

My Conversation with the Colonel
By Lois Harder, Co-Pastor
Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church, Wichita, KS

I was asked to participate in a “Unity Service” on Sunday, September 9, 2011 – the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I was to share in the segment of the service on the topic of “struggle”. I offered, in a confessional vein, that my struggle in the last decade has been with forgiveness. I have struggled to forgive our nation’s leaders who responded to that tragedy by taking us into a baseless and unnecessary war that has resulted in so much death, misery and fear.

My sharing was very offensive to one person, in particular, a retired Army Colonel. Through the help of a colleague, the Colonel and I began to correspond by phone and email. We finally sat down together on October 27 (six weeks later) at a Panera restaurant to talk.

The Colonel has spent lots of time overseas in a variety of countries. He just retired this past February and is now teaching “Leadership Classes” through the JROTC program in a Middle School here in Wichita. He is a devoutly religious person and has come to the Roman Catholic tradition after a long and careful search.

We agree on many points! We agree that the world is in a sorry state, as is The Church in terms of its response. We agree that Jesus is likely disappointed much of the time about how those who claim to be his followers live out that claim (or don’t). We agree that fear and anger are the things that are driving much of the world today. We agree that “George W. Bush could not have been more mistaken when he declared war on Iraq.” The Colonel said that to me in one of our phone conversations. “But”, he said, “I am in the military and once that call has been made there is no looking back, no questioning of it. We go, and we do what we’ve been asked to do.”

We also disagreed vehemently and respectfully as we continued to talk about what’s to be done with the sorry state of the world, The Church, and how to follow Jesus most faithfully. We spent 90 minutes together, eating, talking, laughing, and finding our way through the points of disagreement.

We left Panera after giving one another a warm embrace and a mutual invitation to “keep in touch.” Thanks be to God!

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Revitalizing Journey Includes Discovery Process and Holy Spirit-Guided Steps

By Laurie Oswald Robinson for Western District Conference



Pastor Randy Smith

Newton, Kan.—**Randy Smith**, transitional pastor at **First Mennonite Church in Halstead, Kan.**, doesn’t consider himself an expert on revitalization. But he does know one thing from experience: the revitalization journey is best taken with a discovery process in one hand and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the other.

Smith, the main presenter at the Reference Council sponsored by Western District Conference (WDC) at Tabor Mennonite Church on November 19, encouraged the 70 pastors and congregational leaders to consider engaging in a discovery process that can lead to revitalization.

“Because of today’s trends, we know that 20 years from now, WDC will probably still be here, but it will look very different than it does today,” Smith said. “Our challenge is to continue to be the physical presence of Jesus on earth.”

Smith shared some practical road maps he’s used in various congregations that can help churches to reorient and renew so as to better join Christ’s mission in the 21st century.

One such map charts a congregational life cycle. A congregation begins with high energy and high inclusion, which eventually requires the development of programs and then administration. As a congregation becomes more set in its ways, it becomes top heavy with programs and administration. It loses vitality, openness and relevancy, and needs to be revived.

To be “reborn” to a more vibrant ministry, congregations engage in a discovery process that cycles the congregation back to energy and inclusion.

“Part of the discovery process is asking some important questions,” Smith said. “What are we currently doing? Where are we going? And what are our resources? The discovery process cannot start with structure. It must start with people. Conversation is more important than the outcome. And building trust in the pastor-people relationship is a must.”

Four pastors shared testimonies on congregational revitalization. Three had been in despair of surviving.

For example, **Mike Hiebert** from **Goessel (Kan.) Mennonite Church**, shared how the dwindling and conflicted congregation went from two services to one to quell conflict over worship styles.

“By going to one service, we experienced new unity and learned how to be true brothers and sisters in Christ,” Hiebert said. “God taught us how to listen and to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit and how to love one another.” Attendance has tripled and new ministries are thriving.

Verlin Koehn, a longtime member of **Grace Mennonite (Enid, Okla.)**, shared the multiple miracles of generosity and the work of dedicated volunteers that made possible the construction of a debt-free new facility in an area of new development in Enid. (See *WDC News October 2011 for the full story.*) “This was way beyond us, but not beyond God,” Koehn said.

Pastor Jerry Truex shared how members of **Mennonite Church of the Servant (Wichita, Kan.)** experienced conflict over homosexuality in 2003-2004. The congregation sponsored dialogues to share their differing views and to listen to one another. “As we gave each other freedom to air our views and differences, the tension dissipated, and no one left the congregation as a result,” Truex said.



Pastor Jerry Truex

The congregation has committed itself to biblical spirituality, accountable community, and to seeking Christ’s peace within and in the world. Truex describes the congregation’s revitalizing spiritual practices in [A Monastic Anabaptist Manifesto](#).

Pastor John Regier at **Beatrice (Neb.) Mennonite Church** has invited his congregation to develop missional living and worshiping—including encouraging the church to exist for others and to bless them in the name of Jesus. A missional pilot group with five couples has studied [The Tangible Kingdom](#) by Hugh Halter and Matt Sway. “We are encouraging each other to think and live like missionaries,” Regier said.

Circle of Grace is Up and Running!

Try it: *Stand. Raise your hands above your head and bring your arms slowly down, keeping them outstretched. Extend your arms in front of you, then behind you. Embrace all of the space around you knowing that God is in this space with you. Slowly reach down to your feet. This is your Circle of Grace. You are in it.*

This simple meditation demonstrates the fundamental concepts of a curriculum for preschool through Grade 12 that is now available to all congregations in WDC. The theology is basic and two-fold. **God is present in our Circle of Grace because he desires a relationship with us.** God is with us, no matter what, during difficulty and in joy. God helps us know when to ask for help from someone we trust. **God helps us know what belongs and what does not belong in our Circle of Grace.** God helps us discern what kind of media to engage and how to regulate our relationships, food or recreation. Each of the 1-3 lessons per grade level introduces vocabulary, interaction, Christian teaching. Binders and CD’s are provided with the complete course.

Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton, Kan, is an early adopter of the course. Coordinator Jeanette Leary appreciates Circle of Grace because, “These conversations need to happen in a context of trust and care that the church offers. The COG provides kids with words and actions to help them with boundaries and self-care.”

Marlene Bogard trained leaders in Dallas, Tex. on November 19. Circle of Grace is available in Spanish and English. “For many years, the efforts of Safe Sanctuaries were to train adults in prevention of abuse. Now, COG provides a comprehensive introduction to self-awareness, self-care, boundary-setting, all within a Christian framework for children and youth. It’s a natural next step.”



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