

A Season of Prayer

Five-session Worship, Prayer and Study Guide

by **Brian Dyck**

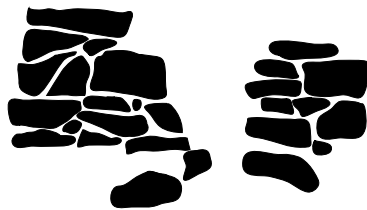
"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11

WALLS: DIVINE AND DIVIDING

— “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” Robert Frost

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prayer and study guide

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“Walls: Divine and Dividing” Prayer Week 2007 – a worship, prayer and study guide for congregations, is published by the Christian Formation Council, and is designed to serve as a resource for the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada.

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Foreword

Walls: Divine and Dividing

— “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” Robert Frost

When you read the Robert Frost quote connected with this material’s title, how many of you wanted to respond with “but... good fences make good neighbours”? Both are part of Robert Frost’s famous poem, “Mending Wall”. There is an irony in our theme that we cannot escape. Walls, or fences, are neither good nor bad, but they do have good and bad functions. As we discerned this year’s theme, we experienced this tension as we spoke of the need for walls, or fences, with doorways and windows.

Mennonites have a love/hate relationship with walls. We want to be welcoming. Being missional has a lot to do with hospitality and extending a genuine welcome to others. But we have also seen ourselves as a separate people. At Mennohof in Shipshewana, Indiana, a wonderful museum that shares the Mennonite story with the broader public, there are repeated references to the fences of accountability that are needed for a Christian community to flourish, so that it can reach out to the world. Is this still true of the Mennonite church? Are we still a separate people? Most of us live fairly integrated lives, but the call to live within society according to an alternative vision remains a strong part of our identity.

At Assembly 2006: God’s People Now!, the Faith and Life Committee of Mennonite Church Canada encouraged us to hold holiness and hospitality in a positive tension, much as one needs to breathe in and breathe out to stay alive. This positive tension also needs to be part of the way we live with all the walls in our lives, so that they can fulfill their positive functions without excluding those whom Christ would have us invite in.

It is our hope and prayer that this year’s Season of Prayer booklet will be a guide to praying that engages all its users with the powerfully reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ.

—*Elsie Rempel, Director, Christian Education and Nurture, Mennonite Church Canada*

Abbreviations:

HWB – Hymnal: A Worship Book

SJ – Sing the Journey

Sing the Journey may be purchased online from the **Resource Centre catalogue** www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/70 or by calling Mennonite Publishing Network at 1-800-631-6535.

Introduction

Walls Can Create a Space for Prayer

Prayer is not restricted to any place or any time. God is present everywhere; we have but to turn our attention to the holiness of God in order to pray.

However, life is full of distractions. Our senses are bombarded. We experience a constant input of information that can diffuse our focus. It

Praying at this wall can be a provocative and political act.

is important for us to set aside a space and a time where we turn to God in a deliberate, focused way. As congregations, we dedicate sanctuaries to this purpose and set aside weekly worship time. But we also need times and spaces between the times we gather with our covenant community to help us focus on God.

Holy Walls

The Western Wall in Jerusalem is believed to be the only remaining part of the second Jewish Temple built by Herod the Great. Because of this, it is a sacred place for many Jews. It is also sacred to Muslims. Solomon, the original builder of the temple, was considered a prophet and it is believed that the prophet Mohammad tethered his horse at this wall. The Dome of the Rock Mosque and the Al-Aqsa Mosque were built near by, thereby making this place a place of prayer for Muslims.

In this politically charged atmosphere, devout Jews come to pray, saying it is the closest place to the most important wall: the Holy of Holies. Praying at this wall can be a provocative and political act. It can be seen as a statement that we have access to God and you do not. On the other hand, there is something about striving to be as close to God as possible that is an integral part of holiness.

During this “Season of Prayer” you are encouraged to set aside a ‘holy wall’; not as a place where you can claim God as your own, but rather where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God’s own. There are many ways you can do this. Find items that will stimulate your senses – all of your senses – to turn towards the Divine and put them on or next to this wall. Symbolic items will be suggested in each session, but it is important that the symbols you choose to set up help your group focus on what brings God’s people together and makes them holy.

Holy walls abound. Some, such as the Western wall, have a special event associated with them, but we can also make a wall holy by simply setting it apart. In fact, to be set apart is the root meaning of sanctify, a word we link closely to holiness.

The five sessions in this book have been written to help you think about how you can get as close to God as

possible. The thematic challenge that is put before you in this “Season of Prayer” is to think about how walls can divide us and how they can bring us together in the presence of our divine Lord.

Several Approaches

First, you are invited to turn to specific places in the Bible. Our starting point is Ephesians 2:11-22. This passage is a reflection on how Christ breaks down walls and brings people together to form a new community. Community is one of the central things that God wants for us.

Second, you will be asked to reflect on Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall.” This poem can help us think about how our attempts to build community sometimes build division. You are encouraged to get a copy of this poem and put it on your “Holy Wall.” It is well worth reading and reflecting on.¹ One of many sites where it is available is <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/mending.htm>.

Third, you will read stories from my life where I have experienced walls. These stories come out of my experience as a missionary in South Africa with Mennonite Church Canada Witness and African Inter-Mennonite Mission from 1999 to 2005. These were years when the great dividing wall of apartheid had fallen, but many other walls remained, and new ones seemed to be springing up. I saw my work as a missionary in that context as working with a church that was

carefully taking apart dividing walls of culture and race; walls that hindered the flourishing of the body of Christ. Taking these walls apart takes a lot of patience, wisdom and, most importantly, graciousness. Fortunately, I worked with people who had an abundance of these qualities.

Fourth, you are encouraged to think about places where you have experienced walls and to tell those stories for the rest of us to hear. It is when we hear each other’s stories of living with divine walls and with walls that divide that we meet God, and our own journey becomes clearer. So you are encouraged to tell your stories, if not to the whole church via the Internet, then to those around you. There is a web site associated with this material and some of the stories you tell will be posted there.² Finally, this resource provides suggestions of how to pray at your ‘holy wall’. This wall may be a wall in your sanctuary with your community of faith; it may be with your family or friends in your home; it may be alone in your room. For suggestions, see the appendix: Setting up Your Worship Space.

May it become a divine wall for all who pray at your ‘holy wall.’

—*Brian Dyck, September 2006*

² <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/62>

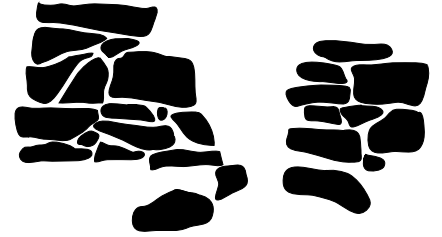
¹ Available at <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/mending.htm>

Session 1

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”

Scripture Texts:

Ephesians 2:11-12, Acts 6:1-7, Psalm 18:1-3.



Visual Display ideas

Walls: Build your display on sand. (If your sandboxes are all hiding under snow, get salted sand that is available for icy sidewalks.) Depending on the size of your display, that can be in anything from a sandbox to a cookie sheet. Use cement blocks, bricks, large building blocks, or stones to create a symbolic wall on the sand. With rounder stones, you may need to stabilize them with salt dough, modelling clay or a glue gun. Add some chalk graffiti, saying “Whites Only” or add other symbols of segregation and the words “Come and Worship” or other symbols of the positive function of walls. Photos of symbolic dividing walls like the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, or the wall being built between Israel and Palestine could add to your display, but balance them with photos of a patio wall and your church building as symbols of walls that can have a divine function.

Music

HWB 36 God of our strength

HWB 165/329 A mighty fortress is our God

HWB 616 Children of the heavenly father

Prayers

HWB 730, 746

SJ (Sing the Journey) 142

Introduction

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” So begins Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall*. In this poem, the narrator and his neighbour come together to maintain the stone wall that divides their properties. One questions the need for the wall that stands between an apple orchard and pine trees, the other responds by quoting his father’s favourite saying: “Good fences make good neighbors,” and carries on with the ritual of replacing the stones that have fallen in the course of the year.

It is telling that we often hear the latter quote but seldom hear the former. The boundaries in our lives are important to us and we expend a lot of energy in maintaining them. As someone who is rather introverted, I certainly enjoy having walls around me, both physically and symbolically, particularly at the end of a long day full of people. Give me my house, my chair, my food, my music, my walls. Give me my space.

And yet we are called to share, to hold things lightly, to be generous and aware of those outside the walls, and

sometimes to even break down those walls. *Koinonia*, the spirit of community, is something that is put before us as a Christian virtue; *Koinonia* receives special emphasis among Anabaptists. But to share even my space? At the end of a long day, I find this hard.

In the church we seem to have a love-hate relationship with walls. On the one hand we want our church to be a place where everyone feels welcome. On the other hand, we also want our chair, our food, our wall and our space in church. We know that as people come in, they have their own ideas about how one is faithful to God and sometimes those ways feel uncomfortable or even downright wrong.

