

From our Churches

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Proclaiming the Gospel: Nurturing a Vision for Engaged Congregations

Have you ever been invited to be the guest speaker at an important event and you are so honoured to be asked, and your ego gets so inflated that all the blood rushing to your swollen head interferes with the process of rational thought, and you are so flattered to be asked that you don't listen all that carefully to what you are actually agreeing to speak about, and then when the time comes to actually sit down to prepare, sober reality sinks in and you ask yourself, "What was I thinking, whatever made me think that I was qualified to speak on this particular topic?" This is the experience out of which I speak to you today.

The focus of our time together is "Nurturing a Vision for Engaged Congregations," and our text is 1 Corinthians 12. This passage presents a wonderful vision: the church richly blessed with an abundance of gifts from the Holy Spirit, believers eagerly taking their place in the body of Christ, offering their gifts for the common good and as a result the church engages in ministries of preaching, teaching, healing, worship, prayer, prophesy, discernment, mutual aid, caring, service, and outreach. Are there many pastors or congregations among us that don't embrace this vision or at least a significant part of it? How many of our congregations declare that no-one in our midst has gifts and we don't think we need volunteers and lay involvement in the life of our congregation, we will just hire professional staff to do all the work for us?

Our problem is not a lack of recognition that the life and ministry of our congregations depend heavily on the exercise of gifts by ordinary members. Our struggle is to mobilize people, to find enough gifted people to teach Sunday school, someone to chair the Fellowship Committee, someone to lead an outreach program. Our people are busy, often far too busy, and the church's ministries frequently wage a losing battle against many other (more exciting?) options and priorities in life. And so today we are gathered to reflect on our situation in light of scripture and our faith, and to discern God's call on the life of the church and on us as church leaders. We are here to ask how we can become more vibrant congregations, delighting in the gifts that God's Spirit has showered upon us, eager to use

these gifts to build up the body of Christ, and be channels of God's healing and hope to a needy world.

Since I have been asked to provide the inspirational input today, here is my first inspirational thought for the day. **If the church ever has enough volunteers, enough lay involvement, enough exercising of gifts, then the church has failed miserably.** Here is my second inspirational thought. **The volunteers that we do have and the gifts exercised among us, will never be adequate for the job, and if we think that they are, then the church has failed miserably.** Obviously these statements require some unpacking.

The church will never have enough volunteers or gifts. How could it? Think about the calling of the church. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a). Our mission is to bring the whole world to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ so that every single human being might experience God's healing and salvation and might embrace God's way of love and peace and justice. If we ever think that we have enough volunteers and gifts for the task, and if we ever think that our efforts are good enough, then we have a serious failure of vision. **As a church our vision should always outstrip the resources available to us.**

Recognizing that the church and its agencies will never have enough workers or gifts or resources can be somewhat depressing, but it can also be quite liberating. We can be assured that it is both normal and healthy for us to recognize that God's plans for the world always extend well beyond what we as God's people are able to contribute to the actualization of these plans. That is just one of the basic realities of the Christian life. This recognition can free us from placing unrealistic expectations and demands on ourselves. Recognizing that there will always be a gap between what needs to be done and what we are able to do, can free us to relax a bit and take note of and celebrate the wonderful signs of God's reign that are unfolding among us. Week after week Sunday school teachers inspire our children with love for the biblical story. Worship happens every Sunday, not always in a way that meets my perfectionist standards, but God is praised, the grace of Christ is proclaimed, discipleship is encouraged, and prayers are offered for ourselves and the world. Money is donated so that Mennonite Church Canada workers can plant churches in Thailand. Used clothes are sold at the MCC thrift store so that MCC can use the money to feed hungry people in Sudan or support peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East. Wheat is grown for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Children at risk are helped with math and reading in an after school program. I am sure that we could all add many other items to this list.

