

# Prayer Week 1997

prepared by Vern Ratzlaff

## Gladly Regulate

The church is often at odds with the gospel. The gospel—that God has come to show care for and acceptance of ‘the little, the lost, the last and the least’ (in Robert Capon’s happy phrase)—is universal, catholic, in the root meaning of that word. ‘Church’ tends to focus on the institution, the structure, the rites and practices; ‘church’ tends to be identified with words such as ‘My church believes the Schleithem Confession’. ‘My church practices believers’ baptism’. ‘My church is the Mennonite Church’. Such statements tend to obscure the gospel: the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody. ‘Church’ tends to limit, to draw boundaries, to forget that we are not a structure but a community of fallible people whom God has trusted with the gospel, the good news: without boundaries, without limits, without restrictions. To lose sight of our catholicity and to emphasize us rather than all is one of the pits ‘church’ has fallen into (frequently, a self-dug pit). ‘Church’ has also tended to lose sight of the basic biblical metaphor that describes God’s people—thus have a double task: to remember that we are always more than just us (that particular names and practices are only pointers to the ‘more than’), and that the community of God’s people is a pilgrim people of exiles (literally, ‘resident aliens’).

The particular story of our denominational family—only one small part of God’s community—emphasizes this. At the heart of the radical sixteenth century reformation was a deep, sustained and thorough-going cynicism: a cynicism, a distrust, of all institutional authority, whether that of state, society or religion. ‘The church is a gathering...of saints, as the Holy Scriptures and the Nicene Creed clearly teach...who would gladly regulate their lives according to the Spirit, Word and example of the Lord.’ (CWMS, p.667) This cynicism about power freed them from state sycophancy and the dubious benefits of the magisterial reformation. The concern for the welfare of even the weak in society is illustrated by a letter (written by the Amsterdam city council at the urging of Dutch Mennonites) to Swiss authorities, asking that justice and equity be granted to victims of Swiss religious persecution. (*Martyrs’ Mirror*, pp 1138-39)

This year’s study and prayer sessions focus on some implications of ‘gladly regulate’ (i.e. be governed by): that we are cynical about authority, that we are aware of being ‘resident aliens’, that we have concern for victims, that we practice a boundaryless community of faith.

The following outlines identify and concentrate on five pressure points in our time and in our Canadian society where these biblical and our denominational perspectives intersect. We come to these pressure points as a community of God’s, people made up of those who ‘gladly regulate’ their lives according to the Spirit, Word and example of the Lord.’

This is not a ‘guide’ that can be used as an outline for a talk, or to list three good things to pray for in each session. Rather, it is an attempt to focus what (in our more God conscious moments) we see as hope for that wondrous mystery called the ‘church’. So read these, adapt them, throw them out if necessary, but work out something that will move your congregation beyond maintenance. ‘Gladly regulate...’

## 1. The aboriginal community

For most of its history, the biblical community found itself either in exile or under foreign domination. For their first century or so, Mennonites were the subjects of political and religious harassment and discrimination. Some later Mennonites had land and property taken from them forcibly. As Mennonite Christians, we have a story that is at times not dissimilar to that of the aboriginal communities on several continents.

Since the aboriginal community and its needs vary so widely across Canada, it is necessary for each congregation to examine which aboriginal concerns are most relevant in its area. So for this first prayer session, identify the concerns that most closely connect you to the native community. Include different age groups and professionals in developing your agenda for the session.

Concerns might include:

1. Land rights
2. Health care (e.g. tuberculosis is a major problem in many of our northern populations)
3. Housing (e.g. are there ghettos in your community?)
4. Employment (e.g. are casinos the only answer?)
5. Education (e.g. what are the problems with high class turnovers in our inner cities? What do teachers say about this?)
6. Prison population (e.g. are whites as likely to be convicted and sentenced as are aboriginals?)
7. Suicide (e.g. native suicide rates among the young in some areas are three times as high as those of the general population)
8. Church impact (e.g. of any identifiable ethnic group, the aboriginal communities—of all continents—have been least receptive to the Christian gospel; has our political dominance been a reason?)