Within the church walls, it seems we are more likely to say, “Good fences make good neighbours.” There are people on the outside of the church walls who would agree with us. They would rather we stay in our own little houses of God and leave the rest of the world alone. Some find the walls of the church too confining; some suggest that in the church we are trying to tame God’s spirit with our walls. Sometimes they are right.

Nevertheless, the walls we establish in our churches are constructed in good faith. When we set boundaries as to what it means to be a part of the body of Christ, we are often thinking about what marks our relationship with fellow believers. We want to make these important relationships holy and set apart from the relationship we have with others. We rightly expect something different from those inside the church walls and less from those outside. We want our church to be a place where we turn to God and feel safe and cared for.

These relationships within the local body of believers can provide comfort and closeness with God. However, while we long for the comfort that these walls provide, we sometimes feel a divine force tearing away at the walls we build. The church walls can be restrictive. They can force an unnatural shape on the body of Christ. They can keep the church from growing and being what it needs to be in different cultural and temporal environments. This has been most problematic when the church walls have been constructed along racial and ethnic lines. These have sometimes morphed into denominations or even sub-groups within a denomination.

Imagine being homeless on a cold winter night, looking in the window of a warm house.

While these walls can feel sacred to us because of their proximity to the holy, they become extremely profane when they divide God's children. Because of this, it is important for us to get to know the walls of the church. We need to make sure that church walls function in holy ways that nurture the family of God to be faithful; in ways that foster the growth and the shape of the Body of Christ.

Reading the Text

The book of Ephesians is about building relationships in the context of the church: man and woman, parent and child, master and slave, but most importantly Jew and Gentile. This latter separation was perhaps the most significant for the early church. In fact this "wall" threatened to split the early church. It is a central theme in the book of Acts and Jesus deals with it in many of his parables.

Ephesians is addressed primarily to Gentile Christians. The letter seems intent on encouraging these Christians who were at risk of being marginalised. While Paul's letter is sometimes seen as restrictive for the underprivileged in society (e.g. women as viewed in Ephesians 5:22ff), he seems to work hard at finding a place for everyone in the body of Christ, no matter who they are or what their gifts are. Over and over, Paul suggests that everyone has a place in the church – even those we don't want and don't expect to participate in it.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is pivotal in the first half of the letter (chapters 1-3). It centres on Christ's role as one who brings Jew and non-Jew together in this body.

The first few verses in this passage summarize the situation. The Gentiles were on the outside of the wall that the Jewish establishment had tried to build around God. Paul characterizes this time as a time of hopelessness for those outside the wall. Imagine being homeless on a cold winter night, looking in the window of a warm house. That is the picture that is invoked here.

Paul punctuates this separation with the language he uses. He refers to the Gentiles with a derogatory term: the uncircumcised. The Gentiles – the outsiders – are defined by comparison to the insiders, and not by how they would define themselves.

Names are important. The old children's taunt can be turned on its head: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will really hurt me." Names can be used to maintain the walls between "us" and "them." By using the term "uncircumcised" Paul reminds the people that there was a dividing wall here that could not easily be crossed by "the circumcised."

Names often serve as a quick way to help us categorize people. I am reminded of this when someone talks about having a "Mennonite name." Referring to a person having a "non-Mennonite" name parallels the way Paul refers to the Gentile believers as "the uncircumcised." This placing of people into categories helps us understand what is going on behind the story from Acts 6, one of the first records of an ethnic dispute in the church.

Many from the Jewish Diaspora (Jews who continued to live in countries outside of Palestine after the Babylonian captivity) came to live close to the temple in Jerusalem. In particular, there were many men who would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem late in life so they could be buried in this holy city. Because these men would bring along their families, their widows and children would be left to fend for themselves in an unfamiliar city.

Therefore, there were synagogues of Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem that were chronically poor because of this huge burden of widows and their children. This also became a problem for the early church. From the story in Acts 6, it is clear that both hometown Hebrew and immigrant Greek Jews were part of the young church. What is also clear is that the Greek-speaking converts were strapped for resources to care for the widows among them.

This was causing problems in the early Jerusalem church. The solution: "deacons" were appointed to distribute resources among the Greek-speaking portion of the church. It is significant that these deacons all have Greek names. It was they who knew best the needs in their community.

The church in South Africa has gone through similar struggles. During the apartheid era, many denominations were sub-divided along White and non-White lines. When apartheid ended, the churches struggled to change their structures to reflect the new reality of the country.

A retired South African pastor told us the story of a predominately white church that experienced an influx of amaXhosa people who had started moving into the area. To their credit, this church responded much like the Jerusalem church responded in Acts; they appointed amaXhosa deacons to minister to that portion of the congregation. This did not remove all the tensions, though. When one deacon blessed the Sunday's offering in the isiXhosa language, some long-time members were upset. "Whose money do they think it is anyway?" When this retired minister heard of their protest, he responded wisely, with a twinkle in his eye, "I thought it was God's money."

Brian's story: Behind the Wall

Walls are a part of life in South Africa. During our time there, we sometimes found our way barred by tall walls topped with razor wire or broken glass that had been cemented into the top of the fence. At other times we were happy to be behind these high walls.

Our house was behind a razor wire-topped wall with a big iron gate. In our backyard, behind this razor wire-topped wall, we made a little retreat centre for ourselves by building a shaded patio and planting many flowers. It was our small oasis where we could get away from everything. Our private space at the end of a long day of being out and about provided enjoyment and rest.

She would call out over and over until someone came to the gate to listen to her latest story.

There were times however, when people would stand at the edge of our oasis and make demands of us. I can still hear the call of one regular visitor: “Mfundisi!” (Pastor) or when she wanted Lynell, “Mama Mfundisi!” She would call out over and over until someone came to the gate to listen to her latest story. I’m embarrassed to admit that I often stood in our front sitting room, seeing but unseen through the sheer curtains, fervently hoping that she would give up, but knowing that she would not.

When I went to the gate, I learned to expect what her story would be. She almost always begged for one of her many children. One of her children was sick and she had come to the public clinic nearby, now she wanted food and taxi fare to get back home. Or, sometimes she would need money for school fees or school uniforms.

Sometimes we would give her something, though never as much as she asked for, by passing money or food through the bars of the gate. Many times we gave her nothing more than a bottle of water on a hot day. We never felt good about this relationship. If we gave her something, we wondered if we were perpetuating an unhealthy dependency. If we didn’t give her anything, we wondered about her children.

The wall between our privilege and her need was as real as the razor wire-topped wall between us. We wondered how or if this was a wall that we could or should tear down. We never knew.

Your stories

What cultural, social and economic barriers divide you from people in your neighbourhood or church community? Do family names form a barrier or create stereotypes? Reflect on these questions silently for a few minutes. Ask God to make you aware of the dividing walls in your context. Then share your stories with each other. If you have the courage, share some of them with the wider church by sending them to Elsie Rempel at erempel@mennonitechurch.ca. She will be happy to edit and summarize them for posting at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/62.

Praying at your ‘holy wall’

During a “Season of Prayer” it is also appropriate to acknowledge the barriers that keep us from getting as close to God and God’s will as we can. Are there barriers that are keeping you from an awareness of being in God’s presence? Silently ask God to make you aware of those dividing walls as well. Recognize them and ask God to help you connect with God’s will and presence. If it helps you focus, sing *HWB 616, Children of the heavenly father*.

Allow your eyes to focus on the visual display. Let your eyes rest on the symbols as you repeat your intention to draw near to God and focus on God’s will. After a short silence, ask,

“If Jesus were physically present, what might he write in the sand that forms the base of our display?”

Acknowledge that the wall invites you to your ‘holy wall’, that place where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God’s own.

If you are using a candle to help you turn towards God, light it, and place it near the display.

Read these questions to offer the stories and the earlier reflections on the Bible text to God. Reflect on each question silently for a short time before moving on to the next.

- Are there walls, both physical and symbolic that are important to you? Name them.
- Think of names or other words that people use to describe you (student, Mennonite, man, woman, Canadian, blue-collar, evangelical, etc). Do you find any of them insulting or demeaning? Do any of these descriptors serve as walls to separate you from others? Do you think you use names that are considered insulting and demeaning to other people?
- How do you react to the story about the woman at Brian’s gate? Do you identify more with her or with Brian? Are there people standing at the “gate” of your house or the “gate” of your church? What do they want?
- How does the reminder in today’s scripture that ‘we were once aliens to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world’ impact your attitudes toward outsiders?

Pray a *Prayer of Confession*. *SJ 142* is suitable for today’s focus, but *HWB 692 or 696* can also be used, as can your own spontaneous prayer.

Thank God for:

- The unity that is possible in Christ.
- The people who have made a welcoming place for you in your congregation and your community.
- Walls that protect you and your family.
- Walls that shelter you as you worship.

