

Faith Journey Reflections – Part 1 of 3
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Inshallah [in-shå-Allah], God Willing

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The question put to me was: how has your faith journey been affected by your experience in leading our national church task force on future directions?

It's a good question; and, on reflection, I might summarize it as: learning once again the truthfulness of the word 'In-shå-Allah' – God Willing. That's the short answer. Let me elaborate.

'God willing!' It's an expression that's fallen out of use amongst us. It once was quite common – in my youth, and before – a time when futures were less predictable – when most Canadians were farmers or fisher folk depending almost solely on nature for their welfare; when ordinary people were caught up in the uncertainties of life, whether in trying to get a job during the great depression, or caught up in armed conflicts, or when death stalked most families. People would say: "I hope for good health, a good job, God willing, and then maybe we can have a good life."

Life has become vastly more predictable for most of us. When I was born, the average male in Canada could expect to live 'til about age 61 or 62 – women a few years more. Today, on average we live to 81 or more – lifespan has increased by one-third in my lifetime. All of us, including farmers and fisherfolk, aren't nearly as dependent on the vagaries of nature or other kinds of surprise to one's life and wellbeing. We're amongst the wealthiest in the world, the beneficiaries of more education, better health care, technological advancement and, perhaps most important, a stable country to live in.

And, as we've prospered, the idea that we've been blessed, or even that God might have some influence in what happens to and around us, has diminished – not only diminished, but relegated to the dim recesses of our minds – even forgotten by many and ridiculed by some.

But, that's not the case in much of the world. In the years I worked in arabaic speaking countries, 'In-shå-Allah' – God Willing – was an expression one heard all the time. Muslims, Christians, Jews – all said it. One might say: "we'll go to Jerusalem this afternoon, inshallah." You never knew what could happen at the border. Or, to someone with a serious head injury we'd say: "we'll seek treatment in Tel Aviv, inshallah." Or, even: "we'll meet in the market tomorrow, inshallah." 'God Willing' was appropriate for almost any statement – added as a tag line – acknowledging that human good will and effort and ability only goes so far.

It's small surprise then that, compared to countries in the global South, the church in Canada has lost its status as touchstone for many people. We as a Mennonite church have fared reasonably well compared to mainline churches, but we too have been affected.

Four years ago, I was invited to lead a Future Directions Task Force to think through the question of what it means to be church in this post-modern, post-colonial, post-Christendom, post-most everything time; and, what God is calling us to as a Mennonite/Anabaptist people in Canada. Doing something like this wasn't entirely foreign – during the arc of my career I've had the good fortune of being in leading roles for a number of large-scale system change campaigns – some local, some national and international. When I say 'good fortune, I acknowledge my career path was hardly planned – unanticipated doors opened, and I was invited to walk in. My Southern Baptist friends speak of this as "God's leading". For me such language is a bit presumptuous, but I've always felt God as present. And to now do something like this for our church – that was a privilege.

In our early work we came to the conclusion that our core beliefs as a Mennonite church were solid –

Jesus is the centre of our faith

Community is the centre of our lives, and

Reconciliation is the centre of our work.

We also concluded our common vision for healing and hope was appropriate for our times – not just appropriate, but essential:

*God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace
so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world*

The challenge for us was how to live into our vision more intentionally. Our programs and the way we were structured were appropriate for an earlier time; BUT in our post-Christendom context they'd lost connectedness with the task of bringing our vision into a hurting world.

The thing about change is that the very idea is unnerving – it means uncertainty. Particularly unnerving is that one has to confess the future is unclear. 'Better the devil we know' it's often said.

So, it wasn't a surprise that anxious voices arose when the Task Force advanced ideas for change. Indeed, we were looking for them – hoping for them. Raised concerns means people are paying attention – that they have a stake in what's being talked about. Some voices were louder than others – you will know of them if you've read the *Canadian Mennonite*. There were others less noticeable. All were welcome.

It takes courage to contemplate change – and even more courage to step beyond what we know when we've invested so much in what we've got. The fear is that change might call into question things we've held dear.

To address such fears we drew on faith that this is God's church we're concerning ourselves with, not ours alone – and on faith that prior experience with systems in change can smooth the process. A good leader of change has ability something like Wayne Gretzky's to go where the puck is going to be, not where it is. It's hard to explain, but one can feel the pulse of systems – the collective will of people – the early reluctance to get involved, then interest, the resistances, the resolution of fears; and, good systems change leaders know how and when to advance new positions. I'd like to think we did that.

In the process I became more deeply aware of how, through the Biblical account, in God time, God has been open to renewing His covenant with us wayward humans time and again. This was another time to renew our covenant. With that as a given, not only I, but the whole Task Force, embraced the anxious concerns raised, grounded by a conviction that where we're seeking to go is where God already is – and the outcome is in God's hands – **in-shā-Allah – God Willing.**

So, was my faith deepened? I'd say profoundly – in the God we long for, in the Christ who modelled responses to our every longing, in the patient and waiting Spirit that can move us beyond our fears, in our community of faith that, in its fumbling ways, it can discern God's will for our time – **in-shā-Allah – God Willing.**