

SIGNS OF GOD AT THE CROSSROADS

A five session study and prayer guide, inspired by Deuteronomy 4:1-9

*by Artur Bergen and
the pastoral team at
Eben-Ezer Mennonite
Church, Abbotsford, BC*



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Hymns and prayers referred to in this study and prayer guide can be found in:

Hymnal: A Worship Book (HWB)
(www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/502)

Sing the Journey (STJ) (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/70)

Sing the Story (STS) (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/447)

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Ways of using Season of Prayer Material

These annual resources are used in a wide variety of ways. They have grown out of the observance of a Week of Prayer to start the calendar year and some congregations of Russian Mennonite heritage continue to use them in this way. Other congregations use them as a resource for a Deeper Life week at different times, frequently during Passion Week. They are also used for early morning prayer breakfasts, for Sunday morning or midweek study and/or worship series. Whatever way you choose to use them, we hope and pray that the reflections the pastoral team from Ebenezer Church discovered in this text will be a blessing to your congregation and help your congregation to be a sign of God's activity in our world, and will lead others to glorify our God.

This study and prayer guide is available for free download at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/745

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Confess:

- Arrogance in our attitudes toward the global south
- Wastefulness in our use of the earth's resources
- Reluctance to develop relationships with Mennonites from other cultural groups.
- Our ignorance of the faithful witness of non-Mennonite Christians

Pray:

- For God to provide the courage to name fears and to allow God to cast them out
- For the witness of Anabaptists in other countries to strengthen our endeavours to faithfully walk the path to which God us calling us
- God to help us cross cultural boundaries and develop healthier multi-cultural relationships in our faith communities
- That we will allow God to use our imagination for God's own good use and honour

Benediction: STJ 159, STS 176, or

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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Foreword

Crossroads—times and places where we are challenged to make and follow through on decisions—abound in our lives. Because of this, and because

my sense of geographic orientation is weak, I tend to stick with familiar travel routes, while my husband, who has a map embedded in his brain, loves the variety of alternative routes between familiar points. Geographic crossroads invite him where they easily overwhelm me. However, when it comes to meeting an assignment's due date, the decisions, or crossroads, of how to focus my time and mind are easier for me than for many others.

This personal anecdote is here to illustrate that different parts of the church also encounter crossroads in varying ways. Decisions that challenge one group will be easier for another. However, as Artur Bergen writes in session one, “focused discernment definitely helps us choose and follow the signs that will get us to our destination.” And focused discernment is what the Season of Prayer materials call the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada to engage.

The church's destination is the kingdom of God. The church's calling is to be a sign, a foretaste of eschatological reality, at the crossroads of church and society. All who follow Jesus together experience and witness to the kingdom of God among us. Jesus said so when he inaugurated his ministry (Mark 1:14-15). To keep headed toward this destination, the church needs to watch for and carefully discern the signs of God's presence and will in each of the decisions it makes.

The writing team for this year's Season of Prayer material has highlighted signs of God in Deuteronomy 4:1-9 that can help us find our way. They have reflected on how these signs are fulfilled in and built upon by Jesus and what they might mean for the church today. Significantly, the signs they discerned are all experienced in community. In a community the varied gifts of its members serve the group, so that a weak sense of geographic orientation, or difficulty with meeting deadlines, need not lead to anyone losing their way. Israel's covenant, as described in Deuteronomy, and the church's new covenant with Jesus, is about developing and maintaining life-giving relationships in a faith community. It is about what we can become with God's help as we worship and serve together. None of us are challenged with making and following through on these dis-

Reflection Questions

1. This session identifies the call to take care of God's creation as a challenge for our church. In what other areas does our connectedness with the global community challenge our faithfulness as a church?
2. If fear, as Gloria Castillo suggests, is the force that keeps us from being faithful, can we name those fears and offer them to God? What would it involve for us to allow the moving spirit of God's love to erase those fears?
3. What other lessons is God calling us to learn from the global Mennonite community?
4. If members of your congregation attend the Mennonite World Conference in Asunción in 2008, how will you support them and help them bring back what they learn from the wider church?
5. What small steps towards faithfulness in your walk with God can you take in the coming year?

Entering Into Prayer

Remarkable things happened when the early church prayed. Some have called their way of praying audacious. Like the early church, let us be audacious in our prayer as well. Focus your eyes once more on the worship visuals and using the Christ candle light the candles for each of the 53 countries in which there are members of Mennonite World Conference. Take some time to ponder the miracle and mystery of our unity in Christ.

Praise and Thank God for:

- The worldwide church, in particular the worldwide Anabaptist community
- The spirit of love that can cast out all our fears
- The faithful witness of believers around the world
- The opportunities for fellowship with our global Anabaptist family of faith
- God's Creation and our connectedness to it
- The gift of imagination.



creation. That same edition includes the invitation to attend the upcoming gathering in Asuncion, Paraguay. Even as we excitedly plan to attend this gathering of the world body of Anabaptist-related churches in Asuncion, the question niggles at the back of our minds whether we are using resources appropriately as we plan this worldwide gathering. This issue is being weighed in other settings as well, but because these times together as a world body are so inspiring and enriching, invitations to attend are still issued boldly. Leaders from many churches use these gatherings as an invaluable time to meet, discuss and worship together. For many it provides the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give and receive wisdom and understanding. So, how often do North Americans deserve to go? And if we go, will we use it to learn from these international brothers and sisters? Gloria Castillo, a member of the Mennonite Church of Colombia writes:

“God’s image on earth is represented not as isolated parts protecting our own interests and needs, but rather as a community, reflecting equality, wisdom, justice, peace, and vitality.”

Thus, all the ideas that separate and label us as rich or poor, black or white, from the North or from the South, give way to calling ourselves brothers and sisters, God’s sons and daughters, creatures made in God’s image, a reflection of God’s love.

This love makes us collaborators, servants, responsible people as we work with all of creation. Recognizing that God’s guiding force is love and not our fears or our own desires, we can then live and work together for equality between peoples. We can also work to provide access to and sustainable use of natural resources.” (*Courier*, 2008/2, 2)

If we as a worldwide Anabaptist Communion would truly take Castillo’s ideas to heart, might we, like the Hebrew people, also be seen as a “wise and discerning people”?

How do we balance the importance of this gathering of one global faith community with the call to care for creation? While the Mennonite World Conference gathering is being highlighted here, appropriate use of the earth’s resources also needs to be considered as we plan national church and other committee meetings that so many of us fly to each year. And then of course there are the vacations to faraway places that even more of us enjoy regularly. How does our covenant with our Creator and our participation as world citizens affect the travel decisions we make?

ciplanship decisions on our own. The good news of God’s kingdom is that God’s church, with its life-giving relationships, is a gift of God to Christians and through us to the world we live in.

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Introduction

Signs are all around us, all the time. Think of driving down a highway or city road—street and road signs tell you where to turn or which exit to take to

get to your destination. Signs tell you how much further you must drive to reach different cities and locations. And then there is the advertising. It's everywhere! It is on the side of the van next to you, on the blinking sign on the storefront, and on the massive billboards on the side of the road, all of them trying to convince you that you need their products or services. Some of these signs are meant to make life easier. They provide clear directions on how to get places, while others' sole purpose is to distract you and draw you away from your destination toward their desired destination for you. To stay focussed on our destination we need to ignore these signs and concentrate on the signs that get us where we want to go.

There are other signs around as well. These signs are harder to detect, but they're there, for God has put them there as guides for our true destination. Though they can be challenging to detect, and many find it easier to say God isn't present, it is worth looking for the divinely placed signs all around us. God's signs rarely come with flashing lights or via the latest high-tech equipment, but they are there none-the-less. As followers of Jesus, we are surrounded by all these different signs, all urging us to follow. The need to decide which signs we will follow places us at repeated crossroads. We can discern and choose God's way of blessing and life, or worldly ways of cursing and death. To discern rightly we must slow down in our fast-paced world, and look, really look, for the signs God has placed for us. We need to think together about which signs really lead to blessing and life and which do not. That is why we focus on specific biblical texts, like this one from Deuteronomy, as a denomination, during the Season of Prayer, looking at them afresh so they can address the realities we are now facing.