Pray for:

- Those who feel excluded from our fellowship.
- Those who have no walls, or only flimsy walls of old tin, cardboard and scraps of wood to protect them.
- Courage to be welcoming toward people who differ from us.
- Wisdom and love that help us invite others within our walls in ways that can warm the hearts of all.

Benediction:

Close with Ephesians 3:20 or one of the sending prayers in *Sing the Journey*.

Session 2

But now...The peace of Christ that breaks dividing walls



Scripture Texts:

Ephesians 2:13-14, Isaiah 57:19, 1 Peter 2:9.

Visual Display

Break your wall apart into two sections. Draw, or rake, a sand path between the wall sections. Depending on the size of your display, lay a wooden cross down in between the sections (prop the top up with a brick or two so it can be seen from a distance) or draw a cross in the sand of a small display.

Worship Resources

Music

HWB 322 We are strangers no more

HWB 367 For the healing of the nations

HWB 526 In the rifted Rock I'm resting

HWB 143 Amazing grace!

SJ 52 Jesus, help us live in peace (Unity)

Prayers

HWB 769

The Lord's Prayer

Introduction

"But now..." Those are the words that could perhaps sum up God's relationship with humanity. They signal that something important has changed. There are a number of significant places where "but now" happens. It can happen to an individual: John Newton's most favoured hymn, "Amazing Grace" has the autobiographical line "I once was blind, but now I see..." These "but now" experiences are more important, and perhaps more miraculous when they happen corporately: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9).

The road to these moments of grace can sometimes be difficult. Sometimes, the barriers to these moments seem insurmountable. We dwell too long on the situation before these moments of invitation or reconciliation and find it hard to hear the "but now." I remember once talking to an African church leader about the relationship with another tribal group. He said, "We did not get along with them, but now we are brothers in Christ." This was good to hear, but I also got the sense that his "but now" was not yet very strong. How often has our church stood in the way or withheld the "but now" from those who are culturally different as well?

When the "but now" is realized, when we realize that God has entered the situation and has set the direction toward a new unity, our spirits celebrate and struggle. We praise God for the "but now." But now what? What does one do now that everything has changed? How do we grieve the loss of old comforts? Sometimes it may seem easier not to work within the realm of "but now." The Children of Israel certainly wondered about the new realm they were venturing into and longed for the "flesh pots of Egypt", even though the promised future was much brighter. The journey toward a "but now" identity can be difficult.

We praise God for the "but now."
But now what?

That is certainly true as we think about the kind of cultural reconciliation that Paul is talking about in Ephesians. It's a hard task to bring people together. As we are on this journey, there will probably be times when we will wonder if it is worth it.

I think it is helpful to think about these "but now" moments as a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift is a way of looking at an old situation from a new perspective. For example, in the realm of astronomy there was a paradigm shift in the seventeenth century when Europeans started to believe that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around.

A major paradigm shift like this example from the field of astronomy, or the one of seeing former "outsiders" as part of "our" group, does not usually happen all at once. It can take years, sometimes even centuries (there is still a flat earth society), and it is difficult to pinpoint when the shift actually happens.

It takes more than time for a paradigm to shift. Moving into another location and culture raises our awareness and can shift the way we look at issues of faith and life. I remember a conversation during a teaching session I led for pastors in South Africa. The topic was sacrifice. As we talked about the view of sacrifice, as reflected in Leviticus and Hebrews, it became clear to me that while, on the surface, we were agreeing with each other, we were coming at this topic from completely different world views. As hard as we tried to explain to each other where we were coming from, these pastors and I, who grew up in completely different contexts, could not completely understand the other's way of thinking about sacrifice. A major paradigm shift would have to occur

for us to be able to understand each other completely. I also had to wonder which perspective was more biblical, since I had more theological training but their culture included a living tradition of animal sacrifice while mine did not.

On that day, I discovered a wall, not of my making or the making of these pastors, but one built by the culture of our ancestors. In that way it was like the wall in Robert Frost's poem – built by the wall menders' ancestors. In the poem, the narrator's suggestion that the wall between them might no longer be necessary is countered by his neighbour's response that he does not want to think about a world without that wall.

If this sort of wall, an ancient wall not of our own making, is to be taken down it must be taken down carefully. Our culturally influenced boundaries of thought and action are more than a pile of stones. These walls are more difficult to deal with than heavy stones that need to be moved to mend or dismantle the wall in Frost's poem.

Reading the Text

Verses 14-16 are the centre of the Ephesians 2:11-22 passage, and indeed of the first half of the book of Ephesians (chapters 1-3). Today's text leads us right into that centre. Tom Yoder-Neufeld, in the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Ephesians, suggests the following outline for this passage.

A – Once strangers and aliens without God (2:11-12)

B – Christ has brought near the far (2:13)

C – Christ is our peace (2:14-16)

B' – Christ proclaimed peace to the far and the near (2:17-18)

A' – Now no longer strangers, but part of God's home (2:19-22)

This kind of structure is known as chiasm (*ki-azm*). Notice how A and A' as well as B and B' reflect each other. In the middle, letter C, we find Christ and the peace that he has brought into the world. Before Christ there is separation and alienation. After Christ, there is a new unity and a new people.

It is interesting to note that it is Christ who accomplishes this unity and not the two sides – the Jews and the Gentiles – who accomplish it. For Paul, Christ, rather than the members, is the source of the unity of the body.

This new unity is not marked by circumcision, which was the identifying symbol of God's people before, but by the blood of Christ. A new, more inclusive, symbol is being offered to supplant the old symbol which had become limiting and exclusive. However, this new symbol draws on the old Jewish tradition of sacrificial blood which signified forgiveness and reconciliation.

All groups look for unifying symbols. When one looks at a young nation like South Africa, it is easy to see this search for and process of crafting symbols. In the early history of a group the process of making symbols seems more deliberate and it is easier to identify. Groups that are creating new

symbols ideally draw on something important from their past and bring it into the present. South Africa has tried to do this in their national anthem which incorporates the Xhosa hymn *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika* (God bless Africa) and *Die Stem* (the Call), an Afrikaans hymn. In joining together music of both the struggle against apartheid and the old national anthem, the new leadership has tried to forge some common ground upon which they hope to build a new nation – a “rainbow nation” as Bishop Desmond Tutu calls it. It is a huge vision.

This process is not without flaws and resistance; but most South Africans seem to mumble through at least some part of the national anthem. And, there are certainly still racial and ethnic divides in the “Rainbow Nation.” That is an interesting thing about new symbols – they are sometimes used to precipitate a paradigm shift rather than reflect one. This seemed to be happening when Christianity was young, as well. Perhaps it is even happening as we learn to think of ourselves as a missional church.

Ephesians 2:13 draws on elements of the past and brings them to bear in a new situation. “Bring those who are far away near” harkens back to the words of Isaiah 57:19, “Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the LORD, and I will heal them.” These were words of hope to the exiles in Babylon that they would be reunited with those who remained in the Promised Land. Tom Yoder-Neufeld also points out that in rabbinic tradition this verse speaks about those who came to Judaism and were not born into it – which would include Gentiles (Yoder-Neufeld, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, Harold Press, 2002, 111).

Brian's story: Living With a Lion

As part of the orientation process to our new life in South Africa, we spent the first six weeks in the village of Magombe, about 30 kilometres outside of the city of Mthatha where we were based. While Mthatha is off the beaten path in the relatively developed country of South Africa, Magombe was even further off the track. There was no electricity, phones, running water, or flush toilets. There was no one around who had English as their first language. It was a tough six weeks for all of us. Nevertheless, Magombe became an important place for us. It became “our village” in South Africa.

One of the things that helped us was that we stayed with a wonderful family: Goodman and Christine Momosa, or tata and mama, as we called them. The Momosas are an elderly couple who live on a small homestead, with several mud brick buildings with either tin or grass roofs. When we lived there, we shared the place with their youngest son, and a number of their grandchildren. They also managed a large garden project about a kilometre and a half's walk away over the hills.

Their lives were vastly different from ours. Tata had worked in the mines, in the sugar cane fields, and as a delivery truck

All groups look for unifying symbols.

driver. Nevertheless he considered himself a farmer first, and a pastor second. He is a man who loves to laugh and to joke around. Mama Momosa had given birth to eleven children who had taken many different paths, two had worked for the electric company, one had studied computers in university, one had been in the military as a paratrooper. They were the kind of people who took up any cause, from community gardening to HIV/AIDS training, to theological education. Mama Momosa in particular was off to meetings all over the country, with her limited command of English, and her rural sensibility.

Because Magombe was our village the Momosas were our family, and we would usually take visitors from overseas to

meet them. I remember one visit in particular where I got a sense of how strange and difficult this relationship was. We invited a long time MCC worker visiting from another country to come to

Magombe with us. The Momosas gave our guest the full treatment. We got a tour of the garden, the projects and the rest of the important places of Magombe. Before we could leave, they even killed and cooked a chicken for our lunch. With the dinner came a speech from Tata Momosa. He talked about what life was like before his “white children” came into his life. He said that he never imagined that he would be living with white people. In the past he had seen white people as like lions – something to be feared and avoided. “But now,” he said, “I have learned that the lion and the lamb can live together.”