Acknowledging that we will never have enough gifts and resources and workers is only part of the story. The other part of the story that is perhaps even more important goes something like this. Long ago there was a young boy who had a lunch of five small loaves of bread, probably more like buns, and two small fish. In the hands of Jesus these inadequate gifts are blessed and multiplied exponentially until 5,000 people are fed. That is what God can do with our limited and inadequate gifts. We do well to thank God for the wonderful exercising of gifts that happens in our midst every day, and for what God does with these gifts. We do well to celebrate and tell these stories in our congregations because the exercising of gifts can be contagious and inspire other people to offer their time and gifts and resources.

But there is another part of our story that is not so positive. In many of our congregations it is harder and harder to find Sunday school teachers. In my congregation it is a challenge to find people willing to teach a single quarter, let alone a whole year. It is difficult to find people to take leadership on committees. Our congregations have huge opportunities for outreach and

service but so often we don't grab hold of these opportunities because we lack energy and volunteers and money. The simple reality is that for many people in our congregations the reign of God and all that goes with it are not high priority, at least not first priority. There is work and getting ahead in a career. There is our children's need for hockey, soccer, music lessons, and other enrichment activities. There are wonderful entertainment options far more exciting than church work. There are winters to be spent in Arizona or Florida because after many years of hard work we have earned a life of leisure.

Many of us are deeply accommodated to our culture. We have bought into the capitalist consumerist vision of the good life. Way back in 1978 already Walter Brueggemann diagnosed our condition. "The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act."¹ Jesus put it a little differently in his parable about the seed falling on different kinds of soil. About the shallow soil he says "but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing" (Mark 4:19). Many of us have so embraced the world's vision of the good life that fancy houses, careers, entertainment, sports, exotic vacations, etc. are choking out concern for the things of God, and as a result we bear little fruit. And so our churches are short of committed and gifted volunteers. Who wants to teach Sunday school when most weekends there is a hockey tournament to go to? Who wants to chair the worship committee when it is more important to flee Canada's cold winters for Arizona? Who wants to engage in the church's outreach and service to the community when there is a cottage at the lake that beckons?

Often when we face a challenge in life we are inclined to focus on the presenting problem. Our church is short of Sunday school teachers and committed volunteers. How can we ask people in such a way that they will say yes? How can we cajole people into agreeing to fill committee positions? Getting people to say yes is important, very important. This September your congregation needs a full roster of Sunday school teachers. You need functioning committees. But I think that the problem we are facing is a symptom of a deeper issue, and it is this deeper that I want to speak to.

Why is it that far too often in our congregations "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing?" **Is it perhaps because our people are not on fire for Jesus Christ?** I don't want to be simplistic in my explanations or my suggestions for solutions to our problems. These situations are enormously complex and it is important to acknowledge this. But imagine your congregation full of people, every single one of them, absolutely on fire for Jesus Christ. Imagine them overflowing with gratitude that Jesus Christ has forgiven their sins, freed them from the destructive powers of sin and death. Imagine them overflowing with gratitude that the Holy Spirit has gathered them into the church, God's new humanity, where relationships are being healed and reconciled, where they experience a deep sense of love and acceptance and worth and community. Imagine them overflowing with gratitude for the vision Jesus offers of a just and peaceful and caring world. Imagine them so grateful for how God's grace has changed them that they can't wait to share this good news with the rest of the world. I can see some of you drooling. It is many a pastor's dream to shepherd a congregation like this.

In a congregation full of people on fire for Jesus Christ, do you think that there would be people eager to share their love and knowledge of the biblical story with our younger generations? Do you think there would be people chomping at the bit to lead us in praise and worship of God and offering prayers for the congregation and the world? Do you think there

¹ *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress), 11.

would be people keen to envision outreach and service activities that share the love of Jesus with the community and the larger world? Do you think there would be people keen to challenge the evil and oppressive structures of this world and begin building structures and relationships of peace and justice? Do you think there would be passion for supporting our conferences and denominational agencies through whom we join with the broader church to do God's work in this world? If this is our vision of an ideal congregation, then how are we as church leaders going to begin moving our very real congregations in this direction?

This past winter I went to hear a series of lectures by Paul Scott Wilson who teaches homiletics at Emmanuel College, a United Church of Canada seminary in Toronto. Speaking in a United Church Wilson spoke quite openly about the crisis facing his denomination. He noted the various ways in which the United Church has attempted to address the crisis, and then he added with great pain in his voice, "but the one thing I don't think we have tried is proclaiming the gospel."

