

Faith Mennonite Church
November 23, 2008

Church Membership: Considering and Following God's Call

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23

When we learned earlier this week that Scott and Deedee Stevens Neal would not be able to be here this morning and take part in our membership Sunday, Matthew and Kami Blackwell Kinney worried that they might need to talk twice as long. That wouldn't be such a bad idea—perhaps it would be a true test of their commitment to membership! But a better test of the quality of their commitment is probably the surprise that many of you had when you saw the announcement that they would be joining the church—"I thought they were already members!" said my husband Gerald.

Obviously we don't make people wait to be involved here at FMC until they officially join. Neither do we pressure people to join until they have considered the decision and believe this is what God is calling them to do.

Considering and following God's call – that is the hallmark of the Anabaptist/Mennonite practice around church membership. In medieval Europe people did not need – nor were they regularly encouraged – to seriously consider the meaning of their commitment to the church. People became Christian as a birthright, of being born in a time and place where baptism made you both a citizen and a church member. This is not to say that *no one* considered the meaning of their faith; Christian faith survives and is passed on one generation at a time. Even in what we might consider the darkest moments in Christian history, faithful men and women remained fervent and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in the life of the church. This commitment led both to the Protestant Reformation, where Anabaptism sprang to life, and to reform movements that remained within the Roman Catholic Church.

As Mennonites we sometimes put greater emphasis on our *individual role of considering and choosing to follow* than on *Who* it is that calls us and *What* it is we are considering. The passage from Ezekiel that we read this morning, speaks clearly of a God who actively seeks us, like a shepherd pursuing sheep. This process doesn't begin with us, but with God who creates us and longs for us to live in vital union with Godself. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, and during Advent we dwell on this mystery that God's love for humanity is so intense that God takes on flesh, in Jesus, to demonstrate that love, to communicate more clearly.

The writer of Ephesians spoke of the *What*. The language is loftier than we are accustomed to but this passage says we are called to receive *wisdom and revelation* that will enable us to live in *hope* and with *power*—the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Isn't this exactly what our world needs right now and has always needed: wisdom and revelation, hope, and power—not to control, manipulate, and destroy but to bring life? This is the essence of the church, the body of Christ. When we take our place in this body, we both contribute to and also receive this wisdom, this hope, and this power which come to us through God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ.

I invite Kami and Matthew to come and make their statements at this time. From the conversations I have had with both Kami and Matthew, and the sharing time they had with the deacons this past Monday evening, I can attest to the integrity with which they have approached this process, their desire to respond to the *Who* and be actively part of the *What*.

Joetta Schlabach

Introduction

(Matthew) We've been attending Faith Mennonite for just over two years now—ever since we moved back to Minnesota from the Pacific Northwest. Both Kami and I were born and raised in Minnesota. I grew up in the Osseo/Maple Grove area, and Kami grew up in southwestern Minnesota, in a little known town called Mt. Lake.

Our faith stories are fairly similar.

Kami's Story

(Kami) I was raised in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, which is a very conservative Mennonite denomination. I went to church Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening, as well as Friday night for youth group. Living in a small community meant that you saw the same people at church, at school, and at the grocery store. This was annoying at the time, but something I now appreciate and even long for. During those years, being Mennonite simply meant that I was related to practically everyone in town. All that changed when my dad died during my sophomore year in college. After witnessing the way my community supported my family during this time, I decided that there was something more to being Mennonite than just ethnicity. I began to study Anabaptist history and theology, in order to find out what it truly meant to be Mennonite.

Matthew's Story

(Matthew) I also grew up in a conservative denomination—the Evangelical Free Church of America. The hallmarks of my faith during those years were scripture, piety, and a constant, prayerful effort to improve my many imperfections. I was “born again” and devotedly sought a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Though an enlightened and progressive retrospective might look upon this experience as pure emotionalism, I have mostly fond memories of these years. I take the good stuff with me every day, and leave the rest behind.

Blackwell Kinney Story

(Matthew) For both of us, this spiritual upbringing gave us a sense that we were heading somewhere wonderful—and that when we got there, we had better be saved. We were focused on the end-state of our spiritual development, paying little heed, or ignoring altogether, the work of God around us and for us. We were given the tools to take care of our own spiritual and physical needs, but not the spiritual and physical needs of those around us.

Kami and I met while attending Bethel University, in Arden Hills. Still immersed in a conservative Christian culture, we graduated, got married, and got out of town.

(Kami) We moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1995, where I pursued my Master's degree in Church History. Studying under John B. Toews, I sought to better understand the spiritual roots of my cultural heritage.