We left Magombe that day feeling good, but also a little uncertain of our place in the family of God. If we had ever thought about our place in this image of a peaceable kingdom from Isaiah 11, we did not think of ourselves as the threatening member of the pair. I realized that it could be frightening to be on the same side of the wall with us rich and powerful Christians.

Your Stories

Have you been surprised by another’s perception of you or your group? Do you know what the people in the neighbourhood of your church think about your congregation? Have you tried to look at a situation through God’s eyes? How did that change your way of thinking about it?

Perhaps you have learned to look differently at your life and life in general through a dramatic conversion experience. Others trace their journey with God as a series of small steps that eventually shift the way they live their life. Share some of your stories with each other.

The church grows closer to each other and God as we become aware of how God is working in each other’s lives. Please share some of your “but now” stories by sending them to Elsie Rempel at erempel@mennonitechurch.ca. She will be happy to edit and summarize them for posting at

www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny.62.

Praying at your ‘holy wall’

This is the time for shifting from the head to the heart, and from our fellowship with each other to more intentional fellowship with God. A short time of silence can help you make this shift. So can prayerful singing of *HWB 143 Amazing grace* or *SJ 52 Jesus, help us live in peace* (Unity).

Acknowledge the wall as your ‘holy wall’; that place where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God’s own.

If you are using a candle to help you turn towards God, light it, and place it near the display.

Silently thank God for being a God of new beginnings, of never ending “but now..” experiences. Let your eyes rest on the broken wall and cross as you repeat your intention to focus on God and God’s will. After a short silence, ask, “If Jesus were physically present, what might he write in the sand that forms the base of our display?”

Consider uniting with Christians through the ages by praying or singing the prayer Jesus taught us. *SJ 48* is one version.

Read these questions to offer the stories and the earlier reflections on the Bible text to God. Reflect on each question silently for a short time before moving on to the next.

- What was an important, “But now...” experience for your congregation?
- What fears did you have about the changes that the “but now...” experience introduced?
- How were those fears overcome?
- What joys were connected to this experience?
- Have you stood in the way of, or facilitated a “but now” experience for someone else?
- How does the thought that Christ, who was the source of unity among the Jews and the Gentiles of the early church, is still the source of our unity as a church make you feel about the “but now...” challenges that our congregations are facing today?

Hold a time of prayer in which you silently confess the fears you have about the new paradigms and new realities God is calling you toward. Leave those fears with Christ, and accept the peace he offers. Consider the following sentences. How would you fill them in?

I once was _____ but now _____

My church was once _____ but now _____

Thank God for:

- Symbols that were used to help forge our cross-Canada community of congregations.
- Symbols that bring your congregation together.
- Ways that different ethnic groups, or different church groups are being drawn together in our church.
- The peace that is ours as we allow Christ to transform us into God's people now.

Pray for:

- Courage to trust Christ's peace to see you through the changes God is calling you toward.
- The "Rainbow Nation" of South Africa and that the divisions between class and race might be overcome and that justice and peace might prevail.
- Other situations in the world, your community, your church and your families where walls need breaking down so that the peace of Christ can prevail.

Benediction:

Close with Ephesians 3:20 or the sending prayer in *HWB* 769.

Session 3

Fence Mending or Sheep Tending?

Scripture Texts:

Ephesians 2:15-16, Matthew 15:10-28

**Visual Display**

Move the pieces of your symbolic wall around so that they resemble an animal enclosure. Make sure it has a few pieces missing. Add upright signs (a paper folded in half so it will stand) with the words, or pictures, of sheep and wolves. If your display is small, write the words sheep (inside) and wolf (outside) in the sand on which your enclosure rests.

Music:

SJ 3 Jesus calls us here to meet him

HWB 447 O Jesus, I have promised

HWB 525 How bless'd are they

Prayers:

HWB 739

SJ 159

Introduction

Who is a part of "our group" and who isn't? Often the way we decide this is how people keep "the rules." People from outside our home culture or our home church can have a hard time fitting in and even offend us because they do not know the unwritten rules: how we greet, how we eat, what we say and do in a given situation. These things seem petty and insignificant, but they go deep. Our cultural rules are much like an iceberg: the part that we can see above the

surface is only a small part of the story. What are under the surface – the values behind the words and actions we can see – are extremely important to us and outsiders can easily bump up painfully against them.

There are times however, when our rules, the written and the unwritten, no longer fit the situation. Some of them may even have been ill-conceived to begin with. When we realise that rules need to be changed to be faithful in our changing world, how do we bring about change? It can be difficult, especially when those rules have been part of our understanding of God's will. After all, we reason, "How could we be wrong when we are doing what we believe God wants us to do?" Perhaps this session's text can help us.

Reading the Text

Imagine being a sheep farmer with a large flock of sheep for which you are responsible. Taking care of the sheep is not a big job because there is plenty of grass and water around, but there is a problem. There are a lot of hungry wild dogs in your area who are a threat to your sheep. How do you protect them?

Do you keep watch over the sheep all the time? That would take up all your time. You need to find a way to keep the wolves at bay. A fence seems like the simplest solution.

It is not easy to build a fence that actually keeps wolves out of a field of sheep. Wolves can be rather clever and sheep can be rather stupid, but building a fence is still the simplest solution. So sheep farmers build strong fences to keep the

“Leave those sheep alone, that fence shouldn’t even be there.”

wolves out and the sheep in. The benefits are great; the farmer doesn’t have to watch the sheep as closely, but can relax a little and get some other things done.

What would you do if the fence you built suddenly had a hole? You would go out to fix it. And what if, right as you see some sheep about to get out through the hole, someone who should know better would say to you, “Leave those sheep alone, that fence shouldn’t even be there.”

This compares to the experience of the Pharisees in Matthew 15. The Pharisees were concerned about helping the Jewish people keep the Law and be faithful to God; those are good things. So they spent a lot of time studying the Law, thinking and discussing what it means to be faithful to God. That is something that we think is important, too.

For example, they would consider food preparation and debate, “How does one prepare food in such a way that it would be pleasing to God?” After centuries of discussion, they had decided exactly what Jews must do to keep the Law in regard to every aspect of food and eating. One of the things they decided on was that a hand washing ritual was compulsory before eating. This is probably based on the command in Leviticus 22:1-9 that priests bathe before eating sacred food. But in Matthew 15, Jesus’ disciples were not washing before eating, and the Pharisees came to check it out, all the way from Jerusalem.

We need to be clear: the Pharisees probably did not think of these rituals as God’s Law; but these “traditions of the elders” were seen as fences around the Law. God’s Law (Torah) was very important to them, because it was God’s gift to their people. They protected the Law, and in this way protected God’s people because they helped them keep the Law, which in turn helped them keep their relationship with God. The ‘traditions of the elders’ helped them remember God’s covenant. In other words, they were extra strict with these “traditions” so that they would be sure they were obeying God’s Law. It was like building an extra fence around a fence just to be on the safe side.

When the Pharisees heard about Jesus’ disciples disregard for washing, they saw a hole in their exterior fence, and feared that some of their sheep were getting out of their tradition fence, or worse yet, that Jesus, who didn’t respect the traditions, was like a wolf who was getting in. They probably considered this lack of regard for the traditions of the elders a slippery slope which would lead to disregard of God’s Law (Torah). Disregarding God’s Law in the past had led to the Israelites’ time of exile in Babylon.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples were not keeping the “tradition of the elders,” Jesus challenged them, “And why do you transgress the commandments

of God for the sake of your tradition?” This is a far more serious charge. Jesus was accusing them of damaging the holier, interior fence. He pointed to an example of where the tradition went against the commandment to “Honour your father and mother.” Apparently, the tradition was that, if you told your parents, “What I owe you, I have given to God,” then it was all right to neglect the commandment to honour and provide for your aging father and mother.

Jesus suggested that the Pharisees’ concern for food was hypocritical. He quoted Isaiah: “This people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine” (Isaiah 29:13).

In other words, “You care more about the fence of rules than the sheep or the people’s relationship with God.” He is pointing out that these traditions of the elders, which had been developed to help people keep the Law, had become a Law unto itself that sometimes went against the Spirit of the Law of God. The Pharisees’ ‘tradition’ had missed the point of the Law: to help people stay in good relationship with their holy and righteous God. They were now carefully tending their fence of tradition, rather than tending the sheep they had been entrusted to lead in God’s way of Torah.

Robert Frost in his poem, “Mending Wall,” seems to accuse his neighbour of the same thing, although in a much subtler way.

*“I see him there bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”*

In a commentary on this poem, George Montiero suggests that Frost was thinking about the ancient Roman festival of Termenilia. On the 23rd of February, Romans would go to the landmarks – the stones that marked boundaries – and bring offerings to the god Terminus. Perhaps Frost thought of this ritual of repairing a needless wall as bringing an offering to Terminus, a god he no longer wished to “worship.”

