

How Can We Get on the Same Page?

Rethinking our Relationships with Each Other and the Bible

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Presentation 1

Since our founding, we Mennonites have claimed the Bible as *the* central source of authority for faith and life. We have shared the conviction that the Bible is the guide for life for the Christian. The Bible, we have said, is how we learn about God and, most importantly, about Jesus Christ, the One whom we *together* seek to follow.

Our Anabaptist forbearers were, in fact, fanatical about Scripture. They experienced a time of *discovering* the Scriptures, really. In their time, the Bible became available to common people for the first time in centuries. No longer did one need to have specialized training to access it. No longer were its words only mediated through leaders. People could read it for themselves and study it in community with others.

Anabaptists grabbed hold of this opportunity! They memorized hundreds of verses and used them powerfully in court hearings and in their testimonies, often quoting Scripture as they were being martyred. Scripture strengthened them for unimaginably difficult times. Anabaptists were truly people of the Book. And we, as their spiritual descendants, have inherited a high view of scripture.

Yet, for all our *historical* respect for Scripture, these days it seems that we Mennonites, on the whole, may not be so sure what to make of the Bible. According to the 2006 Church Member Profile, only about 32% of MC USA members report reading the Bible daily (Kanagy, 2007). Fewer than 17% participate in weekly small group meetings for discussion, Bible study or prayer (MC Frequencies Report, Kanagy, 2006). The numbers for our congregations of color are significantly higher; we would do well to notice this.

As AMBS professor Alan Kreider has written, “The estrangement of many North American Mennonite Christians from the Bible—their sense that they know the book, that it’s over-familiar or irrelevant, and their captivity to American ills of individualism, consumerism and over-busyness—all of these make it hard to indwell the ancient text and make it life-giving today.” (*Engaging Pastors Faculty Report*, March 2, 2007)

And when it comes to difficult conversations like we’re having about sexuality, many Mennonites have little hope that the Scripture can be our guide. In recent months I have heard many church members, and a few church leaders, claiming that there’s no point in studying Scripture when it comes to conversations about sexuality. They say that because the Scripture has been misused and co-opted for political purposes and made into a tool of oppression, we should steer clear of it in discerning difficult matters. These folks make their arguments from other sources, stating that the Bible is an ancient, time-bound, culturally-bound book, and it is therefore not suited to helping us make moral judgments in our time.

At the same time, some among us are quick to claim that the Bible is on their side in the sexuality debates. They quote the Bible readily. Certain verses and passages are often on their lips. They will tell you something like, “I go with the Bible on this one.” This is code for, “There will be no discussion of inclusion or same-sex covenants in my church. I know what the Bible says. Case closed.”

I have good friends in both of these camps, and I’m guessing you do, too.

But my question is, when and with whom are we actually *studying* the Bible? Are we? When are we engaging in in-depth Bible study with sisters and brothers in our congregations? In what contexts are we *together* wrestling with whole passages, or better yet, whole books of the Bible? In what settings are we digging deep, seeking to get to the bottom of a biblical

text's meaning, not just on one issue—not just on one, two or three choice verses—but on *many* texts and *many* issues over *many* weeks?

And where are we doing this in mixed company?

By mixed company I simply mean, in the context of a group of people who are politically, theologically and culturally diverse, like the real body of Christ. In what contexts are we coming together, week in and week out, to keep on listening and talking, challenging and understanding the Scripture and each other?

If I read Conrad Kanagy right, fewer than 17% of us are doing this.

If membership in Mennonite Church USA depended on our willingness to study the Bible together regularly, we would be a tiny denomination indeed.

Frederick Borsch, an Episcopal scholar and church leader, writes, "The Bible provides the stories that have always given identity to the Christian community.... These stories and related materials are the base data and primary theological core of Christian community.... It is the one 'language' shared by Christians of different races, cultures, and economic backgrounds. Throughout the church's history, the Holy Scriptures have called for the formation and re-formation of faithful communities before God. It is both appropriate and necessary that dialogue with [the Scriptures] ... be at the center of the life of every Christian community" (Borsch, 1995, p. 360).