### Bible Study Suggestion: Acts 7:1–53 (NRSV)

Stephen's apologia, his defense speech, stresses that God was with the people most clearly in times of stress—in fact, when they were 'resident aliens' (vv 6, 29). (Moses, attempting to obtain justice for his countryman, ends up being a 'resident alien'.) God seems to be closest to the people in times of greatest oppression and victimization; it's in the wilderness, on the move as exiles, that God gives 'living oracles' (v 38), the torah, the words that would shape their political and economic and religious life. Building the temple was a mistake, Stephen suggests—a moveable tent was God's original design (vv 44–48). It seems that property rights and settled living do not square easily with Stephen's summary of God's closest dealings with the people, or with his interpretation of the high points in their history. Or is Stephen simply romanticizing the past?

## 2. Social Safety Nets

The social safety nets that developed post WW II are undeveloping, or at least being reexamined. Health care reform (which generally speaking is a euphemism for 'funding cutbacks'), stubborn double digit unemployment figures (young people have difficulty entering the job market in the areas for which they trained; the majority of new jobs in Canada are in the service sector rather than in resource development, meaning more part-time and lower paid

jobs); job insecurity; the last four years have seen the average family income dropping; increases in bankruptcies (presently running at 200/day—at the Canadian rate, how long would it take for your congregational membership to declare bankruptcy?).

Some Mennonite Central Committee sponsored surveys indicate these effects on our congregational members have been on a rate lower than that of the Canadian average—or what is your congregation's experience?

Take one of the issues: the health care system. As hospitals close, medical services are curtailed and medical care becomes more basic, what is our response?

A bible study of Matthew 5:13 can help focus our energies and priorities. When we are tempted to pressure Caesar to keep up with the maintenance of the health care institutions (some of which the church itself began), Jesus' words about 'being salt' are suggestive. Salt was the symbol of God covenant, the symbol that God has a purpose for the people, for the community. (Lev 2:13)

Suggestion. Have a group do a little study of how changing social trends are affecting your congregational members, or even your congregational budget. Does the budget reflect these new pressure points? Do you have unemployed or underemployed? What is happening to your young people in regard to employment possibilities? Are they leaving the congregation? The province? Do you have health care workers in the congregation—how are they being affected? What are their perspectives on health care 'reform'?

Pray for better awareness of each other's needs and for clarity of vision to see what can be done as a Christian community, i.e. your congregation, our denomination, groups of congregations interdenominationally in your area, i.e. what can be done from a Christian perspective, not just agitating for Caesar to do it on our behalf.

#### Some thoughts about salt

In the fall of 1995, Dr. Mo Shokeir (a member of our congregation) spoke to the College of Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, on health care reform. A geneticist and at that time was head of pediatrics, he emphasized the need to go beyond five-year survival criteria of health boards, and to consider also the emotional and social perspectives, the relational dynamics that make up the individual's life.

We are to be the salt: the sign, the symbol, the eucharistic sacrament, symbol of the covenant, the indicator of God's good intentions toward creation. We are relationally, not institutionally or programmatically, driven. That's why Mennonites have not always been preoccupied with bricks and mortar. We do have the occasional hospital and several mental health centres and many senior citizen's homes, but greater emphasis has historically been placed on the relational tasks of people. (Despite an impressive budget, MCC continues—and rightly so—to identify people as its greatest asset.) Work as conscientious objectors in mental institutions during WW II brought new visions of health care, and programs and institutions came into being. But major attention was given to being signs and pointers—to demonstrate another way, to initiate new models.