Text Summary

Our text is Deuteronomy 4:1-9. In the opening verses of this text, God speaks through Moses to the Israelites, teaching them what they need to learn before

they enter the Promised Land, where Moses will no longer be with them. Moses urges God's people to hear the laws and decrees he will teach them, so that they may prosper in the land God is giving them. They are not to add or subtract from the laws, but to keep them.

enfranchised within their own communities. International contacts with Christians through business, individual and group visits as well as varied Mennonite ministries, such as Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Central Committee, and Mennonite Church Canada Witness, have opened the doors to international relationships. The translation of *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* into a dozen languages is also opening conversations well beyond the multicultural members of our denomination for whom they were translated. Reading the Spanish translation of this document led a group of Christians in Cuba into a relationship with Mennonite Church Canada. Our Spanish-speaking denominational leaders are now walking with them as they study our confession and history to develop their own Mennonite Anabaptist identity.

At the same time, we are also being instructed and inspired by the Global Anabaptist family. The courage and faith of the Congolese and Colombian Mennonite Churches as well as the joyful suffering of the church in Zimbabwe witness powerfully to our North American churches. Their witness inspires and challenges us in North America, who can hardly imagine the challenges of such economic, political, or social circumstances. More stories of faithful witness from around the world than there is space for here beg to be told. A selection is available at: www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/767

What is our call for faithful witness in the world today?

One strong challenge that confronts North American Christians today is the challenge to be faithful stewards of our earth. For a people who have been very free in our use of non-renewable resources and who maintain a rather large environmental footprint, the call to simplicity challenges us with difficult and costly choices. Are we prepared to make these sacrifices as individuals? As churches? As national bodies?

In one of BC's daily papers, well known environmentalist David Suzuki has a column in which he suggests small practical steps we can take to help the environment. Many of the magazines found in our newsstands today carry at least one article on "greening" options.

The summer edition of the Mennonite World Conference newsletter, "Courier," includes several articles that challenge and inspire followers of Jesus to take seriously the call to care for



context of this covenant relationship, the law itself was distinctive, both for its justice and for its source in God (*The International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 131).

The formation of the peoplehood of God was a deliberate action on God's part. God would provide a witness to the surrounding nations through Israel. It would be a witness that would be noticed, would invite inquiry, and would continue to spark debate. Ultimately, the surrounding nations would reach the conclusion that Israel did indeed qualify as a great and wise nation because of the way this community was held together by its covenant and law.

The text does not take the witness of the nation further than this. That is, in his address to the people, Moses does not portray a nation whose witness will ultimately draw other nations into a relationship with Yahweh. As Christopher Wright states, perhaps it is remarkable enough for Moses to expect other nations to be interested in the 'yet to be' nation of Israel. At this point, the Israelites are landless descendants of refugee slaves who had opted out of one of the great nations of the world (*New International Biblical Commentary*, 47). Even so, they will be known by their fruit.

At Our Crossroads

Today, more than any other time in history, the media has the power to disclose the contents of any movement, be it secular or sacred. Anabaptists are not exempt. In fact, the world is so information-oriented that our government has needed to find ways to protect its citizens from the misuse of their privacy.

Unlike Israel, Anabaptists are not a nation with geographic boundaries. We are a diverse and dispersed people comprising numerous Anabaptist denominations, mission boards and para-church organizations with a kaleidoscope of governance structures. Much of what made Anabaptists distinctive in the 16th Century has faded among the churches that call themselves Anabaptist. It has only been in the last few years that the churches around the world who identify themselves with the Anabaptist church have, through the Mennonite World Conference, formulated a statement that outlines those beliefs they hold in common. Alfred Neufeld has articulated these in his book *What We Believe Together*.

And yet, as diverse as we are, God has used the Anabaptist church as a vehicle through which to be present and known to the world. Local churches are finding ways of bringing healing and hope to the dis-

In verses 3-4, Moses reminds them of what happened at Baal Peor. The entire story, found in Numbers 25:1-5, was well known by that generation of Israelites. Some Israelite men had indulged in sexual immorality with Moabite women and had begun worshiping the Baal of Peor. This was in direct disobedience of God's expectations of his people. All of the offenders were executed. Moses urges the people to hold fast to the LORD so they can resist repeating this error.

The Israelites are to follow the laws Moses gives them, so that they may take possession of the land, and, as explained in verses 5-8, so that it will show their wisdom and understanding to other nations. God's people were to be distinct from the nations around them, and following these laws and having the presence of God with them was how that distinctiveness would reveal itself. Moses wanted future generations of Israelites to follow the LORD and his ways. Without instruction, they wouldn't remember these teachings or what happened at Baal Peor, so verse 9 includes Moses' instruction not to forget these things, but to teach them to their children and grandchildren.

Thematic Overview

By studying this passage in depth in the five sessions of this guide, we will learn more about God's desire for his people, Israel, entering the land, as well as for what God desires for us. The text is filled with signs of blessing and life from God for the first and all subsequent receivers of this text, including us. The writing team from Eben-Ezer Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, BC, selected five signs from God for our denomination to reflect on. All five of these signs are experienced in community.

The first session is about **covenant community**. God's people are called into a holy covenant, and God has promised to be with us always. This covenant requires our obedience and blesses us with more than we could ever ask for. God has called us together to be Christ's body, the church, and while there are many implications for our personal lives, we do well to remember that we are on this journey as a community. Secondly, God longs for us to be a **discipling community**. A discipling community remembers and passes on all the wonderful things God has



done for us and shares God's immense love for all people. Ever since the founding of Israel in the Ancient Near East, God's people are called to be a **contrast community**. We are not a political nation like Israel, but we are God's people, called to live distinctive lives that reflect God's light into the world around us. The Israelites stood out in the Ancient Near East because of their laws, their path of righteousness. Jesus came to fulfill that law, a law that contrasts those of the world. As a part of our covenant, we are to be an **observing community** that discerns and obeys God's signs so that they lead to blessing and life. In response to our Lord, who is ever faithful, we are expected to strive to be faithful to God and God's ways. We do not do this in isolation but with God's people all over the world, in the eyes of all the nations of the world. We are part of a **global community**. It is good for us to remember how our lives here in North America affect people all over the globe.

All of these aspects of community emerge from our actions aligning with God's actions. We cannot do this on our own; we need God, who has chosen us to work with him and to reach out to the world through us. That is why the Holy Spirit, our greatest sign of God, offers to be with us in every experience and situation. Our hope and prayer is that, as you use this year's *Season of Prayer* material, God's Spirit will work in and through you, opening eyes to the many signs of God around us.

—The Eben-Ezer Mennonite Church writing team: Artur Bergen, Ron Braun, Ingrid Krueger, Kristina Toews, and Laura Loewen.

Visual Display Ideas

Core Symbol

Since all of the signs discerned from Deuteronomy 4: 1-9 are aspects of the church's community life, a symbol of community, such as the "Circle of Friends Candleholder" (pictured in this booklet and available at the Ten Thousand Villages store in your area), could form the centre of your visual display. Place a white tapered candle in the centre to symbolize Christ as central to the church's life. Symbols for each aspect of Church community can be added to this, so that the display grows with each session. Since these signs are all discerned at a crossroads, you may want to select a crossroads symbol and have it stand beside the worship table.

For signs used at last summer's Assembly/Summit in Winnipeg, see www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/762

Alfred Neufeld, in his book *What we Believe Together*, writes:

"Mennonite World Conference (MWC) is a community of Anabaptist-related churches.... These churches trace their beginnings directly or indirectly to Anabaptism, a movement of radical reformation during the 16th century. The heirs of Anabaptism now number at least 1.5 million baptized believers worldwide. Most of these are members of the 97 national churches, throughout 53 countries, that belong to MWC (2)."

