

Developing Strategic Partnerships

Exodus 4:10-17, John 17:6-19 by Patty Friesen (May 12/24)

In today's dramatic scripture reading, God tries to develop a strategic partnership with Moses, calling, nurturing and encouraging him for two whole chapters in Exodus 3 and 4. The God of the Hebrews has heard their cry in slavery and wants to partner with Moses to speak to Pharaoh. But Moses resists the partnership, denying God's strategy, "Who am I to speak to Pharaoh and then what if no one believes you are the One who sent me?" Finally Moses gets down to the real issue - his speech impediment, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." God finally loses it saying, "Who gives speech to mortals? Now go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

We are so used to assuming that God can do anything that it's easy to miss the constraints that govern God's own life. God cannot speak to Pharaoh. God cannot marshal the Israelites or lead them out of Egypt. For all of this, God needs a human mouth. And when Moses turns God down saying "O my Lord please send someone else," God's anger is kindled and God says, "What of your brother Aaron? You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth. He indeed shall speak to the people for you and shall serve as a mouth for you and you will serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff with which you shall perform the signs that show my presence with you."

God is frustrated because God's desires for action and justice are stymied. Yet God adapts and changes plan. In a quintessential pivot, God rewords the plan to take into account Moses's skills and capacities, strategically partnering him with Aaron so that Moses can get the job done. God offers Moses certain signs in an extraordinary offer of access. God gives Moses

an alternative mode of communication, one that does not depend on words. God gives Moses assistive technology in the staff that provides access. The staff is Moses' companion for the journey that will provide access into Pharaoh's courts and indeed into freedom out of Egypt. Indeed, Moses' staff is a strategic partnership in its own right. (Watts Belser, p. 80).

God has to develop, nurture and encourage Moses as a strategic or intention partner to get a particular need met, namely delivery from slavery. In our reading from Acts, the early church selects another apostle to join the work of the other 11. Strategic partnerships in the Bible show us that we can't get a job done alone but need a partner who has different gifts but same values so we can get the job done. Can we name other important partnerships in the Bible? Shout them out...If someone can make a list of as many partnerships as they can - we'll print them in the June church newsletter and they'll get a prize. (Adam/Eve, Ruth/Naomi, Jonah/whale, Esther/Mordecai, Elizabeth/Mary, Paul/Barnabus)

I've been banging on about an article on Developing Strategic Partnerships by Glenn Guyton, from Mennonite Church USA. Guyton asks churches: What are the most urgent needs in your community? Is your church equipped to go out into the community or are you positioned with your building so people have easy access to come to you for ministry? Partnerships can happen in several ways:

TL Slide - 1. We can go offsite and provide volunteers to the community like Terri Lynn working here at Good Food Box in Saskatoon. Many of us as individuals serve on church committees, community boards, work for the Red Cross, coach volleyball, work for Girl Guides and volunteer at the MCC Thrift Store. This summer we have 11 of us cooking together at camp. In the past we used to work together at the verenike booth at the MCC Relief Sale, or at Friendship Inn, Mennonite Disaster Service and Osler Community Garden but working off-site

as a group seems to be more difficult to coordinate with busy families. And for some of us our knees can't take off-site volunteerism anymore.

Slide -Option #2 in church partnerships to meet the needs of our community, we give money to projects and blankets to MCC. Fund needs has been our important church go-to. We regularly fund MCC, MDS, Friendship Inn, students at camp and Rosthern Junior College and local food needs. Money and blankets are the easiest way for us to serve our community with the least impact on our bodies and building.

Option #3. We can open our space to established community programs. Glenn Guyton says our church buildings are our greatest resource to meet community needs. This option views our building with the gym, kitchen and classrooms as our greatest asset. Outside Sunday morning, our building currently is used once a week for pickle ball and the occasional youth event and occasional board meeting. Opening church buildings to established community programs is easier for urban churches that have more city traffic like yoga groups, AA groups, bereavement groups, children's choirs, etc. It's challenging to find renters in rural areas.