So what does Wilson mean when he speaks of proclaiming the gospel? First of all, he doesn't mean our typical Mennonite response to crisis or a situation of need. One of our basic instincts within Mennonite Church Canada is to resort to one of our theological distinctives, discipleship. I fully support the Anabaptist-Mennonite commitment to discipleship, and I believe that the emphasis on following Jesus in everyday life is one of the great gifts that we have to offer the broader Christian community and to the world. **But discipleship is not the whole gospel, nor is it the beginning of the gospel.** Too often our Mennonite approach to problems is more discipleship. We have to believe harder, work harder, try harder to follow Jesus. Sometimes we operate with an implicit (or even explicit) "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps" theology. But salvation is not to be found in more human effort. Salvation is to be found in God's effort, in what God is doing for us. That is the source of our healing, our empowerment, our renewal.

Wilson spends a lot of time studying sermons, ancient and modern. One of his observations about contemporary sermons is that often they lack power because instead of placing God at the centre we have placed human beings at the centre.² **Contemporary preaching does not talk enough about God and what God is doing to address the mess that we human beings are in,** and as a result there is often not much gospel in our preaching. Wilson defines gospel as the good news that in Jesus Christ God has provided what is necessary for our salvation. What we see in much contemporary preaching (and we could perhaps add, church life in general) is that humans and what we humans do, or can do, or ought to do, are the focus. This can take a variety of forms and I want to give you a few examples from my own experience.

Some time ago I read a Mennonite sermon on discipleship. The sermon was insightful and made many excellent points about what it means to follow Jesus. But God was essentially absent. The sermon spoke of how believing is central to discipleship. But I missed a discussion of why we ought to believe. We ought to believe because through Jesus Christ God is revolutionizing the world. We ought to believe because through Jesus Christ God's reign has been inaugurated in our midst, God's new age of salvation has dawned. The sermon also talked about the importance of belonging to the body of Christ, but I missed a discussion of why. We ought to belong because through Jesus Christ and the outpouring of

² See Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), xii. I highly recommend this book to all pastors. Besides the very helpful ideas it contains about how to preach in such a way that people experience the gospel, its overall theological perspective has profound implications for how we think about the Christian faith and pastoral ministry.

the Holy Spirit God is calling into being a new end-times community in which the dividing walls of hostility are being broken down. We ought to belong because God is gathering a church to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, and to create reconciliation, and peace, and justice in a broken world. The sermon contained much good material but because God was mostly absent the sermon cast us on our own human resources. Essentially we were told to try harder to believe, to belong, and to follow.

Several years ago I attended a funeral at a congregation that one might say was on the more conservative end of the theological spectrum in Mennonite Church Canada (where they really ought to know better). The pastor spent most of the sermon talking about the person who had died. For reasons that escaped me, this person's disability was of particular theological significance. At another Mennonite funeral the implicit, if not explicit, text of the sermon consisted of three remarkable characteristics of the deceased—energy, passion, kindness (or something like that).

Let's not preach like this. We are ministers of the gospel. The gospel means that God and God's gracious actions stand at the centre. When we are staring death straight in the face, when people are brought face to face with their own mortality, how much good news is there in the disabilities of the deceased, or in the passion and energy which the body before us once possessed? Salvation and new life and empowerment are not to be found in the weaknesses or virtues of the deceased, even if the person's Christian virtues may be very real, or in the case of some funerals, largely imagined. At a Christian funeral the sermon ought to in some way, shape, or form focus on the bedrock of our faith, i.e. on the gospel. Because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead death has lost its sting. God's power of resurrection has been unleashed into this world, and that power and the new life it bestows are now offered to you and to me.