As individual believers, as a local, national and global church, we are indelibly connected to others spiritually, socially, economically, and politically. John Donne's statement "no man is an island" speaks of this truth. Many thoughts and feelings come to mind as we ponder our place in the world, and the ways we are inextricably linked to each other.

Engaging the Text

As we read the story of the formation of the people of God in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch, there is a general sense that the laws and commandments given to these people by God were meant for the Hebrew people alone. The message of Deuteronomy 4:6-8, which places the Hebrew people on the international stage, can easily be missed. The laws given to the nation of Israel are set in an international context in verses 6-8. Obedience to the law was not for Israel's benefit alone. "All that happened in its history was open to the comment and reaction of the nations at large. Apart from being inevitable, given the international scene of the ancient Near East, this "visibility" of Israel was a deliberate part of its theological identity and role as the "priesthood" of Yahweh among the nations (Ex. 19:4-6) (*New International Biblical Commentary*, 47). Whether Israel was faithful or unfaithful, this nation that had been formed by God was an open book to the surrounding nations.

Israel's call was to become a distinctive people and a great nation. This distinctiveness and greatness was not about its wealth, military power, or form of government. Their greatness would lie in their wisdom and discernment so that their neighbours would say: "*Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people.*" What was at the foundation of this greatness? Israel's foundation was a covenant that created an intimate relationship between the people and their God. In the



Session 5

God's Church as a Global Community

By Laura Loewen

Suggested Songs:

HWB 50	<i>Praise the Lord, sing hallelujah</i>
HWB 51	<i>Let the whole creation cry</i>
HWB 367	<i>For the healing of the nations</i>
HWB 322	<i>For we are strangers no more</i>
HWB 293	<i>God sends us the Spirit</i>
HWB 362	<i>Help us to help each other</i>
HWB 371	<i>Let there be light, Lord God</i>
STJ 14	<i>Lord Jesus, you shall be my song</i>
HWB 299	<i>New earth, heavens new</i>
HWB 361	<i>O Spirit of the living God</i>
HWB 374	<i>O young and fearless prophet</i>
STJ 8	<i>Somos pueblo que camina (We are people on a journey)</i>

Introduction

Scripture texts: Deut. 4:6-8

The Hebrew story, the Christian story, and the Anabaptist story all began in particular contexts with a few specific people, but each developed connections with the international community.

In Genesis 12, God told Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." As the Hebrew narrative unfolds, we read how the descendents of Abraham became a nation set among nations.

The book of Acts begins with the narrative of the birth and growth of the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem and then goes on to show the spread of the Church outside Palestine through the missionary travels of Paul. Through this narrative we learn of the first impact the Christian faith made on pagan nations. Today some sources estimate up to two billion adherents to Christianity. This represents up to one third of the world's population.

Session 1: God's Church as a Covenant Community

On one side of the Friendship Candleholder, place a Bible that is open to Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments), as a symbol of the Old Covenant. On the other side of the candleholder, place a communion chalice and a loaf of bread as symbols of the New Covenant.

Session 2: God's Church as a Discipling Community

In addition to the open Bible, add a Bible commentary to symbolize the learning aspect of being disciples.

Session 3: God's Church as Contrast Community

Place another candle and a salt shaker in front of the Friendship candleholder to symbolize the church's call to be seen as salt and light in the world.

Session 4: God's Church as an Observing Community

Add to the display an outer ring that is made of foot-long pieces of ribbon. Be sure to have one for each participant, because these will be used during the response time as participants renew their covenants to God and each other. Blue symbolizes truth and royalty, green symbolizes new life and the season of Pentecost, while purple symbolizes repentance and the season of Lent.

Session 5: God's Church as a Global Community

Create an outer ring of 53 tea lights, to symbolize the 53 countries in which there are members of Mennonite World Conference. You may wish to twine additional ribbon in between these candles to reinforce the symbol of our interconnectedness with the Global Anabaptist Community.



Session 1

God's Church as a Covenant Community

By Artur Bergen

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 4:1-9; Matt. 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-22; 1 Cor.11:17-32.

Suggested Songs:

HWB 165 *A mighty fortress in our God*

Bind us together (Source: Bob Gillman Copyright © 1977 Thankyou Music/kingswaysong/Adm. by worshiptogether.com songs excl. UK & Europe adm. by kingswaysongs.com tym@kingsway.co.uk)

STJ 5 *Come and be light for our eyes*

STJ 31 *He came down*

STJ 42 *Listen, God is calling*

HWB 163 *Obey my voice*

STJ 8 *Somos pueblo que camina*

Opening Prayers: STS 141, STS 202, STS 203

Introduction

My family and I enjoy travelling on many different roads and trails in our province of BC and beyond. When signs are lacking, it is difficult to find one's way to a destination. However, places are saturated with colourful and intriguing signs that can also add to the difficulty of finding one's way. Yet, once one has established which sign one is looking for, it is possible to follow the right direction and arrive at one's goal. Deciding what to focus on makes it relatively easy to find one's way.

The church, as God's people, has been on a journey toward the kingdom of God for more than 2000 years. Anabaptists, our part of the church, have now been part of that journey, or pilgrimage, for more than 500 years. At times the church has seen and followed the signs well. At other times, it has been confused by the signs at the crossroads of each era and has followed some of the wrong signs.

Life constantly places us at crossroads, times and situations when we need to know what sign points to the right path. Focused discernment can help us choose and follow the right signs.

Pray for:

- The church's strength as a faith community whose members remind each other to observe God's law
- Families as primary centres for teaching and living God's way and as building blocks for the faith community
- Marriage partners to honour their marriage vows
- Members who are elderly, frail, or disabled and that they be honoured in the faith community
- Those who have lost their way, that they may find their way back, and that they may once again be lovingly embraced and accepted into our church

Benediction - STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up*



- The guiding Word of God
- The world that observes us as signs of the kingdom of God
- Communion fellowship with Christ and each other
- Service as an outgrowth of our steadfast affection
- Sacrifice: what it cost God to give us his only Son
- The power of God's sacrificial love as seen in Christ and in God's church.

Distribute the ribbons and invite everyone to tie the ribbons on each other's wrists as reminders of their covenant with God and God's people.

Sing "Keep These Words" (by Bryan Moyer Suderman)

Use the recommended prayers, HWB 726, 752 and 790, or follow this pattern for your spontaneous prayers.

Praise and Thank God for:

- Righteous laws that can be reinterpreted for each age
- The way Jesus built on the testimony of Moses' life
- The way that Jesus came to fulfill the law
- The gift of God's presence that Jesus promised would be with us to the end of the age
- The encouragement and strength that we find in our faith communities

Confess:

- That we have neglected to observe God's law
- That we have disobeyed many of God's life-giving commandments
- That we have succumbed to individualism and weakened the communal witness of our congregations
- That we need to reclaim Jesus and his church as the centre of our lives

Engaging the Text

Covenant Community in the Old Testament

Deuteronomy 4 describes a situation where Israel, the people of God, was at a crossroads. God spoke to his people through Moses, calling them to open their eyes, to identify and follow the divine signs put out for them. "Hear, follow, observe, help, watch," are key action words in these verses. God's people are invited to respond to God's initiative in a life-giving and life-protecting way. God has laid the foundation. God has opened a road. God has put signs along the way. Israel is challenged to choose and follow the good road set before the people. Or, they can choose to follow other signs and suffer the consequences.

Deuteronomy's theme of developing and maintaining life-giving relationships is core to the covenant and covenant keeping instructions God provided for Israel.

Following God's signs results in blessings and benefits for God's people that flow over to the surrounding nations. Both insiders and outsiders experience blessings through Israel's good choices and their keeping of God's covenant. The covenant is a powerful sign of God's loving and provisional action.

