

Dying churches and new start-ups: Mennonites in the new Reformation

Sermon at Toronto United Mennonite Church

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Churches are dying in Canada. Is Christianity dying too? Some people think so, and for proof they point to declining attendance at worship services and an increase in the number of people in Canada who declare themselves to have no religious affiliation. We can wring our hands about it but it is true. You have probably seen it in your own neighbourhood. You know of church buildings that sit largely empty on Sundays or have closed altogether.

Not every church is dying, of course. Look at us! Here we are at TUMC. We have an engaged and energetic congregation. It has never crossed our minds that our church might be in danger of dying or that we need to close.

I submit that we are in something of a bubble here at TUMC and cannot really understand the struggle that some of our sister churches are going through. Not only are we removed from the struggle, we are missing the signs that God is breathing new life into the church.

Last weekend, several of us from TUMC attended the national, Mennonite Church Canada Gathering, which took place in Abbotsford, British Columbia from June 28 to July 1. In addition to Harold and myself, Michele Rizoli was there. J.D. Penner attended. Pieter Niemeyer was there. Gary & Lydia Harder attended for one of the days. Anyone can attend. Many people have specific church-related responsibilities which bring them there, but it is a good time for everyone. I strongly recommend it.

I, personally, enjoy conferences because it is inspiring to meet people from other churches. Yes, usually there are good keynote speakers; and usually there are interesting workshops that give useful ideas a person might bring home to their own congregation. Usually, the worship sessions that take place each day are inspiring, and the music is usually excellent. After all, when you bring hundreds of Mennonites together, the singing should be excellent. But what I enjoy most is

getting to know other Mennonites. It energizes me to know that I am part of something bigger than my home congregation.

At this particular conference, the keynote speaker was Dr. Elaine Heath, an American Methodist and former Dean of Duke Divinity School. Heath is passionate about emerging forms of Christianity. She pointed out that the institutional form of worship that we know and practice today is a relatively young tradition. Institutions have been built up around this tradition of corporate worship but maintaining them while the world changes around us becomes a distraction from the true mission of the church – that is, God’s mission. Energy goes into focusing on how to maintain church institutions, when what we should be doing is following Jesus, who wasn’t, of course, in a church. Jesus challenged the traditional institution of his time. Jesus withdrew for periods to pray, but spent the rest of his time working among marginalized people and spreading the Gospel of love.

Heath observed the church today is going through a new Reformation. “God is calling us back to the cellular level,” she said, “away from big institutions. [What is emerging] is a theology of the neighbourhood.”

A theology of the neighbourhood? A couple of years ago, I would not have known what she was talking about. At TUMC, we occasionally talk about our geographic neighbourhood, and once in a while we do a few things to be neighbourly. Is this an expression of our theology?

But I *do* know what she is talking about now. In my work as Publisher of *Canadian Mennonite* magazine, I have the opportunity to travel across Canada. I get to worship in other churches. I get to talk to people about what is going on in their congregations. These trips have enriched my understanding about what our Mennonite church – broadly speaking – is up to.

This summer, our preaching theme at TUMC is called “On the way: views from our faith journey”. I thought I might use this sermon to talk about what I observe in the faith journey of our collective Mennonite Church in Canada. One thing I have observed is that there is, indeed, an emerging theology of the neighbourhood. It comes out of a desire to follow Jesus

commandment to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and love our neighbours as ourselves. It also comes out of one of Mennonites' core strengths, and that is that we are generally good at creating communities that support one another.

But let's go back to the idea that churches are dying, and look at the situation for rural churches. For a generation, rural populations have been in sharp decline as people move to urban areas for work. The whole agricultural industry has changed, so that there are fewer family farms. As well, families have fewer children than they used to. None of this is news to you but imagine how that feels on the ground if your church is situated in rural Saskatchewan. There are fewer people in church and it is not because the church did anything wrong. The congregation is a casualty of economic and demographic change.

In Saskatchewan, there are 27 Mennonite churches, two-thirds of which are rural with fewer than 50 people on a Sunday morning. All are wondering how long they will survive. The Mennonite Church in Eyebrow, Saskatchewan has 23 people when everyone is there. The Mennonite Church in Wymark, Saskatchewan closed last year.

Churches outside Saskatchewan can relate. A recent story in *Canadian Mennonite* talked about Rainham Mennonite Church down on Lake Erie. Rainham Mennonite Church is the 2nd oldest Mennonite Church in Canada, having opened with the immigration of Swiss Mennonites from Pennsylvania in the 1790s. They have been a church worshipping together, singing together and being a community together for more than 200 years. Nearby, other Mennonite churches were also established by the same immigrant stream. Over time, the other churches shrank and closed.

When churches close, the remaining families might move to the next nearest Mennonite church, and that shores up their numbers for a while. Sometimes churches hold joint services with churches of other denominations, and that can be a blessing for the congregations. Rainham Mennonite Church had joint services with a Brethren in Christ Church for a while, but that church has now closed. Because of its current size, Rainham Mennonite hasn't had a full-time minister since 2014.