Slide - (North Star church basement). It's a fact that many Mennonite churches have fewer people involved in church life than they did 20 years ago. Many churches across Canada were constructed or remodeled when attendance was higher; when the church was busy with events and programming every night of the week. In the current reality of quieter schedules and emptier buildings, some Mennonite churches have begun sharing their spaces with other congregations.

Three Mennonite Church Saskatchewan congregations—Mount Royal, Wildwood in Saskatoon and North Star in Drake—have similar stories of how they began sharing their buildings. In each case, a leader from another congregation appeared at the church and inquired

about renting the space on Sunday afternoons for worship services. In all three cases, the interested congregations were very different from their Mennonite hosts in terms of ethnicity, theology and worship style. And in all three cases, the host churches decided to give it a try.

“We said yes, really, because we didn't have a good reason to say no,” said Joe Heikman, pastor of Wildwood Mennonite in Saskatoon. “When I was pastor in British Columbia, I worked in a multi-use congregational building, with lots of positive relationships, and good shared experiences, and I liked the idea of something similar growing here.” Even though the renting congregations were technically “just renters” in the three cases, there was a desire on all sides to build connection and relationships, for the arrangement to be about more than just a line in the budget or a slot on the weekly schedule. This desire became both a source of joy and a point of friction.

All three churches experimented with an occasional joint worship service or a shared meal, with varying degrees of success. North Star Mennonite Church in Drake has built a mutual relationship with their renters, Prairie Light Christian Fellowship, a Filipino Pentecostal church plant. “We've both tried . . . to be in community with each other and navigate those cultural differences,” said Lisa Martens Bartel, pastor of North Star. “The Filipino population here is large enough that they could just stick to themselves, but they've really tried to be together with us and vice-versa.” The two congregations hold quarterly joint worship services and summer potluck picnics.

Another sharing space slide - Mount Royal Mennonite Church in Saskatoon has changed their Sunday worship service time so that the two congregations would be coming and going at the same time, according to Len Andres, the church's administrator. “We're not in this to make money. We're both in the same business. We're in the same family,” he said. In most cases, the

tensions that arose from sharing a space were things one might expect: doors left unlocked, supplies not properly put away or messes left behind. Expectations had to be reiterated and rental agreements renegotiated. “We’ve decided to just say, ‘it happens, ‘everyone is trying their best,’” said Andres. Martens Bartel echoed that sentiment: “It’s been good for us to be forced to bend a bit, and as the host church, I think you have to be gentle in how you approach building community because there’s a power differential between landlords and renters.”

For Wildwood, the differences in values and theological stances became too great. Despite their best efforts, in 2022, Wildwood ended their rental arrangement with their tenants—a Filipino group—after six years. The rental had created increased workload for church staff over the years and the two congregations’ approaches to “being the church” proved too different, explained Heikman. “We share our building with lots of different groups, and many of those aren’t ministry groups. Our council came to a time of re-visioning and asking what it looked like to do God’s work in the world, to help us determine our priorities in who uses this space. Out of that conversation we discerned that we didn’t share the same values as the renting congregation; we weren’t doing the same work, and, in some cases, it was actually oppositional.” Despite the difficult decision, Heikman said the church was grateful for what they had learned through the experience. “We’re still very open to multicultural, multi-denominational ways of being the church, it’s just that this one didn’t blossom like we had hoped.”

Strategic partnerships aren’t always easy as God found out with Moses. What do we think about these possibilities for ourselves? The last line of our purpose statement says we want to meet the needs of our community and ten years ago our visioning process said we wanted to use our building more. The possibilities are endless for that but in our rural setting, we may have

to strategize and advertise for those partnerships or we can just choose status quo – just doing what we are doing now. That's fine too but it's my job to push a little. Let's pray...

God of wisdom, you know we can't do things on our own but need partners so help us get your job done. Please guide us in the weeks and months ahead as we discern possible partnerships. Amen.