The church also has a covenant with God, a new covenant, offered to us through the sacrificial, life-giving blood of Jesus. We remember and renew this covenant each time we offer and receive the cup during communion. Jesus said that the "cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ and confesses with his mouth that Jesus is Lord belongs to Jesus and participates in the kingdom of God (Romans 10:5-15). In other words, that person lives in this new covenant community. When the letter to the Romans was written, declaring Jesus rather than Caesar as Lord was a costly political statement. It was a clear statement about which signs one was following and which community received one's ultimate allegiance.



God continues to set the stage and invite people into covenant relationships with God and the church. With love, grace, and faithfulness, God keeps covenant with us and provides the means for us to keep covenant with God and God's people.

Covenant is an expression of God's nature. Revealing himself to the church through Jesus Christ, historically and in Scripture, and enabling us through the Holy Spirit, are signs that God abides in a loving Trinitarian covenant relationship. Father-Son-Holy Spirit is the perfect covenant community.

God's personality expresses itself in covenantal ways throughout the Old Testament record by establishing covenants with the people, as illustrated by these examples: Noah (Gen. 8:21-22; 9:8-17), Abraham (Gen. 12:1-13; 15:4-20; 17:2-8), Sinai covenant through Moses (Exodus 19:3-6; 20:1-17), David (2 Sam. 7:11-16), and in Ezekiel's covenant renewal (Neh.10:28-31). In these God-initiated covenants, each party promised to live up to the commitments made in the covenant, but God was generally the only promise-keeping partner. While God's people often failed to do their part, God consistently showed himself to be faithful, loving and gracious. God's steadfast love endures forever.

Covenant Community in the New Testament

The term "covenant" is less frequent in the New Testament, but the concept of people living in covenant with each other and with God is central, represented by terms such as "the kingdom of God," "the body of Christ," and "the Church." In the Communion texts, where the term "covenant" does appear, Jesus initiates God's new covenant with his followers by reinterpreting the Passover cup, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood." The cup represents the new covenant in which we are living and, like the earlier ones, it is made and sealed with blood. (Exodus 24 records Moses sprinkling the blood of the sacrificed animal on the people during the covenant ceremony.)

However, this time the blood is not that of a sacrificed animal; instead Jesus insists that he will seal this new covenant with his own blood by remaining faithful unto death. God then reveals the saving power of this sacrifice by raising Jesus from the dead. By this "same power that raised Jesus from the dead, we may be saved from sin to follow Christ in this life and to know the fullness of salvation in the age to come," *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 8. That is to say, all who are saved by their faith in Jesus belong to this new covenant community, which is a foretaste of the eternal kingdom of God.

reigns. The laws are given in order that a relationship is built and a life-giving community is established. Israel's identity was that of a covenant people. Is ours?

Reflection Questions

1. Reread the definitions for "observe" and "faithful" to see which aspects of these definitions describe your faith community's practice. Is the focus on conforming balanced by celebrating in accepted ways and arriving at judgments together? Is the adherence to a standard, such as the Sermon on the Mount, combined with steadfast affection? Which aspects of these definitions could help you redefine faithfulness in ways that are life-giving for your community?
2. What issues in your congregational life could be settled in life-giving ways if you were guided by the spirit rather than the letter of God's law?
3. The Israelites needed sound judgment, a good memory of God's law, and steadfast affection for God to resist the temptations of compromising their faith as they lived among other peoples in the Promised Land. Our society also tempts us with the idols of sports, materialism, individualism, etc. Reflect on, and then share how our judgement, religious memory, and affection can help us become more faithful and observant communities in our current contexts.
4. Through the gift of God's Holy Spirit, the church is empowered by Emmanuel, God-with-us, to show others what it is like when God is in charge and lays the ground rules. How can your congregation become a clearer reflection of God-with-us to the people in your immediate context, and through your connections to our wider society?

Entering into Prayer

Open the time of prayer with the responsive reading arrangement of Deuteronomy 6:4-15 in HWB 808. Follow this by inviting participants to focus on the items in the visual display. As they focus on these items encourage them to reflect on:



taught God's people. Both challenged their communities to observe (i.e. practice) what they had been taught. Whereas Deuteronomy comprises Moses' final instructions to the Israelites, Jesus' instructions in Matthew's Gospel are summarized in the Sermon on the Mount. Then, the great commission serves as the final reminder for Jesus' followers to remember what they had been taught. However, these last words in the Gospel of Matthew reveal a significant difference between Moses and Jesus; Moses could not go with his people into the Promised Land, but Jesus says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20b).

At our Crossroads

Sometimes we question the purpose of laws, wondering if they make any sense. If we look closely at the book of Deuteronomy, as did the participants in Derek Suderman's Bible studies at the MC Canada & MC USA People's Summit (July, 2008), we have to wonder about the sense of some of the Deuteronomic laws. Even when we look at the way Jesus reinterpreted these laws, some of them still seem strange and senseless to us. However, in the context of the Israelites of Moses' time and of the Jews during Jesus' time, these seemingly strange laws helped build community and keep that community safe from harm.

The following example, given by Derek Suderman, helps us understand this point from current realities. In Colombia, where he spent his youth, it was illegal to ride a motorcycle with a helmet on for some time. It was also compulsory to drive a car with interior lights on in the evening. From our North American perspective, these laws made no sense; however, it made sense in the Colombian context where violence was the norm and drive-by-shootings were a regular event. The laws that sounded so strange to us protected the community because, if the person riding on the motorcycle or in a car was easily identifiable, the chance of harm to the community was reduced.

However, the challenges of reinterpreting and observing God's law for our contexts remain; how are we to be an observant and faithful community? Do we continue to follow the letter of laws that were developed for contexts that are radically different from ours? How do we interpret the laws and decrees that were given not only to the Israelites but to all the people of the world in such a way that they can help us today in our commitment to God and to each other? The commandments and decrees from the Old Testament interpreted for us through the teachings and life of Jesus still invite us to participate in the kingdom where God

While this new covenant community has many similarities to those of the old covenant, there is an important difference. The epistles to the Romans and Hebrews make it clear that while God's people were not able to live up to the standard set in the old covenant, in the new covenant, Jesus enables us to live by the power of the Holy Spirit. So we see that God not only created the covenant but also empowers us to keep the covenant agreement as we stay in communion with God and God's people. Christians live by grace, by the power of God in us.

This is worth celebrating! And celebrate it we do, each time we participate in a communion service. While the cup reminds us that Jesus has sealed the covenant, the bread we break and share at communion reminds us that we are participants in the body of Christ. "The body of Christ broken for you" is the phrase often repeated in our communion services, with which we remind each other that it is Jesus' sacrifice, not our own doing, which makes it possible for us to live an abundant life. Since the "body of Christ" also refers to the church, abundant life is therefore understood as being lived in Christian community. The early church's communion text, 1 Corinthians 11:17-32, provides a clear case that all people living in covenant with Christ are part of Christ's body, the church. Whether they are rich or poor, all who confess Jesus as their Lord and believe in Him are members of the one body of Christ.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, the new believers became an intentional community that was committed to Christ and to each other. Their choice to live in this community was not a program but rather the lifestyle they understood as being faithful to Jesus. It impacted all aspects of their lives. This could be a struggle, as was the case with the Christian community in Corinth. Their dysfunctional communion services were addressed in Paul's stinging words to his beloved brothers and sisters: "In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better, but for the worse" (1 Corinthians 11:17).

The Corinthian community, or house church, was not living up to its covenant promises. Wealthier members were reflecting only on their personal relationship with God and forgetting about the needs of the rest, so much so that some members were going hungry while others were drinking to excess. In the early church, communion included an



evening meal, and when the working poor arrived later, as in this case, food hadn't been saved for them. God's understanding of covenant was lacking in their community, so Paul challenged their spiritual practices and warned them of God's judgment. In Paul's understanding, not recognizing the community nature of the covenant is a sin committed against the blood and body of the Lord himself. Therefore, Paul encourages them to "wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation" (1 Corinthians 11:33b-34).