Montiero concludes, “What impresses itself upon [Frost] is that, for whatever reasons, [people] continue to need marked boundaries, even when they find it difficult to justify their existence.”[from “Unlinked Myth in Frost’s ‘Mending Wall.’” Concerning Poetry 7:2 (Fall 1974).]

While it may be true that “something there is that does not love a wall,” it is also true

The Pharisees’ ‘tradition’ had missed the point of the Law:

The walls become a problem when they take on a life and a spirit of their own.

that many of us love our walls and cannot imagine a world without them.

The walls become a problem when they take on a life and a spirit of their own. Instead of using the Laws, customs, or ethical guidelines that rule our lives as a tool to remember our covenant relationship with a righteous and gracious God, we can reach a place where we focus only on rules. It is at that point that we begin to worship the god Terminus.

After leaving these 'tradition fence' focused shepherds, Jesus encounters one of the hungry wolves or wild dogs that the Pharisees are trying to keep out: a Canaanite woman. This woman pesters Jesus and his disciples because her daughter needs help. The Pharisees, worried about staying "clean" would probably treat her like a wild dog and ignore her. Jesus even suggests this in his response to her.

How does Jesus feel about this woman? Does he have any compassion for her? I assume he does. But, why does he neglect her and treat her like a dog as the Pharisees do? Perhaps Jesus is trying to carry out the point he was making with the Pharisees: that their fence-focused ways of seeking to obey God do not make much sense. When he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he is responding like a pharisaic shepherd, who worries about keeping the sheep inside their solid fences, with no concern for the dogs. Jesus continues in this vein when he uses the analogy, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This woman points out wisely that, like a dog, she is not taking anything away from the children of Israel; she is simply picking up what they don't want. What these Pharisees don't want, and what she is picking up, is the possibility of healing through Jesus.

While the leaders of the children of Israel worry about mending fences, she is taking the bread that falls from their table. Her faith and her wisdom are beyond that of the Pharisees who are busy protecting their fences of tradition and trying to keep people like this woman outside of their community, seeing her as a dangerous dog that may attack and infect or devour their sheep after wrecking their 'tradition' fence.

In Ephesians 2, Paul also talks about Jesus tearing down the walls of law of commandments and ordinances. I think Paul, who came from the Pharisaic tradition, would have been able to empathize with the 'fence menders' that Jesus encounters in Matthew 15. He had been a 'fence mender' before his "but now..." experience as well. Now Paul writes that Jesus tore down that wall.

Brian's story: What if my culture kills me?

AIDS is a huge problem all over Southern Africa, and it is one that the church and other African institutions need to take seriously and respond to. Unfortunately, the AIDS situation is complicated by that fact the disease is almost always transmitted by sex.

There is probably no other area of life with more ritual, tradition or taboo than sexual relationships. This makes it hard to talk about in many settings. About eighty percent of Africans who become infected with HIV – the virus that leads to AIDS – are infected through heterosexual sex. Therefore if one is doing education about AIDS, one must talk about sex.

One of the AIDS education problems we ran into as we worked with the churches in Southern Africa was the issue of sexual taboos, in particular the reluctance to talk about sex in public. It made people uncomfortable, so people would not talk about AIDS. And people kept dying on account of something nobody wanted to talk about.

There was a lot of fear. One church leader told us, "I cannot talk about AIDS in my church, if I do that, I will lose my job." Another wisely said, "I cannot talk about AIDS in my church but perhaps you or others from outside the church can do that," so that is what we began doing. When we were invited to speak to a church we would often bring up the topic of AIDS. We pointed out that there were many people – especially young people – in our communities who were getting sick and dying. We would talk about how important it was for the churches to care for these people, and to promote sexual fidelity.

We heard other stories of how traditions would cause problems in regards to the spread of AIDS. One example of this was the tradition of wife inheritance which is common in some parts of Africa. Wife inheritance happens when a man dies and leaves behind a widow. In that case, it is the responsibility of one of the dead man's brothers to take his widow as a wife – even if he is already married – in order to keep her in the clan and make sure she and her children are cared for.

If the man who died had AIDS, it is quite likely that his wife also has the disease. If her new husband then has sexual relations with her she can pass the virus on to him, and in this way the disease can eventually spread to the rest of the clan.

I heard two interesting and opposite views of this practice. Nicta Lubaale, a Ugandan AIDS activist I worked with, spoke about explaining this problem to a community leader in East Africa. The leader considered this problem for a moment and then said, "The purposes of our traditions are to keep the community alive. If there is a tradition that is killing us, then we must change the tradition."

On the other hand, I heard the story of another leader who had been trained as a "trainer of trainers" in an AIDS education program. Shortly after this man had gone through the training, he was leading a workshop on AIDS. The issue of wife inheritance came up, and this man explained why the practice of wife inheritance would pass on AIDS. Then he said, "But if my brother dies of AIDS, I must take his wife, I can do nothing else. That is my culture and I cannot change it."

The former view sees traditions as serving something else beyond themselves. The latter view sees traditions as divinely ordained and unable to change.

Your Stories

Being too focused on customs and rules can lead us into hypocrisy. We are fascinated by these stories of hypocrisy, at least as long as they expose someone else's hypocrisy. Sometimes they can even help us see our own. More often, they bring out our righteous indignation. We need righteous indignation and so we need to hear and tell those stories. But, it is also important to hear stories of when blind obedience to rules and customs turns to creative redemption. Share both types of stories with each other as a way of connecting this part of God's story with your stories. Perhaps someone in your group would be willing to record and share at least one of these stories with the broader church. Names can be withheld on the website but must accompany your story. Send stories to erempel@mennonitechurch.ca. She will be happy to edit and summarize them for posting at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny.62.

Praying at your 'holy wall'

The time has come for shifting from the head to the heart, and from our fellowship with each other to more intentional fellowship with God. A short time of silence can help you make this shift. So can prayerful singing of *HWB 525 How bless'd are they* and *SJ 3 Jesus calls us here to meet him*. The first one focuses on the call to righteousness while the second challenges us to follow Jesus in his hospitality toward outsiders.

Acknowledge the wall as your 'holy wall'; that place where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God's own.

If you are using a candle to help you turn towards God, light it, and place it near the display.

Silently thank God for being a God of both righteousness and welcome to outsiders. Let your eyes rest on the visual display of an enclosure as you repeat your intention to focus on God's righteous holiness and welcoming hospitality. After a short silence, ask, "If Jesus were physically present, what might he write in the sand that forms the base of our display? Would he have a word for our congregation about how we view our rules and customs?"

Use the prayer, *HWB 739* as a prayer of confession, or lead with spontaneous prayers of confession about your own struggle to balance Jesus' call to right relationship with God's law and with outsiders.

Read these questions to offer the stories and the earlier reflections on the Bible text to God. Reflect on each question silently for a short time before moving on to the next.

- What is important in your life and what you do to protect or enclose those things or people?
- What rules or traditions in our congregation – written or unwritten – have become "fences" that are losing their meaning and purpose?
- Are there laws or rules in your church or community that need an "expiration date?"
- Who are the "wolves" that we used to protect our congregation from?
- Who are the current "wolves"; the people that we are afraid will defile our church?
- What is in our hearts that can defile the church Jesus calls us to be today?

Thank God for:

- The laws, rules and customs that have kept us away from sin and close to God.
- Those who have challenged the rules that have unnecessarily limited us and kept others away from God.
- The healing Jesus offers people we consider outsiders.

Pray for:

- Those on the outside looking in, who want the healing Jesus offers through his church, but are not finding it.
- Wisdom and love to discern how Jesus is calling and equipping your congregation to live in the tension between holiness, or righteousness, and hospitality.

Sing:

HWB 447 O Jesus, I have promised

Benediction:

HWB 738 or SJ 159

Session 4

Overcoming Barriers

Scripture Texts:

Ephesians 2:17-18, Acts 10:1-43

Visual Display

Recreate a complete wall with your bricks, blocks, or stones. Straddle this barrier with an appropriate sized stepladder or a paper representation of one.

Music

SJ 57 Mayenziwe

SJ 59 Confitemini Domino

SJ 31 He came down

HWB 15 O Prince of peace

HWB 306 In Christ there is no East or West

HWB 322 For we are strangers no more

Prayers

HWB 697(confession)

HWB 729 (prayer intro)

HWB762 (sending)

SJ 162 (sending)

Introduction

One of the most familiar stories from the Old Testament is the story of the battle of Jericho. Really it wasn't much of a battle, and that is perhaps a central point of the story. The Israelites, under the leadership of their new leader, Joshua, followed God's instruction and simply marched around the city walls for several days. Finally, on the appointed day, the walls fell.

Walls were one of the first military and political tools, and they are still widely used that way today. Because of this, walls also become important symbols of national identity and security. Think of the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and more recently the wall that the country of Israel is erecting between it and Palestine.

