

Touch and Go

Biblical Storytelling: Luke 24:36-43 by Patty Friesen (April 18/21)

As proof that he is not a ghost, Jesus shows the disciples his hands and feet and eats in front of them. He tells them to touch him and see that his body is real and that the new heaven and new earth are already being formed. Simple as these proofs may be, they are extremely important as the testimony of the resurrection reaches back to the words and *experiences* of these eyewitnesses. Once there were those who could say, "We saw and touched the resurrected Christ."

Where Christ's scarred hands and feet are no longer present, the ministry of the hands and feet of countless followers continue to bear witness to the Risen Christ. Though he may not appear in our midst these days to eat broiled fish, his presence is tangible around our kitchen tables, around this altar table at church and around the tables at Friendship Inn. We see Jesus "in the breaking of bread," wherever and whenever that bread is broken. As in the first century so now, the most convincing proof of the resurrection is our daily witness that Christ still lives and the work of his kingdom continues in our work. The followers who affirm that Christ is risen, therefore, should consider what it is Christ is sending us to do next. (New Interpreter's Commentary)

As part of that considering, we are completing our congregational review this week as part of our traditional three year cycle of discernment together about what Christ is calling us to do next. Review is a healthy process of congregational and pastoral reflection, circling back to see if we are still aligning our practice with our vision to quote Dare to Lead guru Brene Brown.

Seven years ago when we met with Mennonite Church Saskatchewan listeners, we said our three core values were #1- children and youth and intergenerational ministry and investing in the next generations. This led to the hiring of a second minister to help us in this focus and we've gotten that and so much more with the gifts of spiritual care and preaching from Terri Lynn Friesen and Nora Pederberg these past six years.

Secondly, we said we wanted our building to be used for the larger community and it has been for youth overnights, funerals, concerts, and Community Garden meetings. Thirdly, we said we wanted our written policies to align with our actual practices and that requires ongoing discernment as our community needs and practices evolve. We are a smaller congregation now than when we last wrote our handbook in the 1990s. We don't need as many volunteers on committees for example. We also have brilliant young leadership asking the questions about larger community engagement, the meaning of membership and practices of open communion to name a few provocative discussions.

I am thankful for the hard work and diligence of the review committee to try and distill the breadth of our congregational life. Thank you to everyone who has been able to take the time to fill it out. I filled out my review while waiting for 3 hours in the vaccine drive-thru at Prairieland Park last week! I rated Nora and I really high of course. Y'all are so lucky to have us! And we are lucky to work for you! It is a joy to have meaningful, interesting and diverse work everyday. In the review, I wrote long answers under the "other" section because I wanted to say a lot about each question. Plus it was hard for me to prioritize only 4 things I value about worship, fellowship, education

and our community connections so I wrote long answers about that. My review is a mess! I'm eager to hear others' responses and hope we can go through the results together in the months ahead. The on-line survey is just the springboard for us to verbally share together our narratives about church - like we did at our 90th anniversary — what are the *experiences of our life together* and where is God leading us in the future.

Speaking of the future, today we joyfully received Erna and Henry Funk into membership transfer from Zoar Mennonite Waldheim. It has felt they've already been members here as they attend lots of church events and have lovely relatives. They're easy to get to know - smart and funny. They bring us new energy and life. At the same time, it is sad that Zoar Mennonite had to close. In fact, it was a bit of a shock to all of us. In fact, all of our recent new members this past year have come from rural Mennonite congregations that have closed. We grieve these closures like deaths even as we celebrate the gifts of new life in folks transferring to us.

The pandemic has put the nail in the coffin for many of our struggling rural Mennonite congregations. Changing demographics in agriculture impacts rural families and rural churches. Rural churches have been family churches since they began, but rural people have smaller families now and young people leave small family farms and small family churches and there is little opportunity to gain new members when everyone in the area is leaving their farms and churches. It's touch and go for rural churches. Declining numbers means no Sunday School, no youth, no community outreach. Declining numbers means fewer people doing more things and churches quickly become exhausted and if they struggle with technology during this time, they are

totally hooped. At our provincial conference level, we are trying to form a resource team to help churches discern closure and then go through the myriad of legal and financial details in closing and selling buildings and the greatest stressor of all – how to get rid of cemeteries!

At our Mennonite Church Saskatchewan Annual Meeting we were all touched by the grief of pastors and congregational chairs who were closing churches and who were the last ones standing left to deal with all the financial and legal details. The death of a church impacts not only those in the church but all those in the surrounding rural community whom the church served with fall suppers, weddings, funerals and worship services. The loss of a rural church has broad ripple effects on denominational institutions like camps and private high schools.

At Osler Mennonite, we are the perfect rural/urban blend but we are not immune to these changes. We are 93 years old and I always assumed we would live forever, that we had the young people and energy to carry this thing for another 93 years. But I think we are going to have to be very intentional if that's going to happen. Since our last congregational review 3 years ago, we have had no baptisms, one birth and one wedding and 12 funerals.

I believe if we look our possible death in the face, we quickly realize how precious our faith and community is and we will do whatever it takes to continue to thrive. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests the community of Christ can only really be formed when some of its hopes and dreams have been shattered like they did for the disciples when Jesus died. Only when the dreams are shattered can the risen Christ remake them into something they hadn't imagined. What ideals or assumptions or church

culture has to die in order for us to raise up something new? Maybe we are perfect as we were. Maybe my denial has to die.

As a rural church, we are still mostly a family church. If urbanites come, it's because they are related or we pay them as staff. If we want to be a family church made up of our relatives and friends, that's OK, but we've got to start having a lot more babies and we're going to have to start baptizing them as babies and lock the church doors to keep them after graduation!

Family churches survive if we can keep our own but sadly, our own find the outside door once they graduate from high school or sooner. If we want to be something more than a family church, we've got to figure out how to effectively engage our larger community. Ironically the pandemic has helped us through our Facebook worship services and it has been wonderful to have new folks join our Zoom coffees and mid-week workshops. We're building community engagement these days unexpectedly.

We're the best kept secret in the valley. We have an authentic wrestling faith with an intergenerational, intellectual and liturgical style of worship and lived-out passion for God and justice with a potluck-eating, hymn-singing, fun-loving community. We're unique, an alternative in this already well-churched valley. How do we put ourselves out there for folks who are not Mennonite but who are looking for an authentic community that is passionate and who cares about others?

Just this winter on the Warman ski trail I got talking to another skier who was a former church attender who was looking for something again. I told her to check us out on Facebook so Hi to this skier if she is still following us. Now we just have to figure out

how to draw in Facebook folks to in-person gatherings and worship, while keeping the Facebook/Zoom options open for folks. How do we build vulnerability and connection through technology? At 93 years old we've been flexible and adaptable to these changing times which gives me hope that we will thrive for another 93 years and I want to be a part of that for a few more years at least.

My commitment to our thriving for the next 93 years is to spend the month of May in Grasslands National Park on sabbatical, not only counting birds and counting my blessings but thinking about our review results. I want to share what I learned when I come back June 1 all windblown, bug-bitten and sunburned, unbathed and looking wild like John the Baptist coming out of the wilderness. But hopefully like John the Baptist, I'll have vision and fire for what comes next. May the risen Christ whose wounds we touch, give us confidence to go forth into the future. Let us pray...

O Risen Christ, you breathe your Holy Spirit on us and you tell us, Peace be yours. Opening ourselves to your peace means preparing ourselves to be bearers of reconciliation where you may place us. But you know at times we are at a loss. So come and lead us. Let a ray of hope shine forth in our world. Amen. VT1013

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