At Our Crossroads

Christians in the early Christian Church thought of themselves as a community bound together by the new covenant that had been sealed with Christ's blood, and the book of Acts includes several stories about how this affected their daily lives. They understood themselves to be accountable to each other and responsible to care for each other. Furthermore, many of the pastoral letters were written to instruct the new congregations in living out this covenant relationship. In his letter to the Romans, Paul uses "body" language to stress that church members only develop the full potential of their ministry in unity with the whole body. Letters to the Corinthians include repeated calls to recognize the radical new unity Christ offered and made possible: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into **one body**—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit". (1 Cor.12:13). First Peter 2:5 refers to the church as "living stones" that are "built into a **spiritual house**," an image that emphasizes the community's connectedness, in which each member both supports and is supported by every other member. This is what makes each stone precious and crates a "**holy nation**" (1 Peter 2:9).

The church has frequently drifted from this understanding of covenant community through the centuries; thereby diminishing its witness. However, each century also includes examples of the church listening to God, correcting its theology and practice to align itself with God, collaborating with the Holy Spirit, and thereby living up to its mission as a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Are we, the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada, listening to and participating with God to be the covenant communities with which God wants to bless the world?

Our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 12, illustrates a deep understanding of covenant community: "We believe that the Lord's supper is a sign by which the Church thankfully remembers the new covenant which Jesus established by his death. In this communion meal,

not to abolish, but to fulfil" the law (Mt.5:17). Jesus' followers, then, are to receive and pass on God's blessing by becoming "salt" and "light" for the world.

This parallels the pattern from Israel's history where God graciously saved his people from Egyptian slavery, gave them just and righteous laws to live by and blessed the world around them. Jesus reiterates God's blessing at the beginning of his sermon in Matthew 5 and then proceeds to explain the law with examples that are contextual to that day and time, much as Moses is recorded as doing in Deuteronomy. In both situations, the law is to be more than a set of rules to follow; it is to be internalized so it resides in the heart. Deuteronomy 6:3-6 says:

"Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you.... Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart."

Jesus' sermon conveys this same message. The spirit of God's law is to reside in the heart of each believer as a guide for everyday living in the kingdom of God.

The Mosaic laws had been given as a just foundation for building a strong community in which each member held the other accountable to observe and keep the law, to walk in the path of shalom. Though Jesus' life showed us that, when God's words are hidden in the heart, being faithful to the law can become second nature, this note was already sounded in Deuteronomy 30:14 which asserts that "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." This was true for Jesus' first disciples and remains true for us today, to whom Jesus might say that God's law is to be imprinted on our DNA.

When we compare the challenge of Deut. 4:5-6 (to faithfully observe God's laws and statutes in order to witness to God and God's ways) with the Great Commission in Mt. 28:18-20 (to make disciples and teach Jesus' commandments), we realize that God's people are continually challenged to faithfulness in the same ways. Moses was given authority, Jesus has authority; Moses taught the people of Israel, Jesus also



After forty years of wilderness wandering, a new set of challenging circumstances faced God's covenant people. To be a faithful and observant community, Israel needed to live within the guidelines of God's just and gracious laws and statutes. This included watching their own behaviour and attitudes carefully as they crossed over into the Promised Land so they wouldn't slip into those practices of the surrounding cultures that would compromise their faithfulness to God. The people of Israel would need sound judgment along with steadfast affection for and allegiance to their God, who had so graciously saved, led, and covenanted with them.

Reading the Text

Chapters 4-6 of Deuteronomy present Moses as a teacher who reminds and instructs the tribes of Israel about the decrees and laws they had received at Mount Sinai shortly after leaving Egypt. He challenges the people to "Hear!" and remember the covenant God has made with them at this new crossroads, reminding them also of God's revelation to them and of how God's gracious deliverance preceded receiving the gift of the law. Moses hopes that if they remember their past encounters with their faithful God of steadfast love, they will enter the new land knowing who and whose they are.

In chapters 5 and 6, Moses expounds the Law for the people, restating the Ten Commandments and focusing on each commandment in a new way. Was this reminder needed because the Israelites had been unfaithful, had stopped observing the laws? Or did the new realities and their years in the desert create the need to interpret the laws in a new way? Probably both were true. And just as the Israelites needed reminders of the covenant laws and decrees at the crossroads of entering the Promised Land, we need reminders of our covenants with God each time we face new situations.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), Jesus parallels Moses as teacher and legal re-interpreter. During Jesus' lifetime, the Pharisees functioned as keepers and interpreters of the law, but they had become quite legalistic in their interpretation and application as they led the Jewish people. Jesus, in contrast, encouraged the people to view these same laws from the perspective of God's kingdom on earth, showing them the fulfillment of the individual laws by living according to the underlying core law of God's steadfast love and righteousness. At the same time, he also invited each listener to participate in this kingdom and live according to its priorities, as outlined in the Beatitudes. Thus, even as he loosens the hold of some of the Jewish rules on their lives, Jesus tells them, "I have come

the members of the Church renew our covenant with God and with each other." We also celebrate covenant community in our practice of believers' baptism. "Believers are baptized into Christ and **his body** by the Spirit, water, and blood" (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 11). We say we believe that when God reaches out to us and we are able to believe, by God's grace, we enter into a covenant relationship with the Triune God and Christ's body, the church. By responding to God's call, and asking for believers' baptism, we enter a covenant relationship with the body of Christ. **The body** includes all believers, with different gifts and at different stages in their spiritual pilgrimages.

Communion and believers baptism are among the signs that our denomination has discerned and placed to help us live as faithful covenant communities. We are at the crossroads. Our society tends to overwhelm us with its values of personal rights, personal freedom, and living out one's individual passions and worldviews. When these values infiltrate our Christian practices and daily routines, they tempt us to neglect God's idea of covenant community. At the closing worship of Mennonite Church Canada's Assembly and the bi-national People's Summit in 2008, we were challenged by Tom Yoder Neufeld and Deuteronomy 4:1-9 to choose again, deliberately, to follow Jesus and live in covenant community. This includes loving each other and receiving each other the way Christ has received, loved, and welcomed us. Living out the covenant makes us trustworthy before the World. Let us always remember these words of Jesus, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).



Reflection Questions

1. The Old Testament has a long record of God-initiated covenants. How can the record of these covenants inform or even enrich the way we celebrate and renew covenants in our families, congregations, area churches, and beyond?
2. Jesus offers us his blood/life as the blood of the new covenant and enables us to live in this covenant through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. In a culture of animal sacrifice, this was easier to understand than it is in our context. If Jesus had celebrated that last supper with us in our context, what language might he use to invite us to the fullness of salvation through his life, death and resurrection?
3. The early Christians understood communal meals and financial sharing as important aspects of their covenant communities. Paul admonished the Corinthian community of believers for their unfair table fellowship. What do we understand as the most important aspects of our covenants with God and our congregations?
4. How can your congregation's communion practice help its members to be more faithful to their baptismal covenants and grow in faithfulness as a covenant community that blesses and engages the world with the reconciling Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Entering into Prayer

During this "Season of Prayer," with its focus on crossroads and different signs of Christian community, it is particularly important to spend time in prayer fellowship. As a group and as individuals, we encounter many crossroads where prayer helps us discern which "road signs" are of God and which are not. Prepare your hearts for prayer by remembering that God has called you together to receive and pass on the many blessings of being a divinely initiated covenant community. Focus your eyes on the symbolic road signs in the booklet or in your visual display and reflect on the crossroads you are currently facing. Offer them to God and ask for God's help in discerning the life-giving signs that will keep you headed in the direction of God's kingdom.