According to Paul Scott Wilson, much contemporary preaching focuses on what we human beings must do. We should believe more deeply, trust God more fully, witness more courageously (if we are on the evangelical end of the theological spectrum), serve more selflessly, give more generously, practice justice and peace more passionately (if we are on the mainline end of the theological spectrum). Now all of these things are important, and Wilson is adamant that preaching is not faithful unless it nurtures a passion for discipleship, service, mission, evangelism, peace and justice, and Christian virtues of all kinds. But the **real issue is how do we nurture and empower such passions.**

I wonder if long lasting human transformation is really nurtured by a "we must try harder" theology, by telling each other that we must try harder to be good disciples. I suspect that we are changed as we encounter the risen Christ, and as the Holy Spirit transforms us into new creatures. Think again of that ideal congregation that we imagined earlier, that congregation where every person is on fire for Jesus Christ, and as a result people are falling all over themselves to offer their Spirit-given gifts in service to Jesus Christ and his cause. How do we get to be that kind of a congregation? By telling each other that we must try harder to be better disciples? Or by proclaiming the gospel? By proclaiming the good news of how much God loves us, the good news that even our worst sins are forgiven, the good news that God heals and offers us new life, the good news that the Holy Spirit empowers us to be the body of Christ where broken human beings are welcomed and embraced, pointed in the direction of God's grace, and integrated into a community of people empowered for discipleship and mission and service in the world. By proclaiming the good news that some day when Jesus Christ returns all our humble actions of faithful discipleship will be taken up into God's great cause and become part of God's new heaven and new earth. By proclaiming the good news that because nothing is ever lost to the heart of God we are empowered to persevere, make

sacrifices, and carry on being disciples even in the face of hardship and persecution and death.

If we proclaim the good news of what God has done, continues to do, and will yet one day do, then we can properly understand discipleship and our mission and service work. Then people may just be awakened to the reality of God's reign among us. They may just become so grateful that Jesus Christ has liberated them from the oppressive powers of sin and death that they will overflow with gratitude and will become excited about getting on board with what God is doing in this world. Their joy and gratitude and excitement may just lead them to ask what they can do in service to Jesus Christ.

The challenge I want to throw out today does not relate directly to how can we get our quota of Sunday school teachers and committee chairs for this fall, as important as this is for the life of our congregations. I want to push us deeper. What kinds of things do we want to do in our ministry to set people on fire for Jesus. How will we preach? How will we lead worship? What kind of tone will we set at meetings? How will we talk about our Sunday school program so that people get excited about what God is doing in the lives of our children? How will we talk about how God is at work through our church budget, channeling financial resources into Kingdom ministry? How will we describe how God is at work through our seniors who volunteer at the thrift store? How will we envision the ministry of Mennonite Church Canada, and MCC, and MEDA, and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, and other church agencies as part of God's grand plan to transform the entire world? How will we talk, and write about these things with such energy, and conviction, and passion, and joy, that people will be lining up to volunteer and offer their gifts?

I am under no illusions about quick fixes for changing the spirit and culture of our congregations. And I am under no illusions that proclaiming the gospel will create the ideal congregation overnight. But **I do believe that proclaiming the gospel is the place to begin.** I think that far too many people in our congregations have been inoculated against the gospel. Some vaccines work by giving us a very mild case of the disease they protect us from. When our body is exposed to this mild form it has the opportunity to develop antibodies that then protect us when we are exposed to the real thing. Many of our people have been infected with a mild dose of the Christian faith and as a result they have developed antibodies. They feel right with God, right with the world, they believe that they are good Christian people, but in reality the soil is shallow and they produce little fruit. **Our role as church leaders is to proclaim the gospel with such energy, passion, conviction, and especially love, that people's immunization will not prevent them from being infected with a full-blown case of the disease.**

So how do we go about infecting people with a full-blown case of the Christian faith? Again, I want to say that I don't believe in simplistic solutions to complex issues. But I do believe that at the heart of our response must be proclaiming the gospel, the story of what God has done, continues to do, and will yet do to save us and the entire created order. The book of Acts can be instructive for us. What was the source of the early church's empowerment? Was it conversations among the first followers of Jesus about all the things they now had to do in response to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? No, the church's power comes from Pentecost, from what God does. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is poured out on these first fearful disciples gathered behind closed doors in Jerusalem and as a result the doors are thrown open, the church bursts forth, and the world has never been the same again. God does not leave the church to its own resources but sends the Spirit to empower us. The gifts Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 12 are gifts of the Spirit.