It is easy to be coopted by a system: to concentrate energies on getting the system to work better, to become better bureaucrats, to be driven by professional norms and preoccupied with incremental improvements. 'You are the salt of the earth,' we were once told. People are the salt of the earth—not systems, not institutions. But you. And we need to see again that the sign of the covenant, the sign of God's intent, is not satisfied with maintaining what Caesar has established or restoring what Caesar is dismantling. (Remember Anabaptist cynicism.) But prophetically, covenantally, speaking in advance of, acting in advance of—to generate new approaches, new ways, sometimes simply to underscore the old ways.

“You are the salt of the earth” we were once told. And it seems to me a shame if we expend too much energy in attempting to enervate a system that is in any event time-bound and time-conditioned and only too provisional. Our task is the relational of pointing towards God’s intent, and this will irrevocably make us counter-cultural and counter-structural, for we are to be the salt of the earth.

### 3. Denominationalism

The accidents of history, of geography and of personality differences have been as influential in the proliferation of denominations as have theological differences. 1860 saw two new Mennonite denominations emerge as reform movements: the Mennonite Brethren in the Ukraine, the General Conference in Ohio. Two reform movements on two continents the same year, each independent of the other—interesting. Yet the differences of 1860 in the Ukraine were brought to the new world. For us as General Conference, 1860 is now being addressed by the integration initiatives with the Mennonite Church, although the MCEC has shown the way with its recognition that church unity can be done more simply than the laborious plotting of endless organizational charts and deadlines.

The true catholicity of the church, its boundarylessness, regardless of what bureaucratic preoccupation and high level negotiations suggest, is based rather simply and directly on the work of God in the creation (Colossians 1), the incarnation (Philippians 2) and the crucifixion (Ephesians 2). In case there are any doubts about God’s intent, we also have Jesus’ words (John 13: 34, 35; 17: 20–24). [please forgive me my prooftexting]

I know that for Mennonites, ‘ecumenism’ (meaning the emphasis on the basic unity of the church) usually refers to Mennonite splinter groups speaking to other Mennonite splinter groups. Jesus’ words in John’s gospel go deeper. By Christians’ love for each other.

1. Non-Christians will recognize that we are Jesus’ disciples (John 13: 34, 35)
2. Non-Christians will recognize that God has come in the flesh (John 17: 21)
3. Non-Christians will know that God has loved the world (John 17: 23)

In Christian unity (count the occurrence of ‘one’ in these chapters) is a preliminary to evangelism and represents a theological apologia for the incarnation itself. Note that according to Jesus, at least, it is not small groups, night-club music with religious words, entertainment-styled worship, that is the medium of evangelism: it is in how we live together with other Christians.

The General Conference started as a uniting conference, uniting disparate racial and social groups—are we still?

1. How does your congregation relate to other denominations? (I’m talking about right in your neighbourhood—not on the other side of town, not through your head office, not in another city, not in another country or continent. It’s easy to go on week or two week tours and make nice pronouncements to others there whom we will not have to see again—such ecclesial tourism is not particularly helpful, significant or self involving.) Is this a part of your mission statement? Do we carry out this part of Jesus’ wish for the church as intentionally as we do other parts of his instructions?

2. What steps are you prepared to take to recognize the catholicity—the boundarylessness—nature of the church?

E.g. In some Canadian rural areas, congregations shrink in size; can we accept the possibility of

joining in worship with other denominational groups to present a vibrant and viable witness in the community? What about church 'planting' in urban areas on a cooperative basis? We do these kinds of cooperative church ventures though AIMM with the African indigenous churches; we try to do this through our work in MCC—why not in our country? (Guess we sometimes have the attitude of NIMB—Not in My Back Yard)

So there may be problems re communion, baptism, etc? Tough! Remember: these are people—articulated positions, and any one position taken on any of these is not to be considered as God's final word on the subject. How do you think Jesus or Paul would look at such issues or differences in view of the need for a witness?