Bergthal Mennonite Church in Didsbury, Alberta is another example. I was there this past March. They have a property the size of a football field, and a worship space just a bit smaller than ours.

On a Sunday morning, they have about 40 worshipers these days. It used to be 150. They have been questioning their future for the past decade. Calgary is not so far away, and there are Mennonite churches there. Other nearby churches (United, Anglican, Catholic, etc.) are also in decline and are closing. It must be dis-spiriting to witness the continued attrition. I imagine people can't help wishing to bring back better times.

In the words from Isaiah 43 that we heard this morning, in verses 18 and 19 God's message to Israel was, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

This message from God wasn't delivered to a church in decline. It was delivered to the people of Israel, who kept moaning about their disobedience to God which had led to their exile in Babylon. The prophet tells the Israelites to stop dwelling on their past and instead look up to the new opportunities that God is offering them.

This passage was used at the Mennonite Church Canada gathering last week, and it was not used to tell Mennonite churches that we are spending too much time dwelling on the past. Instead, the point of using this passage now with the Mennonite Church is to encourage us all to face the unknown future with confidence, knowing that God promises to provide a way forward and also provides us with miraculous sustenance for the journey.

Verse 20 says "I give water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people." (NIV) Providing water in the desert is miraculous sustenance.

In facing decline, the people of Bergthal Mennonite Church looked in the mirror and saw that the people who attend their church are largely all related, having settled in Alberta from the same

immigration stream of Russian Mennonites in the 1870s. Like Rainham Mennonite Church on Lake Erie, the people who attend are descendants of the founders.

The Bergthal people realized that one of their strengths is their strong sense of community – they support and take care of one another. But this very strength was also a barrier for others around Didsbury. Not that they weren't friendly with their neighbours in town. It was just that everyone knew that Bergthal was the Mennonite church, so if you weren't already Mennonite, you wouldn't go there.

Bergthal Mennonite Church launched a season of prayer and discernment to help them imagine what God might be calling them to do as a church at this point in time. The process led them to two questions, both of which have been transformational.

They asked: how can we be a blessing to Mennonite Church Alberta and how can we be a blessing to the community?

Subsequently, they initiated what has become an annual tradition of joint worship services and potlucks with a fledgling Chin Mennonite congregation in Calgary. Bergthal pastor Anna Lisa Salo told the gathered in Abbotsford last weekend that each year, the congregations look forward to this event more and more. She said, “As faces become familiar and new friendships are formed, we are finding unity of the Spirit. We are building relationships as a part of Mennonite Church Alberta and finding new ways to bring glory to God right where we are planted.”

To address the question of how to be a blessing to the community, Bergthal's practical response was to share their large church yard. They built a playground and a picnic shelter. They have made their yard into a park for the people of Didsbury. There's no explicit effort to bring people into church on Sunday morning. Their purpose is to share what they have. The result is that it does bring people onto the yard who wouldn't otherwise come there, and it demonstrates an explicit openness to the community that didn't exist before. Now, the Mennonite church is not just for Mennonites. Moreover, the pastor reports that seeing their yard used brings joy to the congregation.

I asked that we hear about Jesus feeding of the multitude this morning and we used the version as presented in the book of John. The people gathered there came to be healed or came because they were curious about the phenomenon of Jesus. Being human, they also had physical needs. Someone shared what he had and God multiplied it to be food that was more than enough for all. The disciples couldn't see how they would be able to serve all those people, and were skeptical that Jesus expected them to. But God provided a way. I often think of this passage when Christians question where the church is headed while society changes around us; when we wonder how we will cope or what to do next. Like providing water in the desert, God provides food for the journey and God will light the way.

Time does not allow me to give as many examples as I would like about the new life springing up in Mennonite churches across Canada. Life that is coming precisely because of the decline that prompted new ideas. Some are experimenting with alternative worship services in forests and parks; at least one church changed up its worship schedule so that they meet twice a month in their church building, once a month in small groups in people's houses, and once a month they have an event on a Saturday or Sunday in the community where there is no worship service at all. There are several other examples but since the feeding of the multitude includes sharing food with everyone around, let me give this one last example.

Peace Mennonite Church in Richmond, B.C. hosts a community meal twice a month in their gym. This isn't a food bank or a meal for needy people. This is a meal for anyone who wants to come. It is regularly attended by 120 – 150 people from the neighbourhood. Friendships have been formed. New immigrants get to know Canadians who have been here a while. People donate money and volunteer for food preparation and clean up. The church's act of hospitality has grown into a significant blessing to the larger community.

I do not suggest that TUMC start having community dinners or that what *we* need is to be more directly involved in this physical neighbourhood. Our visioning processes at TUMC have not been prompted by a decline in attendance and our visioning processes have led us in other exciting directions. What I am saying, is that it is amazing to see what is coming up out of the so-

called decline. If there is any lesson to learn, it's just this: keep your eyes open for the opportunities that God presents to us.