Session 4

God's Church as an Observant (Faithful) Community

By Ingrid Krueger

Scripture Texts: Deuteronomy 4-6, Matthew 5-7, Matthew 28:18-20

Music

Keep These Words (by Bryan Moyer Suderman)

HWB 525 *How bless'd are they*

HWB 543 *I long for your commandments*

HWB 545 *Be thou my vision*

STJ 100 *Here I am*

STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up (Benediction)*

STS 55 *Love the Lord your God*

STS 117 *How can I say*

Prayers

HWB 726

HWB 752

HWB 790

Introduction

What does it mean today to be an observing, faithful community in the context of Deuteronomy 4? The following excerpts from the Webster's Dictionary definitions may help us:

observe: to conform one's action or practice to (as a law, rite, or condition); comply with; to celebrate or solemnize (as a ceremony or festival) in a customary or accepted way; to watch carefully especially with attention to details or behaviour for the purpose of arriving at a judgment.

faithful: steadfast in affection or allegiance; loyal; firm in adherence to promises or in observance of duty; binding; true to the facts, to a standard, or to an original.



- That we can continually walk with God as we keep learning what it means to follow Jesus.
- God for the faith community in which you can join others in living the contrast of Jesus' way in the midst of the world.

Pray for:

- Your personal, congregational, and denominational struggle to resist society's ways.
- God's blessing, wisdom, strength, and grace to overcome areas of struggle and temptation.
- God to guide your journey, to keep opening your eyes to see the signs of God around us.
- The opportunities and the courage to be signs for others.
- Open and loving hearts for those on the outside looking in, that they will actually see as attractive the offer of a contrasting way of life in us.

Sending

Look at the light from the candle or lamp of the visual display and remember that the Holy Spirit sends and guides us. Rejoice in the help we receive as we are sent. Take some of the salt in your hand, taste it and reclaim, like the Chilean Baptist Union, your God-given identity as salt and light.

Praise & Thank God for:

- For the Cup, the blood of Christ, the new covenant
- For the Bread, the body of Christ, we are invited to participate in
- The revelation of God's truth in the Bible
- The Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God
- The model of covenant community presented and lived out by Christ
- Many models of covenant community in the church history. List those that are part of your context.
- The spirit of Christian unity that is growing among you
- The regional, individual and global Church with its gifts
- The MWC model of covenant community we see in the Global Sharing Fund. See www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/763

Confess:

- Following the model of the world instead of following the way of Christ
- Our congregation's lack of commitment to its members, to the regional and the national church
- Our lack of commitment to our marriage partners and other members of our families
- The times we deny the unity Christ has established between Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, males and females

Pray for:

- The needs in your congregation
- A renewed vision for covenant communities
- Willingness to commit to the ways of Christ
- The courage to model new ways of living out covenant communities

Closing Prayer: HWB 774 or STJ 159



Session 2

God's Church as a Discipling Community

By Ron Braun

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1-9; John 1:35-51

Suggested Songs:

STJ 94	<i>Blest are they</i>
HWB 20	<i>Come and see</i>
HWB 420	<i>Heart with loving heart united</i>
STJ 96	<i>I'm pressing on the upward way</i>
HWB 306	<i>In Christ there is no East or West</i>
STS 39	<i>Will you come and follow me</i>
HWB 307	<i>Will you let me be your servant</i>

Opening Prayer: HWB 672

Introduction

Ever since the dawn of creation, God has been initiating relationship between himself and humanity. But this relationship is much more than a private relationship. By creating man and woman, and speaking with them together at the close of each day, God established and enabled the family as the first and most basic form of human community. Thousands of years later, God chose, blessed, and led an unlikely family to create the nation of Israel in order to show the world what it meant for a community to follow God and God's ways with all its heart, soul, and strength. And when Jesus called his first disciples, they became another example of how a community can participate with God in building God's Kingdom. Thus, like the community that formed around Jesus, our congregations are to be discipling communities. We are to live out what it means to love God and God's ways with heart, mind, and soul in all the places God blesses and sends us.

Engaging the Texts

The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' challenging farewell instructions for this people of Israel as they are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. For forty years Moses had led, instructed, disciplined, performed miraculous signs, and interceded for them with their

Responding Prayerfully

STJ 128—Prayer of Confession

Now is the time to shift from the head to the heart, from focussing on ourselves and our world to focussing on God. To do this, it may be helpful for you to spend some time in silence, or to sing a song such as the familiar chorus, *Be still and know that I am God*.

Relax and remember God's presence. Reflect on the fact that, just as it was God's presence with Israel that made her into a great nation, so too the all powerful God dwelling in and among us can do far more than we can ask or imagine. Close your eyes and picture God's Spirit surrounding you as you breathe in the aroma from the candle or lamp of the visual display.

Praise:

- God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- God for the grace and truth of God's "statutes and ordinances."
- God for the power of Jesus' way of peace at work in our world.

Confess:

After a silence of several minutes, move into a time of confession. Be honest and open with God, baring your soul in God's presence. Even with the help of God's Spirit none of us is perfect like Jesus, and yet we strive to follow his way. You may find it helpful to begin with the prayer in STJ 128.

- Acknowledge your feelings and thoughts about being salt and light for the world.
- Confess ways in which you have struggled, fallen short and done less than you could have.

Thank:

- God for being with us.
- God for giving us signs and examples of how to become true contrast communities.



the other evangelical leaders that Christ's calling to peace was primary to her denomination. Instead of following the values of the host culture, the Chilean Baptist Union followed Christ's call to live for peace. This very visible, public action grew out of their belief that Jesus' call for his followers to be light and salt as people of peace applies to the present.

Similarly, it is our inner yearning to follow Jesus in all of life that makes our actions contrast those of our social context, whether we take a major public stance, like the Chilean Baptists, or through small, private actions for a neighbour. True change in our actions emerges from inner convictions and an ever deepening relationship with the Holy Spirit. When we align ourselves with God, the Holy Spirit calls and transforms us to live by God's values. We become members of contrast communities that witness to the glory of God living within us.

Reflection Questions

1. Living in contrast to our society produces varied emotional responses in us. Some find it frightening to think of others watching us and wonder if others are just waiting for us to mess up. Others find it exhilarating, a chance to step outside the box and follow Jesus in new and radical ways. What do you feel as you think about being a contrast to society? Excitement? Uneasiness? Fear? A mixture of all of the above?
2. Becoming a contrast community is not something we are to do alone; Jesus used the plural to say "you are the salt and light of the earth." How do you think Jesus wants us to feel about the calling he has given us to be different than the world?
3. Each time the church lives out Christ's call in a way that's different from what the world does is significant, because it shows God's wisdom and understanding to the nations. What are your stories? How has your faith community been a contrast to society and stood out distinctively in the past? What are you doing now?
4. What is God calling you to do as witnesses for the way of Jesus in your setting? Spend some time reflecting on this before sharing and testing what God is revealing to your group.
5. Our actions of witness arise from what is within us, who we are. Our power to live differently comes from living in Christ. How are you cooperating with God's Spirit at work in you as a community so that your faith will grow stronger? What is needed for the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) to grow within you?

LORD. Under his leadership, they had matured into a people who made a commitment to follow God. Eventually, Joshua was trained to take over Moses' leadership. Now, as the people of Israel prepare to go on without him, Moses challenges them to follow the ways of God in order to experience God's blessing. Moses specifically commands them to pass on this love for the Lord from one generation to the next (Deut.4:9b). They are to do this through their everyday experiences of life as they are sitting at home or walking along the road with their children (Deut. 6:7). Israel initially obeys this teaching and thus experiences the blessings Moses described, but in the ensuing years is also frequently disciplined by God's judgment because of poor choices.

The New Testament introduces the term disciple and models a **discipling community** for us. When Jesus called his disciples, he invited them to come and see who he was and to follow him. Jesus deliberately gathered a group of 12 to disciple (which means "to teach"). In three years with Jesus as their rabbi (or teacher), this small group observed, learned, and experienced much. Jesus used the same basic principles in discipling this community that Moses had taught the Israelites for passing on their faith and values from generation to generation—being present in everyday activities and using the teachable moments they offered. After Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, this community of disciples continued to grow under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who equipped them to lead the church. The church, which began as small groups or house churches, is described in 1 Peter as a spiritual nation, a peculiar people. Each of these house churches was a discipling community that followed Jesus' example of inviting others to "come and see." The unity these groups experienced through their recognition of the crucified and resurrected Christ transformed their lives. These communities learned to live together, as discipling communities of grace, joy, and peace. The way these early Christian communities shared their faith and life in Christ, witnessing to their love for God and each other, has changed the course of history (Matt. 28:19-20).