(Matthew) In 1998, after Kami graduated, we decided that I would take a turn at graduate school. At the time, I had decided I was going to be an actor! I applied my ability to memorize

scripture toward literature and poetry. I immersed myself in words and language and the experience of other perspectives, and in performance—the incarnation of prose.

(Kami) We attended Seattle Mennonite Church during these years. SMC is a sojourner's church. People of many Christian traditions attend, and for us it felt like a good home. We had enough experience to be dangerous with our faith—to try new traditions, to let go a bit of the dogmatic constraints of our youth, and to experience what God was doing around us.

(Matthew) There we're a few false starts however. Initially we attempted to apply our own traditions to this a-traditional culture. "Let's start a Sunday night hymn sing"; "How about a Wednesday night community meal?" "Let's talk about sin and how to overcome it." Eventually we settled in. We enjoyed the eclectic community and were thankful for the new ways in which we were experiencing God. I started merging the worlds of theater and church—reciting and performing the scriptures I had devoted myself to in my youth. The reading of scripture became for me a new spiritual dimension—a new way to experience the voice of God. Rather than memorizing scripture, I now began to meditate on scripture and to experience it from many perspectives. Rather than checking off a verse, I was living its rhythm, cadence, and meaning.

(Kami) At the same time I was going through a mini-crisis. I had just graduated with my Master's degree and was eager to pursue the next. Instead, I found myself waiting for Matthew to find himself and was working a rather unfulfilling job as marketing coordinator for a small CPA firm. I felt a little lost, until finally God reached in and began to teach me something new about faith—that it is a process of refinement, rather than a product you craft and put on the mantle.

(Matthew) In Seattle we were happy. We were young; we had angst and spiritual epiphanies, and a cat that marked her territory on the walls of our home. And then we had kids. William was born in 2002; and Ava came along in 2004. Having children changed us both utterly. God reached into our lives once again and made us realize how little we knew.

(Kami) For me, having children put me through tremendous physical and spiritual challenges. Mine were not easy pregnancies or births. My first pregnancy was rife with complications that climaxed in an emergency C-section. During my pregnancy with Ava, I had a completely different set of complications that incapacitated me for months on end. Our faith was tested to its limits.

(Matthew) At the time, I was commuting 90 minutes each way to work and trying to "assist" with a troubled pregnancy. I was helpless to help, and many nights we'd end up on the floor, exhausted, wondering how we might make it through. Where was God in all this?

(Kami) Thanks to the support of our church community, family, neighbors, and friends, we made it through. Ava was born and we were relieved; but we were also changed; we were altered in a manner that would re-direct our faith onto a path we couldn't yet define.

(Matthew) We stayed in this indefinable state for months. Mostly we ignored our spiritual status and tried to breathe again. We enjoyed our days together and worked to regain equilibrium. It wasn't until March of the following year, when the Iraq war was imminent, that the crucible of the prior 15 months finally completed its work. Our pastor at the time, Weldon Nisly, flew to

Baghdad just before the bombing began to be a witness to peace. In the name of love, he put his life at risk.

I suddenly began to be aware of what God was doing in my life; I began to realize that, the recent trials we had endured we're brought to strip away the shadow of doctrine and dogma—to simplify our faith, to give us hope, and to show us how to love.

(Kami) For all of the history we could tell of our lives since that time—moving to back to Minnesota in 2006, trying to create new community and reacquaint ourselves with our extended families—our faith journey remains in this space. It is mostly uncomplicated—somewhere between recognizing the process of refinement that God is constantly working in our lives, and longing for grace; between believing that faith, hope and love are all we know on earth, and not quite knowing how to take the first steps in the right direction.

(Matthew) So, if we have anything to bring to the community of Faith Mennonite Church, it is this faith story; knowing that while the story continues to write itself under God's direction, we will strive to focus first on love.

(Kami) But a focus on love is not enough, and this is where we look to Faith to help us in our journey—and not just for ourselves, but for our children as well. We look to you to help us learn practical ways to show love, and to help us as we train up our children in the way they must go. We ask for you to walk with us on this journey, and to pray for us, and to challenge us in love.

(Matthew) We do bring a few practical skills to the community. I can mow, and shovel, and organize, and speak articulately.

(Kami) And I can cook, and clean, and organize, and communicate in written form. William is a fine artist, and Ava likes to dance and sing.

(Matthew) There are other things too; these are just some of the tools God has given us to use at Faith.

(Kami) We pray for opportunities to use these and to obtain new ones, to grow in our faith and to find our way in love.

(Matthew) We'd like to close with some verses on love. I learned these verses by heart some years ago, but will read them to you today:

1 Corinthians 13

1. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
2. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
3. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
4. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant
5. Or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
6. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
7. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
8. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.
9. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;
10. But when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.
11. When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.
12. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.
13. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.