Because these walls are symbols of power, attacks on them can be equally powerful and symbolic. The graffiti-covered wall at the Brandenburg gate in Berlin that came down in joyous celebration remains a powerful symbol. Some of the participants certainly knew that there would be difficulties ahead for their country after this particular wall no longer existed. For the moment though, the joyous celebration of a new reality reigned.

Bringing down a wall can mean something more ominous than uniting two sides. The ability to bring down a wall can be an aggressive move to redefine who has power.

Remember the horror of watching the twin towers collapsing on September 11th, 2001. The fall of that wall changed the way most Americans view the world; it made many feel vulnerable. When we talk about bringing down walls, this image of a violent attempt to change the world also comes to mind. Sadly, we in North America have torn down other people's walls; perhaps not as dramatically as on September 11, but we have left other people with the same feeling of vulnerability.

Ownership of a wall between two sides can be an issue as well. If we think of the dispute between Israel and Palestine, we see that the Israeli Defence Force has been tearing down walls for years – the walls of the homes of Palestinian farmers who have built what the Israelis consider illegal houses. In addition to this, they have been building their own walls – walls to keep the Palestinians outside of their land.

It is important for us to be involved in breaking down walls that divide people in the world and especially in the church. This is one of the things that we are called to do as followers of Jesus Christ. However, it is important that we do so in a caring way. When taking down a wall, it is imperative that we work together with the person on the other side.

The image of breaking walls is a powerful one, but it is also troublesome. Is it tempting to think about building bridges over walls rather than focussing on taking walls down. The image of bridge building can help us think about cross-cultural encounters. Building a bridge is not a violent act; it is constructive and must be done deliberately and carefully. Second, bridges can be built over natural barriers, like rivers, or they can be built over barriers of our own making, like roads. In the same way some of the things that keep us apart are of our own making and some are not. Finally, when we build a bridge, the barrier it spans is still there, but stops being a factor for the two sides getting together. Perhaps we need to leave the wall-breaking to Christ to accomplish and direct our attention to building bridges to span the barriers of difference that remain between us.

Reading the Text

As we have seen, the Jew and Gentile barrier was the most difficult issue the early church dealt with. The story in Acts 10 describes one of the most important turning points for the church in overcoming this barrier.

This story begins with twin visions by two different men in two different locations. Peter is a central character in

the book of Acts and the ultimate insider among Jewish Christians. Cornelius is a powerful man from the dominant world culture of the time, but an unclean outsider to the Jews. These two are brought together by visions from God.

This is not the only place in the book of Acts where we have twin visions that draw together two people. In chapter 9, Saul and Ananias are also drawn together by visions. These sets of twin visions have some important similarities. In both stories, a leader in the church is drawn to accept – perhaps reluctantly – a powerful “outsider.” In both stories, the visions rely on each other for completion and interpretation. Saul is told to go to the city and wait for further instructions. Cornelius is told to call Peter to him.

Had the rules changed, or were the rules always wrong?

Neither is told what the next step will be. Third, both stories end in a baptism. Finally, in both cases the people in Jerusalem, where the church was started, are at first sceptical of the baptisms, but are eventually won over.

What is significant about these two stories is that while the main point seems to be the baptism of important new converts, the ones who are called to bring the message, Ananias and Peter, also have their own conversion experience. A significant shift happens in their understanding of who is in and who is out of the church.

Peter’s vision is one that creates a crisis for him. The laws that governed what one can and cannot eat, something he considered central to maintaining his relationship with God, were being questioned. What does one do when God says it is alright to eat things that have always been wrong to eat? Had the rules changed, or were the rules always wrong? It is hard for us to imagine how much of a shake-up this must have been. Can we be as open as Peter was to the faith-shaking events that occur when we encounter the wider church?

As Peter met the men sent by Cornelius, he began to understand what the vision was about: it was about more than food, it was also about sharing food. When Peter arrived in Caesarea, he immediately told Cornelius about his vision and what it meant (Acts 10:28-29). Indeed, even before he got to Caesarea, Peter had put this new way of thinking into practice. Peter invited the messengers who were sent for him, to stay in the same house that he was staying. This act of hospitality to “outsiders” was an important first step.

It is one thing to invite an outsider in, but it is quite another to say that the outsiders are no longer outsiders. That seems to be the conclusion that Peter came to as he saw the Holy Spirit descending on the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house. Peter asked, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” The Holy Spirit led Peter to cross boundaries he could never have crossed on his own.

The Holy Spirit is the truly central character in the book of Acts and outshines both Peter and Paul. The Spirit is

mentioned more often in Acts than any other book in the New Testament. When questions arise about actions that have been taken, or what course is to be taken, the Holy Spirit settles the question. In this case, when the church in Jerusalem questioned what Peter did, he explained that the Holy Spirit was present, and that answered the question for them.

It was the Spirit that kept expanding the church and kept it from remaining a small group of disciples. It led them first in Acts 2, when the disciples spoke in tongues and Jews from different language groups were baptized to become followers of the Way. It expanded their group again in chapter 8 when the Samaritans, those embarrassing cousins of the Jews, also received the Holy Spirit when Philip preached to them. It expanded the church when Philip baptized the Ethiopian court official. Finally, the Holy Spirit moved them beyond the Jewish world into to the Roman world when Cornelius and his household were baptised.

It was the Spirit that kept expanding the church

With these steps, beyond the comfort zone of Jesus’ earliest followers, but just next door, the church moved, and bridges were carefully constructed to help them overcome dividing barriers.

Returning to the Ephesians passage we read that both “those far” and “those near” have access to God through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not depend on the insiders bringing the outsiders in, but equips the insiders to move so that the Holy Spirit can do its reconciling inviting, barrier-crossing thing. The definitions of being “far” and “near” do not apply in terms of the Holy Spirit’s movement. In this respect, our “Vision: Healing and Hope” statement ends too soon. The final words are “...so that God’s Healing and Hope flow through us to the world.” The Holy Spirit has other ways of flowing to “outsiders” too, and was there ahead of Peter and Ananias. As the healing and hope of the Holy Spirit flows through us, we, like Peter and Ananias, are more than conduits of God’s blessings. We are profoundly affected, blessed and transformed as those blessings from God flow through us to change the world.

Christians with a service orientation are acutely aware of this. Whenever we serve, whenever we bring God’s word, we feel the Holy Spirit changing us, moulding us, transforming us, just as it changed Peter and Ananias in Acts.

Brian’s story: “Communion by the fire”

When I was living in South Africa, I remember thinking periodically about who belonged there and how one gained a sense of belonging. I remember one evening in particular, when I was discussing this with a South African friend of mine. Zama and his wife, Pat, had invited some friends over for a “braai” to celebrate Zama’s retirement. Braai is an Afrikaans word which means barbecue. Braaiing is one activity that transcends the racial and cultural divides in South Africa. Everyone braais.

Zama, in addition to being a University professor, is a lay leader in the local and the national level of the Presbyterian Church. He can communicate effectively in all eleven official languages of South Africa.

I remember that evening sitting, in the dark, in Zama's backyard, watching the meat cook and talking about the new South Africa and the attempts – sometimes awkward, sometimes inspired – to bring people together across the cultural walls.

I remember talking about the South African novelist and playwright, Zakes Mda, and the assertion in one of his plays that the amaXhosa and the Afrikaners need to work together to exorcise from each other the demons left by apartheid.

I remember talking about how its multi-cultural nature was both a huge challenge and a tremendous blessing to South Africa. I remember finally asking Zama how the diverse people in this country can possibly come together. This was a question that Zama found hard to understand. He is one of those rare people who can move through cultures easily, can quickly pick up the subtleties of words and actions, can fit in, saying and doing the right things. We stared at the fire in silence. Finally he said, "This is where we come together, by the fire cooking meat and sharing it." Then he reached for a piece of meat, cut off two pieces, and handed one to me.

Your Stories

When the Holy Spirit empowers someone to reach out in a big or small way, to bridge a gap, it is a profoundly moving experience. These are important stories of conversion for both those reaching out and for those being touched. Tell each other stories of 'bridging the gap' experiences that you have had. These stories are often filled with embarrassment, laughter and grace as we awkwardly try to meet on unfamiliar ground. If your stories include more stumbling than success at bridging cultural divides, tell those as well. Laughing at ourselves can help us gain perspective, heal and get ready to try again. Please record and share at least one of these stories with the broader church. Names can be withheld on the website but must accompany your story. Send stories to erempel@mennonitechurch.ca for editing, summarizing and posting at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/62.

It is the small things that matter: the invitation to share food, the word of concern or friendship in passing. It is times when we step – just slightly – out of our comfort zone that can make a difference changing us and changing the world.

The starting point may be trying a new food, or singing an unfamiliar hymn from another culture in church. It cannot stop there. These actions must lead to real connections with real people. If they do not we are simply engaging in cultural voyeurism.

One way to help us move out of our comfort zones is to find someone who knows our own culture and another one. Ideally this is someone who is an insider in another culture and finds it important to interpret that culture for others. I call these people cultural bridge builders – people who want

to explain their world to others without making people feel ignorant, provincial or out of place. These people can be rare and hard to find, but can lead to meaningful friendships.