Pray: For better understanding of what it means to be God's people  
For vision to share and move in friendship with others of God's people

#### **4. Demographics: our cross section**

No, by 'cross section' I don't imply the need for girth control—I mean, how does your congregation—how does our denomination—look when we examine it for age distribution (a 'chronological demographical profile', I guess you could call it). One of the best tools for finding both the congregational and the denominational data for such a profile is the *Fact Book of Congregational Membership, 1990* (if you don't have one, order from our Newton office), which gives the breakdown by age and by other interesting criteria of the 233 GC congregations that participated in our denominational census. Of particular interest to us is the age—pyramid shape (with the bulk of the population in the children's ages), we see age ranges fairly evenly distributed all the way up to the 80 plus; this means we don't have the replacement potential in our child—base if our membership is to remain (at the very least) constant. Get a copy of the book; do a pyramid for your own congregation, or use some standard demographic study—what do you find for your congregation? What are the implications for leadership? For a volunteer base for your programs? For budget potential?

Consult some of the literature; read what is being said by those who work with demographic patterns (a few suggestions are given below). To what extent are all age groups involved in the worshipping and service (actually, these two areas aren't really different—study Romans 12: 1,2) aspects of your congregation? If not all age groups are fairly represented, which are missing? Why? What are you prepared to do about the missing components (or the under—represented)? What are you doing to meet the spiritual needs of the components you do have (i.e. in some congregations a pyramid is simply not feasible—what forms of ministry do you then give priorities of resources to?).

We have tended to jump onto current bandwagons, usually those that went by thirty years earlier and are now here for a second or third time around—e.g. small groups, electronic sound enhancement, musical experimentation, etc. For example, over the last fifteen years, our denomination has gone through some six identifiable programs (sometimes euphemistically called 'process') which did not take into account congregational differences and unique ministries. For Anabaptists (and the free church generally), our music has been our liturgy, since we don't use the creeds and there is comparatively little scripture read, let alone systematically selected or presented, and topical preaching seems to be increasingly popular (with more emphasis on the current psychological fad or 'feel—good' approach than solid

scriptural grounding. So if our hymnody (containing our theology) is passed by, we no longer have a systematic theological base from which to worship or to confess. Our hymnody must be given strong attention, since it expresses our theology and keeps us in touch with the teaching heritage of the church. Current preoccupation with numbers (witness the number of seminars that come into our urban centres each year that stress church growth from the perspectives of the mega-church enthusiasts) tempt us to become ecclesial counterparts of WalMart, stocking only what sells. It is easy to forget that preoccupation with size and numbers alone guarantee little beyond lowest common denominator preaching, hymnody and discipleship.

Project: Have representatives of several age groups share what they find meaningful about your congregational life and witness.

Pray: For clarity of vision as to how to prepare for your future as a congregation.

For clarity of vision for the needs of each group in your congregation.

For clarity of vision that we listen to each other in the context of changing times.

For clarity of vision that we focus ministry for the group/groups that our congregation is uniquely gifted with, that we can capitalize on specific opportunities.

### Some reading

*What Makes Churches Grow?* 14 summary reports. Celia Hahn (ed). Alban Institute

*Where's a Good Church?* Posterski and Barker. Wood Lake Books

*100 Ways to be the Church.* Woodbury. Wood Lake Books

*Reclaiming Inactive Church Members.* Jones. Broadman

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## **5. Our Mission**

The bulk of the common scriptures (which we somewhat patronizingly call the 'old' testament) were written in exile or edited in exile. This means the major influence was that of being away from home and trying to make sense of a God who seemed strangely distant, if not absent. It's put at its most poignant in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,

when we remembered Zion.

For there our captors (said to us),

‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’  
(But) how shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?

The Christian scriptures (which we usually call the ‘new’ testament) were written by those who found themselves unwanted in their own countries, on the move, or refugees. Exiles, sociological exiles at the least, for we ‘can be in exile without ever leaving the land’. (Klein, *Israel in Exile*, p. 149) It’s significant that the book with the most sustained note of hope, *Revelation*, was written (traditionally, at least) in exile.

So being identified as ‘resident aliens’, having concern for the powerless, knowing that our only hope is to ‘gladly regulate our lives according to the Spirit, Word and examples of the Lord’, not by power structures of state or society, by fawning acceptance or by conventional morality and civic niceness: this is our mission.