The New Testament includes two basic kinds of discipling relationships, one of which is **the rabbinic relationship** illustrated by Jesus and his disciples or by Paul and Timothy. That Paul calls Timothy his "loyal child in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2) shows the similarity of this relationship to that of parents and their children. The



other is **the mutual relationship** illustrated by Paul's references in his letters to his *fellow workers*, such as Aristarchus, Demas, Epaphroditus, Justus, Mark, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, and Silas. These working relationships, often mentioned in the greetings section of Paul's letters, reveal the many leaders who worked together with Paul in planting churches. New Testament church planting was never an individual effort, but was undertaken by pairs of individuals or by a group. Even the Apostle Paul worked alone only on a few occasions, for example, while travelling from one town to another, or as he wrote letters from prison. And even in prison, Paul relied on the assistance of others whenever possible.

We can see from the biblical record that God intends us to pass on his love for the world from the context of a **discipling community**. The church, then, is a community of disciples that exists for this mission. We need the accountability and encouragement of other church members to help us reach out faithfully as we instruct each other in the truths of God. Just as Jesus sent out his disciples two by two (Mark 6:7) to proclaim the gospel and heal the sick, we need the support of partnership to be effective in our work and witness. Church leaders who attempt to work alone risk losing sight of God's signs, and can break under the stress and succumb to depression, or even moral or spiritual failure. Just as discipling communities were the key to the growth of the early church, they remain essential to church growth in our present settings.

Jesus and his first disciples model a discipling community

John 1:35-51

When John the Baptist exclaims to his disciples that Jesus is the Lamb of God, their initial response is to follow tentatively behind Jesus to see where he goes. Jesus asks them what they are looking for and invites them to "come and see." And so their journey as disciples of Jesus begins. Jesus, who believes that they will eventually be able to disciple others, will be a patient teacher. Why do Andrew and John ask to see where Jesus is staying? No doubt it is because they want to spend time with Jesus and get to know him better. Jesus hospitably invites them to do so. Before long, they are telling Andrew's brother about this visit and introducing him to Jesus. The next day two others, Phillip and Nathanael, also from Andrew and Peter's home town of Bethsaida, become disciples. Phillip is called directly by Jesus, and tells Nathanael about Jesus. Nathanael is skeptical at first, but when he discovers how deeply Jesus knows him, he becomes convinced that Jesus is the Son of God.

The church, as salt and light for the world, has many important social functions. Like salt, the church is to prevent decay, purify and add a desperately needed flavour. Like light, the church is to dispel the darkness and illumine truth, beauty, and goodness. Jesus, the Lord of the church, calls us to these social tasks. When the church follows this mandate, it contrasts to the rest of society. The distinctives that set the church apart as a wise and understanding people, that give it the positive characteristics of salt and light, can be seen by others, but these distinctives come from what can't be seen—our relationship with the Spirit of God within us. In this way, our faith in God and our participation in God's kingdom motivate us to live lives of contrast, shining as signs of God for the watching world.

At our Crossroads

How we focus on God's kingdom, rather than on what our culture deems as desirable, varies for each situation. One impressive example was shared by Raquel Contreras, President of the Baptist Union of Chile, at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in 2008. As part of the discernment session on peacemaking, Contreras spoke to the delegates about her denomination's decision to reclaim their Anabaptist roots as part of their identity. She shared how their congregations were moving toward a contrasting lifestyle that shows peace as a different way of living to the people around them.

Not only are the Chilean congregations changing, their leadership is also taking a public stand as a light for peace in their country. Recently, Contreras took a step of faith in that direction when she turned down an invitation from the Chilean government. The leaders of evangelical denominations, of which Contreras' Baptist denomination is the largest, had been invited by the federal government to a big celebration to bless a new warship. While all the other church leaders attended, Contreras declined, standing by the Anabaptist roots and peace theology her denomination has recently decided to reclaim. This move was completely unexpected. No one thought that she would turn this invitation down, nor would she have considered doing so a few years ago. Because her decision was so different from what society expected, it was very noticeable. Contreras' absence at the ceremony of blessing sent a message to the government and



offered by the LORD. It was the inner reality of “the presence of God and the justice of God’s Torah,” (*NIBC: Deuteronomy* page 48), that truly made Israel distinctive in its wisdom and discernment.

The gracious, righteous relationship offered to God’s people in the Old Testament is still being offered to God’s people, the church, today. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, as described in Matthew 5-7, describes what life in a faith community looks like when lived according to the rule of God. People who participate in the kingdom of God can be identified by the grace-filled, righteous actions that arise from their transformed hearts.

Living the distinctive life to which Christ calls us produces a marked contrast between Christians and the rest of society. Jesus did not say to his disciples, “you should be...,” or “it would be great if you were...” Jesus told them “You *are* the salt of the earth” and “You *are* the light of the world.” (Matt. 5:13-16) This is not hypothetical, nor is it a question, but a statement of fact. It is also worth noting that the “you” in these statements is plural; they are to work together as a community to be salt and light for the earth, (*Interpretation: Matthew* page 44).

What does it mean to be salt and light? Salt is a common, inconspicuous substance that has a powerful impact when mixed into other common substances. Salt purifies, preserves, and adds flavour. Only a small amount is needed to affect a large amount of food. In the Ancient Near East’s warm climate, with its limited food preservation possibilities, salt was very valuable and expensive. It is therefore a great honour for Jesus to call his disciples salt (*The Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew and Mark* page 288). Even though Jesus’ disciples were a small community, they were to purify, preserve, and flavour a much larger group using characteristics of the kingdom of God.

We rely on light to see what we are doing and where we are going. Very little is possible without light. Jesus calls his disciples to be light, as well as salt, in this passage. Though Jesus is the true light (John 8:12), he also calls his disciples to be light. Jesus’ contrast communities of disciples are like windows through which the world can see the light of Jesus. When this light illumines the community of faith, it grows into a wise and discerning contrast community, because it can see where it is going. Jesus’ power residing in the first disciples, and now in his people the church, shines through to the world whenever the church genuinely proclaims and follows Christ as Lord (*Interpretation: Matthew* page 45).

This short description of how Jesus gained his first disciples reveals some basic principles that apply to our discipling communities as well.

1. A trusted leader publicly shifts the attention and allegiance toward Jesus. “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” (John 1:36b). John the Baptist does not succumb to the temptations of popularity, but remembers the nature of his mission and points beyond himself to Jesus. For discipling communities to be signs of and point toward God’s kingdom, it is paramount for leaders to remember this lesson from John the Baptist.

2. Jesus extends hospitality. He invites Andrew and John to come and see where he is staying. Hospitality still provides opportunities for people to meet and confess Christ in discipling communities. As people share their homes they share themselves, thus letting Christ shine through. This gift of hospitality breaks down barriers and provides opportunities for the growth of understanding, love, and acceptance. Hospitality also provides the setting for a grace-filled verbal witness of who Jesus is and what he means to us.

3. Disciples and Jesus get to know each other. Because the disciples of John want to get to know Jesus, they spend a good block of time with him. “They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock” (v. 39). Jesus spends time with them and engages their questions. He recognizes and affirms them for who they really are, as in these exchanges with his followers: “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (v.42), and “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (v.47). It takes time for a faith community to disciple people as followers of Jesus, but it is essential to spend as much time as necessary to really get to know and be known by Jesus and Jesus’ followers. Then, as Christ’s body on earth, the church can also discern and name the gifts of those who “come and see” what the church is about.