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish author and holocaust survivor, has spoken eloquently of this of bridge building role. He said:

"I want to bring people together from all sides: Buddhists and Arabs and Europeans and Americans. Because, again, a witness is what? A witness is a link. A link between the event and the other person who has not participated in it. A witness is a link between past and present, between man and man, and man and God. Being a witness I would like to be that link between the Arabs and the Jews, and the Jews and the Christians, and the Jews among themselves."³

Praying at your 'holy wall'

The stories you shared may have helped move into that humble 'heart space' which makes it easier to become aware of God. Encourage each other to focus on what Christ can do in us and through us by singing HWB 306 In Christ there is no East or West, or 15 O Prince of Peace. As you shift from fellowship with each other to more intentional fellowship with God, enjoy a short time of silence.

Acknowledge today's visual with its barrier and a straddling stepladder as your 'holy wall', that place where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God's own.

If you are using a candle to help you turn towards God, light it, and place it near the display. Let your eyes rest on the visual display. Silently thank God for the barriers Christ's love has and is overcoming in your personal and congregational life. After a short silence, ask, "If Jesus were physically present, what might he write in the sand that forms the base of our display?"

Use the prayer, *HWB 697* as a prayer of confession, or lead with spontaneous prayers of confession about your own reluctance to trust the reconciling peace Jesus offers.

Read these questions to offer the stories and the earlier reflections on the Bible text to God. Reflect on each question silently for a short time before moving on to the next.

- What walls has Jesus broken down?
- How might Saul and Ananias, or Peter and Cornelius, have felt while they were in the midst of having their dividing barriers destroyed by the Holy Spirit?
- What dividing barriers have you encountered in your life?
- What bridges have we helped to build?
- Whom is the Holy Spirit equipping as bridge builders in our church?
- What gaps is the Holy Spirit nudging us to bridge?

³ Elie Wiesel in "What is a Jew? Interview of Elie Wiesel." Responses to Elie Wiesel. Ed. Harry James Gargas. New York: Persea, 1978. 150-57.

Thank God for:

- The barriers that the Holy Spirit has helped your congregation overcome.
- The people the Holy Spirit is equipping to be bridge builders.
- The encouragement that comes from claiming Christ's peace.
- God's great gift of reconciliation that is available to us because of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.
- The foretastes of peace and unity that we can participate in.

Pray for:

- Those in our congregations, our communities, our country, and our world, who are separated from lives of shalom by dividing walls.
- Those who are in bridge building ministries in our congregations, our communities, our country and our world.
- Faith to claim the peace of Christ at deepening levels of our lives.

Benediction:

Sing SJ 59 Confitemini Domino or HWB 322 For we are strangers no more.

Read the benediction from *HWB 762 or SJ 162*

Session 5

The Divine Walls of God's House

Scripture Text:
Ephesians 2:19-22



Visual Display

Rebuild your bricks, blocks or stones into the low walls of a house of prayer. Place an appropriate-sized cross upright within it. Add paths in the sand that lead to this house of prayer from all directions.

Music

HWB 407 We are people of God's peace

HWB 2 In thy holy place we bow

SJ 4 You've got a place

SJ 16 Praise with joy the world's Creator

"Here by the Water" from the album *Romantics & Mystics*, Steve Bell, signpost music, 1997.

Prayers

HWB 696

SJ 143

HWB 726

Introduction

Do good fences make good neighbours? Sometimes, a "good" fence can be a sign of a bad relationship between neighbours. When we must tend with great vigilance the things that separate us, maybe "something there is that doesn't love our wall." If we want to have good relationships in our communities and in our churches, it is more important that we attend to things that can bring us together than to things that separate us from our neighbours.

Jesus was once asked about neighbours. A lawyer, in order to get an answer of how far his compassion must extend, asked him, "Who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29) Jesus' response can be summarised as, 'Your neighbour can be anyone. It can even be the person on the other side of that high wall that you have built between you and the Samaritans. And that person could be the one reaching over the wall to help you rather than the other way around.'

It is not good fences that make good neighbours; good Samaritans make good neighbours.

Reading the Text

As we look at the closing verse in our Ephesians passage we see that making good neighbours does not seem to go far enough. We see that Christ's ultimate goal – and ours as well – is not to break down walls in our neighbourhood, but to build the divine walls of one big house.

The Greek word for house is *oikos*. The root of that word appears six times in Ephesians 2:19-22. Of particular note is the word *paroikoi* which is translated as "aliens" in verse 19 by the NRSV. The *paroikoi* are literally "those who are outside of the house" (Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians, Yoder-Neufeld p. 124). The writer of Ephesians is telling the Gentiles they are no longer outside the house of God.

We have all had the sense of being an outsider at one time or another.

We have all had the sense of being an outsider at one time or another. This is acute when we cross into another

culture and language. Until recently, the people in our congregations who had experienced this cross-cultural anxiety were mainly missionaries or former Mennonite Central Committee workers. They were among the few people in each congregation who had lived and worked in another cultural context. Sometimes they sat in the back of the church, frustrated with what they saw in their home church. Occasionally they tried to broaden their home congregation's perspective with ideas from their cross-cultural experience. Sometimes this worked, but at other times people would look at them and wonder what planet they came from.

As global travel has become easier and the world economy become more interdependent, we do not have to go far to feel out of our environment. Other cultures have come to us. The rapid progress of technology is creating new environments and cultures within our homes. We can feel as if we are on the wrong side of a wall even in our own backyard. This can be an extremely difficult and depressing experience. However, going through a time of being an alien can make us become empathetic toward the needs of outsiders among us.

... keep holiness and hospitality in a healthy tension...

While we can learn from the experience, being an outsider is not a good thing and should not be our ultimate goal, just

as tearing down walls is not our ultimate goal. In the Old Testament to be *paroikoi* (or *gerim* in Hebrew) is portrayed as a hardship one is born into (e.g. Gen. 15:13). Having a home is important. It is part of *shalom*, the rich Hebrew word for peace. Much of the first five books of the Bible are about the drive, by the people of Israel, to find a home.

Because of their history, which included being outsiders, the Israelites are reminded to be compassionate towards the outsiders in their land. Sojourners, those who are outsiders, have a special place in the Law (e.g. Exodus 22:20, 23:9, Leviticus 19:33-34; Deut. 10:18-19).

Leviticus 19:33-34 is particularly powerful. It says that the alien must not be oppressed, must be treated as a "citizen" (as the NRSV says) and that "you shall love the alien [outsider] as yourself."

This is risky. How can we trust the alien in our midst? Can we be too accommodating? Are there some places that we do need to build a wall to protect who we are as God's people?

At the 2006 Assembly of Mennonite Church Canada, the Faith and Life Committee challenged us to keep holiness and hospitality in a healthy tension; like the tension of breathing in and out helps keeps us alive. Another place where the balance between accommodation and faithfulness to God seems to have struck a good balance is in the Rule of Benedict, written in the sixth century by St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine Monastic order.

Monasteries are often seen as places that are focused on prayer and holiness. They are separated from the world by high walls that are difficult to penetrate. Chapter 58 of the Rule of Benedict says that if a person is persistent

enough to knock four or five days at the monastery door, he or she should be let in and invited to begin the journey of becoming a full member of the community. At various points along this journey the Rule of Community is to be read to this persistent novice. If the novice wants to join the order, he or she must humbly keep this rule without question. It is not easy to get to this point. Much is expected.

At the same time, there are many exceptions in the Rule of Benedict that make it easier to keep. In chapter 53 the Benedictines are told, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt. 25:35)." The rule goes on to single out pilgrims and the poor for special treatment as guests in the monastery.

Joan Chittister, in a devotional commentary on the Rule of Benedict, says, "Only two Benedictine principles are applied without exception: kindness and self-control." At every other point, we are encouraged to accommodate.⁴

It is this balance of strict discipline, challenging members to be devout in thought and deed at every turn, but tempered with compassion for the weak, or taking into account the circumstances that make obedience difficult, which characterizes the Rule of Benedict. It encourages a balance worth striving for: between openness and servanthood on one hand and making certain that we call each other to a life of humble service and sanctity on the other. This is similar to the balance between hospitality and holiness that the Mennonite Church Canada Faith and Life Committee is encouraging us to strive for.⁵ The building materials for the house of God, written about in Ephesians 2, are crucial. Both Jews and Gentiles must be a part of this new house. Foundation language, which is used in so many places (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:11) is used to talk about Christ's role, but other important building blocks are the apostles and the prophets. Alongside these, the former outsiders and insiders come together to be part of the wall of God's new house.

It is clear that the house, or temple, which we are building, is to involve a multitude of people from the ground up. That challenges us to do more than merely breaking down walls; it takes a lot of creative energy to build with and keep such diverse stones together. Anyone who has done household renovations knows how crucial it is to move beyond thinking about breaking down and think about building. They may also know the satisfaction and challenge of working with diverse materials. As we build, or are built into this new house, this text can keep us from promoting either a bland sameness within the church – which can move to the extreme of a "cultural imperialism" – or to a simplistic celebration of diversity that does not recognize the complexity of the "us and them" that is present.