I believe that as Mennonite Church Canada congregations we will not thrive if our worship, preaching, teaching, and church life as a whole cast us upon our own human resources. Our discipleship and life of faith are empowered and enabled as we are connected to the Spirit of Christ unleashed at Pentecost and now at work among us. The early church's sermons recorded in the book of Acts are narratives that tell the story of what God is at work doing to restore and heal a fallen human race and a broken world. Peter's sermon at Pentecost begins by claiming that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit indicates that God's end-time intervention to save the world has begun (Acts 2:14-21). Then Peter goes on to describe how God has been at work through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to offer life and salvation. The book of Acts is very clear that the church is not empowered by focusing on its internal gifts and resources, as rich and abundant as these might be. **The church lives by the power of the Spirit poured out so that the church can carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ here on earth.**

In a recent issue of *The Mennonite* Clarence Rempel wrote an article entitled "God's Extravagant Generosity" (Feb. 17, 2009, p. 2). He asks, "Do you imagine God with a clenched hand or an open hand? Is the God you worship a giver or a taker? Rempel encourages us to soak in the spirit of God's generosity, to be attentive to the beauty and grandeur that God has lavished on creation. And we could add the grace that God has lavished on God's people through the ages. Then Rempel concludes, "We become what we honour and worship. As we behold God as extravagantly generous, our hearts will bloom with greater generosity. Our churches will become baskets of generosity and beacons of hope."

"We become what we honour and worship." As we worship and honour a God who is at work to heal, to reconcile, to forgive, to create caring community, we become more like this God we worship and we are inspired and empowered to offer our gifts in service to this God. As we honour and worship a God who is active in this world to feed the hungry, to free the oppressed, to heal the sick, to transform spears into plowshares, we will become more like this God and we will be inspired to offer our gifts in service to this God. We become what we honor and worship. I can think of few more compelling reasons for proclaiming the good news of what God is doing in this world.

Focusing on what God is doing in this world and how we fit into God's work has the potential to empower our volunteers and church committees. Let's be honest, committee work and church work in general can sometimes be tedious, hard, and take huge amounts of time and energy. There is no getting around the fact that lots of hard work needs to get done if a congregation is going to prosper. But the tedium and hard work can be placed into a context, and that is part of our role as leaders. Some of you have probably heard the story of a man sitting by a pile of rocks chipping away at one. A woman approaches and asks him what he is doing. He responds, "Can't you see, I'm chipping rocks? The woman walks over to a second man sitting by a similar pile of stones, also chipping away and she repeats her question. The answer is the same. "I am chipping rocks." She spots a third man sitting by the same kind of pile and asks what he is doing. He replies, "I am building a cathedral." All three men are engaged in the exactly the same venture. They are serving on the same church committee, doing the same tedious work. But one knows that he is helping to build God's cathedral, and that makes all the difference.

One of our roles as leaders is to empower our congregations with a vision of how God is building a wonderful cathedral, furthering God's reign here on earth. So let's make sure that our committee members, our volunteers, and our Sunday school teachers know that they are

not just chipping rocks. Let's help them to see how they are helping God to build a cathedral, and how important the rocks that they chip are to this grand venture.

In closing then, I challenge us to an approach that is at least somewhat counter-intuitive. When our congregations are short of volunteers, and Sunday school teachers, and resources, let's not just focus on the short-term needs, as important as these are. Let's not make what we human beings can and ought to do the focus of our ministry and our church life. Let us proclaim the gospel where God and God's saving actions stand at the centre. And then as our people become infected with a severe case of this gospel, let's help them discern what this gospel calls them to. Let's help them discern the gifts that the Spirit has entrusted to us as a church. And let's help our people find ways to set these gifts free in service of God, the church, and God's needy world. Let's minister towards the kinds of congregations that we and God want to see, congregations in which every single person is on fire for Jesus Christ and can't wait to offer their gifts in service to him and his work in the world.