4. Jesus’ new disciples introduce their friends to him naturally, with simple statements of faith and invitations to come and see. Andrew responds to his visit with Jesus by seeking out his brother Simon and sharing his new conviction: “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew doesn’t argue; he just encourages his brother to come and see for himself. This may be a ministry gift of Andrew’s, for it is Andrew



who later brings the boy with the loaves and the fishes to Jesus (John 6:8), and it is Andrew, along with Phillip, who bring some Greeks to dialogue with Jesus (John 12:20-22).

Phillip's approach with Nathanael is similar. He shares his conviction: "we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (v.45) and, when Nathanael's response is skeptical, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Phillip responds with "Come and see!" (v.46). Nathanael's statement reflects the scriptural indicators that the Messiah would come from Judah, not Galilee, and certainly not Nazareth, but his encounter with Jesus convinces him to change his mind.

A discipling community does not need to argue when introducing people to Christ. It does need to confess and claim the one "we have found," and it does need to invite and provide opportunities for interested people to come and see Jesus.

At Our Crossroads

Many Canadian Mennonites have become followers of Christ by observing Christ in our parents and other believers in our community. We are followers because we have had the opportunity to "come and see" for ourselves. Arguing about our convictions can easily turn people away, whereas lived faith which includes the invitation to come and see with no strings attached is more likely to open people to an encounter with Christ. It is challenging, and a little frightening, to realize that Christ-centered lives and communities are what others will still want to "come and see." Do our individual and congregational lives show others the reality of Christ?

On our own, we are weak, and sometimes we are tempted to believe that our sin is so glaring we have nothing to show for what we believe. But as we continue to "come and see" Jesus in prayer, Bible study and Christian fellowship, as we experience and share His hospitality with others, as we take time to get to know others beyond a superficial level, our lives will attract those around us to want to come and see Jesus. Christ will shine through our words and deeds if we remember to do as John the Baptist and point beyond ourselves to Christ. Our lives can be faith-filled, hospitable invitations to come and see, even as we remain imperfect followers who rely on the forgiveness of our gracious Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. God knows our weakness, willingly works through us and welcomes our willingness to speak words and live lives

These inner changes are signs of God's presence. They are a witness, or sign, to the rest of the world of what it means to live in Christ. By shaping our thoughts and actions, these inner changes make it possible for us to live in accordance with the values and habits of God's kingdom. Our congregations thus become identifiable as contrasting communities of hope. Trusting that God is in control and that God's kingdom is being inaugurated here and now among us helps us to offer life-giving alternatives to the despair and cynicism of our host cultures. While we do not lose sight of the misery and anguish in the world, the church is to face these realities together with hope because of our belief that God's kingdom, already begun, will come to completion upon Christ's return. Our faith communities can stand in marked contrast to the rest of society because of the signs that God's presence produces in us. This makes us into signs of God to all the nations of the world.

Living in contrast to our host cultures does not mean totally turning our backs on it. Culture is an integral part of who we are. We can't escape it. However, we can discern what aspects of the culture can serve God's purposes, and what aspects distract us from those purposes. As every culture is a blend of good and bad, we need to be a wise and discerning people, encouraging each other to consciously follow God's way even when that means going against social convention.

Reading the Text

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 focuses on the reason Israel has been given the law. It is clear from the text that obedience to the law was not only for Israel's benefit. Not only would obedience secure Israel's possession of the land and help them prosper in it; it would also reveal their wisdom and understanding to the surrounding nations. Israel was geographically surrounded by great nations and the important trade routes of the Ancient Near East. This meant that whatever Israel did, whether faithful to God or not, would be noticed by the surrounding nations. If Israel kept God's laws faithfully, these neighbours would consider Israel to be wise and understanding: a great nation. They wouldn't necessarily know why Israel was so wise and understanding, but Israel should know and remember the reason; their God was near to them and gave them just laws to live by. No other nation could compare to the gracious and righteous relationship Israel was



Session 3

God's Church as a Contrast Community

By Kristina Toews

Scripture texts: Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Matthew 5:13-16, John 8:12, Galatians 5:22-23

Suggested Songs:

Be still and know that I am God (Composer unknown)

STJ 75 *Be still*

STS 41 *Blessed are they*

HWB 20 *Come and see*

STJ 33 *Come, Holy Spirit, descend*

HWB 289 *Filled with the Spirit's power*

HWB 486 *God of our life*

HWB 420 *Heart with loving heart united*

STJ 61 *How can we be silent*

STJ 54 *Longing for light*

Opening Prayer: STJ 120

Introduction to the Topic

It is easy to become disillusioned with society because so many horrendous things happen in our world that hope for positive change often appears naïve or impossible. As Christians, this places us at a crossroads. Looking in the direction of the world, we see never-ending despair and hopelessness, but looking in the direction of Christ reveals a way of hope. Thankfully, we have the option of following Christ's alternative plan for the world.

When we learn to see with God's eyes, we become aware of many signs that invite us to move forward in hope. For those who choose to follow Jesus, God is not just all around, but also within. The gift of the Holy Spirit equips the followers of Jesus on earth, identifying us as God's people. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruits of the Spirit (love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) which are sure signs that the Holy Spirit is in us and is leaving its mark on our lives. While this spiritual fruit reveals itself in our actions, the actions are the result of inner changes that occur when we yield to the leading of the Spirit.

that say, "Come and see." A healthy discipling community overcomes its insecurities and trusts God to work in and shine through its fallible members.

The challenge and opportunity to be such a **discipling** community places us at a major crossroads, offering choices that have consequences for our individual and congregational lives. Are we willing to follow this sign from God and see where it will lead us? What will happen to us if we are not willing to follow? Will we idle and stall at the crossroads, or follow other signs that divert from our destination?

Reflection Questions

1. If you had to leave farewell instructions for your family or congregation because, like Moses, you knew you could not journey with them, what instructions would you leave for them? Reflect quietly on this for some time, before writing down your thoughts or sharing them in a small group.
2. This session mentions rabbinic and mutual partnership models that were part of the New Testament's discipling communities. Create a T chart, with Rabbinic and Mutual relationship written above each arm of the T. Brainstorm, or search the scriptures for the characteristics of each leadership style. Think of examples of each of these styles in your community and what makes each style better for certain settings.
3. Four basic principles for forming a community of disciples are described on page 23. How do you see these principles at work in your congregational and family lives? Which principles could help you overcome a current problem within each or either of these settings?
4. Our church has sometimes sent out individuals to plant churches or begin some other form of Christian ministry. How could a group approach have strengthened and blessed these efforts? Are there situations where it is good to send individuals on missionary assignments?
5. What implications do the examples of Jesus and Paul gathering and working with small groups or pairs of disciples have for determining outreach and church planting policies within our congregations or our wider church?



Entering into Prayer

None of us can hope to be a **discipling community** without time spent in prayer as a community. Time spent in prayer fellowship heightens our awareness of the presence of God among us and opens us up to participating in God's intentions for our community. Community prayer is one of God's strategies for discipling us, and for discipling others through us. Focus your eyes on the symbols of discipleship in the booklet or in your visual display and reflect on the crossroads you are currently facing as a discipling community. Offer them to God and ask for God's help in discerning the life-giving signs that will keep you headed in the direction of God's kingdom.

The prayers in HWB 726, 728, 736 and STJ 143 are helpful for beginning and ending this time of prayer.

Praise and Thank God for:

- The gift of relationship with our triune God
- God's community strategy for growing the kingdom of God
- Biblical examples of discipling communities
- The encouragement and guidance that your congregation provides
- The presence of the kingdom of God among you that others can "come and see"

Confess:

- The times we have succumbed to the individualism of our society and tried to be solo Christians
- The times we have been too concerned about getting recognition instead of helping others recognize Christ
- Our lack of hospitality to people who would like to come and see the kingdom of God among and within our congregation
- Our blindness to and lack of faith in God's transforming power in our communities

Pray for:

- A greater awareness of and willingness to partner with what God is doing in your community
- The teachers and mentors in your congregation, that they might follow Jesus' example of leadership
- A renewed vision of and strategy for your discipling community
- Willingness to follow the ways of Christ together
- The courage to model new ways of living as discipling communities.

