as a way of drawing people gifted for ministry into the church. It also indicated the need for ongoing support of pastors throughout their careers.

Doug Klassen, Senior Pastor of Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary, Alberta, refers to 1 Corinthians 12 to describe his leadership development philosophy. "There are many gifts but the same spirit and they are for use in the church. It's that basic for me. God gives the gifts and we need to find places in the church to develop these gifts." He stresses the importance of developing all gifts, not just those required for pastoral ministry, but is convinced that the part of the responsibility for developing leadership belongs to congregations and their pastors. "Raising up leaders is written into my job description as one of the top five requirements."

As a painfully shy young man, Klassen's potential for preaching was encouraged and mentored by John H. Neufeld, former president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University). Those experiences shaped his approach to mentoring, which includes providing opportunities and feedback.

"It's hard for a person to feel called to pastoral ministry if they never get a taste of what it's like," he says.

Klassen has mentored Foothills member Doug Unrau in worship leading and preaching. For Unrau, the benefits of participating in worship are multi-layered. "People start to know who you are and open up to you," he says.

The experience has given him the ability to talk about his faith more easily than he could before, and to incorporate it more clearly into his lifestyle. "I don't preach about it at work, but they know that my faith is important to me."

On a quest for ideas to sustain the effectiveness, faithfulness and health of pastoral leaders, Marianne Mellinger, Coordinator of Leadership Formation for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC), and Muriel Bechtel, MCEC Conference Minister, reviewed existing models from other denominations. Their research resulted in the creation of a three year formation program for pastors new to ministry. Transition into Ministry (TiM) offers peer learning, mentoring, group coaching sessions, and two three-day retreats each year.

Mellinger reports that so far, participants have appreciated the program. "It provides a safe place where they are accepted and can then risk talking about some of their vulnerabilities as beginning pastors."

Pastor Juanita Lavery from Hanover Mennonite Church in Ontario has been involved with TiM for two years – since the program began and since she stepped into pastoral ministry. TiM gives her the opportunity to review her experiences freely with others who can relate to them. "The support network gives me renewed energy to continue to develop my own pastoral identity," she says.



Mennonite Church Canada's Christian Formation Council discusses the ministry of nurturing disciples and leaders.
L-R: Arlyn Friesen Epp (MC Canada staff, Resource Centre Manager), Naomi Unger, Ron Rempel, Tom Yoder Neufeld, Coreen Froese, Karen Martens Zimmerly, Veronica Dyck, Pauline Steinmann, Dave Bergen, Sue Steiner.

By demonstrating approaches that encourage and support leaders, these examples are helping to shape a vision for leadership development within the larger body – another example of the benefits of being a body of many parts, inspired by God.