Here is where we find ourselves as a denomination, as congregations. We live in a pluralistic society, where competing social values, religious options and economic choices, jostle us daily. 10% of my town’s population is first generation immigrants, most of whom hold faiths different from the one I am most comfortable with. So the task for us is no longer simply that of maintenance; we are called to be a missionary church as was that of the first century. And that means working together with others, not just as Mennonites, but as the church that practices a boundaryless community of faith. We are cynical of authorities that coopt us, either by tempting us to reduce radical obedience to that of civic respectability, or to give a benediction on programs motivated more by anxiety and unmet budgets than by vision. Our primary tasks are not to erect buildings (however functional or beautiful) or to run auctions, however productive of contributions to an institutional budget. We are sent to proclaim the foolishness of God that is wiser than that of human beings, and the weakness of God that is stronger than that of human beings, because both of these activities are either scandals or idiocy, depending on whom you ask. The church, instead of embracing its timeless absurdity, tends to latch on to the transitory plausibility of worldly success models and attendance graphs, and defends these models instead of extending the boundaryless community of faith. (For further on this, see Capon, *The Astonished Heart*). ‘Gladly regulate [your] lives according to the Spirit, Word and example of the Lord.’

So,

1. Identify your congregation’s priorities
2. Identify your congregation’s resources (money, people, buildings, parking spaces, offering plates, community influence, geranium plants in the foyer—you name them!)
3. What is your congregation’s mission?
4. How do ‘1’ and ‘2’ undergird ‘3’?
5. a) If they do, pray with thanksgiving  
b) If they don’t pray for courage and insight and common sense (not necessarily in that order).

#### Some reading

Brueggemann.	<i>Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism</i> . Abingdon
Oswald.	<i>Making Your Church More Inviting</i> . Alban Institute
Dudley.	<i>Energizing the Congregation</i> . W/JK

*Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ's Way.* WCC

Final thoughts

The transforming reality of the gospel. Brueggemann says, is that there is 'no more business as usual'.

'The Lover who restores the world in Christ is not the God of the philosophers or even the theologians (unless they are very astonishing theologians indeed). And that God is certainly not the god of the inner-harmony-through-self-help gurus... The God incarnate in Jesus is an utterly desirable God... The church is not a club; it is a divine Mystery—the body of him who fills all in all and who, when he is lifted up, draws all to himself.' (Capon, *The Astonished Heart*, p 122)

'The church is a gathering...of saints...who would gladly regulate their lives according to the Spirit, Word and example of the Lord.' (Simons)

Some trends in church and culture; adapted from *Inside Information*, Alban Institute, Summer/96

1. Society is becoming multicultural and increasingly pluralistic in beliefs, values and behaviours.
2. Non-traditional families have increased in number
3. Mobility and impermanence are more pronounced, especially with respect to education and careers
4. Values are increasingly shaped by television, computers and other media
5. There is a globalization of economics that is changing the ways in which cultures relate.
6. The nature of work is changing as we move from a manufacturing to a service and information-based economy
7. The middle class is shrinking; the gap between the rich and the poor widens
8. People are turning to the market and other community-based institutions to solve problems traditionally handled by government or by the church
9. As we move from a print-based to an electronic culture, we experience chronic information overload and changes in the nature of human relationships
10. The breakdown of trust in all institutions continues
11. The decline and aging of congregational members results in decreasing financial and human resources
12. Congregations tend to emphasize maintenance rather than responding to (let alone leading in) the changing times
13. New ethnic congregations are growing rapidly
14. There is growing uncertainty about the relevance of denominationalism
15. More women and second-career persons are entering ordained ministry, and this is changing expectations and delivery of ministry.
16. Congregational members are seeking to play new leadership roles in the church and looking for connections between faith and daily life
17. People are spiritually searching but not finding lively connections to the theological and religious resources in their own traditions