Following Borsch I would suggest that when we can no longer speak to each other from the Bible, we cease to share a common Christian identity. We lose our shared foundation—our shared theological core—and our conversations go in circles. In fact, our conversations largely take place only within our own carefully constructed social circles, not within the theologically diverse body that is the church. We find ourselves unable to speak across our conservative-liberal divides because we are no longer speaking a common language.

Might it be possible that the Bible, instead of being useless, or irrelevant, or hopelessly divisive, might be the *one thing* that can save us? **Might the language of the Bible, in fact, be the language we must learn to speak together again?**

In 1990, Ross Bender, a pastor, religious educator and seminary administrator, wrote in *Gospel Herald*, "How long can we continue to neglect serious Bible study and still claim to be a church that is founded on the teachings of the Bible?" (Bender, 1997, p. 11). He pointed out that we must study the Bible together if we want to meet the *living* God. The goal of teaching the Bible is to facilitate a conversation between God and God's people today, he said. "The [Bible] teacher operates on the assumption that this conversation can come alive in the congregation and that once again the living Lord of the text will speak through the text to his people now" (Bender, 1997, pp. 69-70).

In my recent studies, I have had the opportunity to talk with several pastors and lay people who are participating in Bible studies in their congregations, Bible studies in which people from many different places on the theological and political spectrum come together, and are *together* inspired, and challenged, and convicted by Scripture. One pastor told me,

In a sense I feel like I make my liberal people more conservative and my conservatives more liberal. I'd like to think that's success! But it's interesting the way good engagement of Scripture can offer something to both the liberal end of the spectrum and the conservative end. I often get the comment from conservative folk, "I love that you teach the Bible." They feel the Bible being taught and sometimes don't even realize how much they're being stretched. And then from the liberal end I feel like I have a good number of people in the church who just gave up on the Bible. They wouldn't even touch it. And for them, they are finding, "Wow, there's a way that I can engage this. I can read this!" I feel like I really push my liberal group to realize that this is something worth taking seriously. These are the stories of the people of God and it's messy. The nature of Scripture is to be messy

because the nature of human experience is to be messy, but we should hold it with all the more respect for that reason. It's not whitewashing life.

So how can this kind of Bible study happen? As we already know, the Bible can be a lightning rod, a source of hostility and one-up-man-ship, division and fear-mongering. *What is the difference* between that kind of Bible reading and the truly life-giving Bible study I encountered in my interviews with pastors and lay people?

My own story might speak a bit to this question.

Like many of you, I grew up in a home where the Bible was at the center of everything we understood God and faith to represent. Many conversations in our house revolved around what the Bible says. How we would treat each other, where we thought the world was headed, even what to wear—we discussed all of it, in light of Scripture. And so, deep in the fiber of my being is love for Scripture and gratitude for the moorings in Scripture my parents gave me.

In our family we took what many would call a *literalistic* approach to Scripture. What was on the page was what we did. At least that's what we thought was going on. Of course this led to some interesting discussions. Could I, as a conservative Mennonite girl, wear "that which pertaineth to a man?" (For those of you who are uninitiated, that meant *pants*.) No. But what about clothing made of two kinds of cloth?—Well, that prohibition didn't really apply to today. Or, could women speak in public worship? No—except during testimony time or on Sunday night. Could I drink a little wine for my stomach's sake? Absolutely not. On the other hand, I'm grateful my parents didn't decide to stone their children for disobedience, as commanded by Deuteronomy 21.

Along with not knowing exactly what the interpretive rules were, I soon started running into another problem with the Bible. I remember being questioned at a young age about how I knew the Bible was true. This was a tough question. How *did* I know the Bible was true? How did Mom and Dad know that they could trust this book? As a matter of fact, a lot of it *did* seem kind of far-out, and fantastical, and *very* different from anything I knew in real life.