Steve Bell, a Winnipeg singer-songwriter, on his album "*Romantics & Mystics*" sings the song "Here by the Water" by Jim Croegaert, a Catholic singer-songwriter who was

⁴ Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict, Insights for the Ages*, New York: Crossroads, 1993 p. 119.

⁵ See power point presentation at:

www.mennonitechurch.ca/files/events/edmonton/F&L_ACOM

connected to the Mennonites for a time. The refrain goes:

*And here by the water
I'll build an altar to praise Him
Out of the stones that I've found here
I'll set them down here
Rough as they are
Knowing You can make them holy...*

Though these lyrics draw on the event in Joshua 4, they speak to this passage as well. We come together as rough, uncut, and diverse stones, and in Christ's presence, through the power of Christ's peace, we are fit together as something holy, as divine walls.

In the end, is either group outside the wall? For the writer of Ephesians both Jews and Gentiles are. Neither group can be complete on its own. In Christ, a new humanity is formed which is more than Jew or Gentile. If we take this as our starting point, we can work together to build God's temple around the foundation which was laid in Jesus Christ.

Brian's story: People were coming to us for help.

Whenever missiologists talk about the church in Africa, the first statement made is that there is a huge diversity among the Christians of Africa, and it is impossible to make general statements about such a large and diverse group. African churches meet in every manner of building, worship in every imaginable style and expound every imaginable doctrine.

Within this diversity, I found moments where I felt a strong connection with my African brothers and sisters in Christ. There were moments when I felt the walls of culture, language, race and any number of other barriers melting away and sensed a unity which went beyond understanding.

“People were coming to us for help.”

One of the moments I felt this unity most acutely was when I had the opportunity to attend a meeting in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Burkina Faso is vastly

different from South Africa, culturally, economically and religiously. Where South Africa has only two basic Bantu language groups which are understood by most people, Burkina Faso, a country that is much smaller, has about 50 distinct African languages. Where South Africa is about three percent Muslim, Burkina Faso is mostly Muslim. Where South Africa is rich in natural resources, Burkina is relatively poor. Where about one in five South African adults is HIV positive, Burkina Faso has about a six percent HIV positive rate among adults – high by North American standards, but low by African standards.

Just prior to coming to Burkina Faso, I had been at an international AIDS conference in South Africa. I had met church leaders from all over Africa who were concerned about AIDS and were thinking about what they could do together to respond to this crisis.

This was still on my mind as I talked to Donna Entz, my mission colleague there. As we talked more about what the churches in Southern Africa were doing about AIDS, she suggested that I meet with the Mennonite Church leaders in Burkina Faso to talk about how they were responding to AIDS.

One evening after supper, I was sitting at a table with Coullbaly Abdias, who was then the president of the Burkina Faso Mennonite Church, and another church leader who was acting as translator. When I asked them what they were doing about AIDS, I was pleasantly surprised to find that they had already been doing quite a lot. With the help of Mennonite Central Committee's Generations at Risk (GAR) funds they had started projects of education and care for those who were ill.

I told them I was very impressed, and asked them why they had started these projects. They simply answered, “People were coming to us for help.”

I was deeply moved by this answer. People who are HIV positive are on the other side of just about everyone else's wall. I was impressed that the Mennonite Church in Burkina Faso was seen as a place where people knew they would be cared for no matter what. I was also amazed that they did not shy away from this role in their communities, when so many avert their eyes from these problems. The young Mennonite Church in Burkina Faso had decided to break down the wall that kept out people living with AIDS. At that point I knew that the three of us sitting at that table were part of one house built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as a cornerstone, and as our peace.

Your Stories

When God's Holy house is rebuilt among us out of diverse groups that find their unity in Christ, we experience deep joy and gratitude for the way we are enabled to overcome our differences. These are important stories of the Kingdom of God among us that we need to tell each other in a world where the news media chooses stories because “if it bleeds it leads.” Think about differences that no longer divide us the way they used to. Encourage each other with stories and signs of God's unifying activity in your families. Please record and share at least one of these stories with the broader church. Send stories to erempel@mennonitechurch.ca for editing, summarizing and posting at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/62.

Praying at your 'holy wall'

The stories of God's unifying grace that you just shared will have done much to help you become attentive to God. As you shift from fellowship with each other to more intentional fellowship with God, enjoy a short time of silence. Sing *HWB 2 In thy holy place we bow* to mark the shift of focus from the group and toward God. Acknowledge today's visual of the growing walls of a house around the cross of Christ as your 'holy wall', that place where you seek to be as close to God as possible and let God claim you as God's own.

If you are using a candle to help you turn towards God, light it, and place it near the display. Let your eyes rest on the visual display. Silently thank God for the signs of God's new house in your personal and congregational life. After a short silence, ask, "If Jesus were physically present, what might he write in the sand that forms the base of our display?"

Use the prayer, *HWB 696* as a prayer of confession, or lead with spontaneous prayers of confession of your doubt and faith about the Kingdom of God that is already among us.

Read these questions to help you offer to God the stories and the earlier reflections on the Bible text to God. Reflect on each question silently for a short time before moving on to the next.

- Who feels welcome and included in our homes?
- When and where have we Anabaptist Mennonites had a sense of being outsiders?
- How has that sense of being outsiders affected the welcome we offer others?
- How does our current acceptance by society impact the way we think of being 'aliens' and 'citizens with the saints'. (Ephesians 2:12 and 19)

Thank God for:

- The unity in the midst of diversity that is possible in the body of Christ.
- Those who are equipped and willing to risk taking on the role of "Good Samaritan".
- The good Samaritans who reach out to us from beyond our understanding of the walls of God's house and people.
- Opportunities like this season of prayer to become aware of God's activity among us.

Pray for:

- A generous heart and discerning spirit.
- The desire to struggle for unity in the face of diversity.
- The growing unity of the church in your neighbourhood, country and world.

Listen to *Here by the Water* from the album *Romantics & Mystics*, Steve Bell, signpost music, 1997.

Sing one or more of the following songs to affirm God's Kingdom, God's house being built among and with us: *HWB 407 We are people of God's peace*, *SJ 2 In thy holy place we bow*, *SJ 4 You've got a place*, *SJ 16 Praise with joy the world's Creator*.

Benediction:

HWB 726 or SJ 143



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Response Form

We would be grateful if you could help us evaluate the benefit of this material by completing this short response form. Thank-you.

1. How did you use this material? (Please circle the letters that apply best.)
- a) In personal reflection and nurture
 - b) In a group use setting (Bible study, prayer meetings, adult ed)
 - c) In sermon development
 - d) Other (please describe) _____
-

2. How helpful was this material in promoting conversation about, and encouraging a deeper understanding of the texts? (Please circle the letter that best fits your experience.)
- a) Not at all helpful
 - b) Somewhat helpful
 - c) As helpful as expected
 - d) More helpful than expected
 - e) Other (please describe) _____
-

3. How understandable was the material? (Please circle the letter that best fits your experience.)
- a) Not easily understandable
 - b) Somewhat understandable
 - c) Reasonably understandable
 - d) Very understandable
 - e) Other (please describe) _____
-

4. If you answered a) in #1 above, how well did this material work for personal reflection and nurture? (Please circle the letter that best fits your experience.)
- a) Not well at all
 - b) Reasonably well
 - c) As well as expected
 - d) Exceptionally well

Explain your answer:

5. If you answered b) in #1 above, how well did this material work in a group setting? (Circle the letter of the response that best fits your experience.)
- a) Not well at all
 - b) Reasonably well
 - c) As well as expected
 - d) Exceptionally well

Explain your answer:

6. What themes would you like Season of Prayer materials to explore in the future?
-
-

7. Will you use Season of Prayer material again next year?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) Explain your answer:

8. In what form did you use this material:
- a) Pre-printed booklets from the MC Canada Resource Centre
 - b) A downloadable version from the internet
 - c) Photocopied
 - d) Unknown

9. My congregation's name is: _____

Province _____/City _____

10. I am:
- a) 18- 25 years old
 - b) 26-35 years old
 - c) 36-50 years old
 - d) 51 - 60 years old
 - e) 65 years or older

11. I am: a) Male b) Female

12. I am a/an:
- a) Occasional attender
 - b) Regular attender
 - c) New member
 - d) Long term member
 - e) Other
-

13. I participate in my congregation in the following ways:
- a) Lay leader
 - b) Committee member
 - c) Pastor
 - d) Leadership Council
-

Please clip and return this survey to:

Dave Bergen, Executive Secretary, MC Canada Formation
600 Shaftesbury Blvd. Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4

Ph: 1-866-888-6785 Email: dbergen@mennonitechurch.ca

OR Complete this questionnaire online at:

www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/75