

Faith Mennonite Church  
February 15, 2009  
Joetta Schlabach

“We are what we do”: Actions that Heal  
*2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45*

Two weeks ago I spent the week at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, for their Annual “Pastors Week.” I was one of just over 200 pastors and seminarians from the US and Canada, mostly Mennonite, some Church of the Brethren, and a few brave representatives of the Presbyterian, United Methodist, Baptist and Episcopal churches. The theme for the week was “Imagining a New Old Church.” The keynote speaker, Diana Butler Bass, is a scholar of church history who grew up United Methodist, turned to evangelicalism in her high school years, and mid-way through college began attending an Episcopal Church, the denomination she later joined and that became her spiritual home.

In the four presentations she gave over as many days, she told first-hand stories of mainline churches (Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Congregational) that are thriving, vital churches, in defiance of the supposed cultural current of decline--if not outright death--in this sector of Christianity. Some were stories of rather miraculous resurrections, like Trinity Episcopal in Santa Barbara, California, which had dwindled to 60 people who were without a priest, and were dipping into their endowment to the tune of \$30,000 a year just to pay the bills. That was *before* the State of California passed legislation requiring all public buildings to be brought up to code in line with 1990 earthquake building regulations. This would require renovations to the tune of \$1.5 million.

But the faithful in this church refused to close their doors and die. The bishop of Los Angeles appointed the only openly gay priest in the diocese to this parish and gave him a fancy title—something like “Special Minister for Extraordinary Circumstances.” In three years the church grew from 60 to 600, attracting some of its former members back, but more importantly bringing in new people who were drawn to a church that practiced hospitality and prayer, and trusted in the Spirit. They were a church that became known for linking a passion for social justice with an emphasis on Christian practices of prayer, Bible study, and hospitality. In reflecting later on what had happened, one parishioner said: “We saved the church and in the process God saved us.” They became a new old church.

Diana and her research associate did in-depth studies of 50 vital churches over several years, thanks to a generous grant from the Lily Foundation. When they began their research they needed to come up with a working definition of “vital” congregations. Since a recent poll had shown that most 25-40 year olds consider Christians or Christian churches to be hypocritical, phony, and irrelevant, they decided to look for churches that were the opposite of those things. According to their definition, “vital” churches were those that had 1) a coherent message: they walked their talk, 2) they were authentic, and 3) they were transformative, addressing the real needs—physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional—of people within and beyond their walls. Size was not an important factor – some were as small as 25-30 members, others were over a thousand.

The one thing that these vital churches shared in common, regardless of their size, denomination or geographical location, was that they were committed to several intentional

Christian practices. The most frequent practices were theological reflection and hospitality. Theological reflection included engaging biblical stories, church history and the surrounding culture, in sermons and in Bible and book studies. Hospitality involved many things: it included welcoming people as they physically enter the church, it meant welcoming people of diverse backgrounds, it meant inviting people into their homes, and so on.)

There are many other Christian practices: prayer, fasting, service, singing, honoring the body, keeping Sabbath, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and more.<sup>i</sup> Diana and her colleague did not find that any particular practice or set of practices was more effective than others. Rather each church practiced two or three very well, and the practices were either part of their history or they grew out of a process of discernment as they asked what God was calling them to do.

One isolated, rural church in Idaho felt called to the practice of hospitality and prayer. They knew that they would never grow in numbers because of the small population base, but they were in a lovely, mountainous setting, so they began to offer their church and their homes as a retreat place for folks from urban areas within a couple hours drive. They not only live these practices, but they teach them to those who came to visit and retreat.

In her final presentation, Diana mentioned the author and psychiatrist Gordon Livingston, whom she had heard interviewed on the topic of happiness and hope. Dr. Livingston speaks and writes from his personal experience of overcoming great loss in his life and also from the experiences he has had in accompanying others on their healing journey. Dr. Livingston lost 2 sons in 13 months—one took his own life, the other died of leukemia. In his books *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart: Thirty True Things You Need to Know* and a sequel, *And Never Stop Dancing: Thirty More Things You Need to Know*, he “underscores that ‘we are what we do,’ and that while there may be no escaping who we are, we also have the capacity to face loss, misfortune, and regret and to move beyond them—that it is not too late.”<sup>iii</sup>

We are what we do. As I reflected on the stories that Diana told us of new old churches and the scripture texts today about two rather different stories of individual healing, I was struck by the intersections. All of these stories have to do with living into a reality of health and vitality. In Old Testament story, Naaman starts out thinking that he will find healing because of his status—he was an army commander and he went bearing gifts of gold and silver. He’s not so unlike folks in our society who go to the Dr. expecting a diagnostic test or a pill to take care of our problems. But Elisha said, “You are what you *do*. You have to climb down from your high tower of status and power and go naked into the Jordan River.” Resistant at first, Naaman did just that, immersing himself seven times. I don’t know if the Jordan is cold (like the spiritual says) ... or if it’s warm and dirty. I don’t know what it felt like for Naaman to go into the water. But the action, the obedience, healed him.

And the leper that came to Jesus for healing broke out of the social rules of confinement that said if you have this disease you have to wait for people to bring you food and aid. He went, he begged, he kneeled, and said “If you choose, you can make me clean—you can heal me.” Unlike Elisha who had to call forth action from Naaman, Jesus merely confirmed the action that had already taken place. He reached out and with his touch and offered healing. Jesus tried in vain to stop the man from testifying, but this was a man who couldn’t be held back. His disease had not held him back; he couldn’t help but testify and proclaim what had happened in his life, what Jesus had given to him.

I see these same patterns of vitality around us here at Faith Mennonite Church. As we seek peace, speak and sing peace, teach peace, and practice peace in difficult situations, we become peacemakers. As we seek to become better connected with this community and take part

in collaborative relationships we become neighbors. As we read and meditate on Scripture and let the Scripture read and interrogate us we become people shaped by the Word. As we pray, crying out with questions and petitions and also listening in silence, we become in-tune with God's voice and open to God's direction. As we step beyond the lethargy of despair and pain, rise up defiantly when our inner voices whisper negative, paralyzing thoughts, we begin to create new realities that reinforce confidence.

But new realities rarely take shape overnight. Our own church needed nearly 10 years to heal from a wound it suffered in the mid-90s. Some of us carry wounds or thick scar tissue from events that happened many years ago. Some, like our teachers and social workers, feel overburdened by the complicated and tortured lives of clients and students.

But we do not despair. Like the leper, we come to Jesus in search of healing, and like the slave girl, we encourage one another and point others in the direction of healing. God will honor the steps that we take. We do not walk alone on the path toward newness in life.

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<sup>i</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing our Faith: A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growth*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.gordonlivingston.com/books/tooSoonOld.html>