And so, as a child and youth, I remember often trying to get the answer to that question. For many years, my spiritual journey was clouded by the haunting fear that perhaps the Bible, and everything it stood for, could not be trusted.

At age 26 I found myself in seminary, largely because I was still trying to figure out whether or not the Bible was true. Thanks to a misunderstanding with the AMBS admissions counselor (which was certainly my fault!), my first seminary class was Introduction to Biblical Greek, where I was surprised to discover that our work was to translate portions of the book of John. Suddenly, I was immersed in studying the Bible in great depth. I had come to seminary expecting long, philosophical conversations about the reliability of Scripture, and whether or not the modern mind should even bother with it at all, but instead found myself reading the Bible more carefully and at a slower pace than I had ever read it before. As I learned to carefully translate passages in John from Greek, I couldn't help but notice each word and phrase and chapter in a very different way. Just the act of slowing down and noticing what was really there, as opposed to what *I thought* I knew was there, was eye opening, and light bulbs started going on.

The next semester of Greek got me into the book of Ephesians. The professor guided us in translating it, and significantly introduced us to all kinds of *scholarly tools* to help us better understand what those words from Ephesians meant when they were first written. His set of tools included such things as literary analysis—asking what type of writing is this passage we are reading? Is it a letter? A list of laws? A drama? A hymn? And he taught us to notice the passages that came right before the one we were reading, and the one after we were reading, to see the line of thought running through them. Rather than just picking and choosing verses to quote, he showed us how each verse is part of a larger whole, and indeed, informed us that the verses themselves weren't added to Bibles until the 1500s. What a difference all this makes!

Another tool our professor introduced us to was how to analyze our sources, which meant learning to figure out which Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible are the oldest and closest to the originals, and noticing how this affects how translators might include a certain word or phrase, or leave it out, and how that, in turn, shapes a theological concept we may hold.

Over the next months, I learned about many more helpful tools for interpretation that shed a lot of light on Scripture. I remember many moments sitting in the library and feeling concepts just “coming together.” I was amazed and would even feel tears coming to my eyes because these things I was learning made so much sense and were things I had never thought about before. The more I learned, the more I realized that the biblical story, both in Old and New Testaments, describes reality in ways unbelievably “in touch” with the world I live in. I began to see that the motivations, pursuits, failings and faith of people in the biblical story are the stories of people I know, of governments with which I am familiar—the stories, in fact, of my world and of me.

And as I opened my eyes to see the Bible in this new light, I found myself asking, “Can anything be truer than this?!”

Through my recent interviews, I encountered many lay people who are having a similar experience. They are participating in Bible studies in their congregations in which *scholarly tools of interpretation are being used regularly*. The people I spoke with are remarkably enthusiastic about these Bible studies. They are experiencing so many “a-ha!” moments, seeing things making so much more sense than when they just tried to sit down and read their Bibles without these tools.

One Bible study participant told me, “Whenever you can get historical context, it’s SO helpful. And whenever a Bible study can take events that happened thousands of years ago, and you come away with, ‘Oh, they’re not much different than we are today,’ or, ‘This chasm of time isn’t all that big on another scale of people being human.’” He said, “When I was younger, there was such a disconnect, like ‘This happened long ago and we just don’t think or act or do things this way.’ And so there was a little bit of, ‘It’s not so relevant to me today.’ Whereas ... with the kind of Bible study we are doing now, with this kind of historical thing, my feelings are—this is *very* relevant!”

One of the pastors who is leading one of those Bible studies told me, “I have been doing quite a bit of teaching on Hosea and I can’t tell you how many people have come up to me and said, ‘I was too scared to touch the book of Hosea, like it was too ugly, and now I love this book!’ It’s like watching them rediscover the Bible, and they say over and over and over to me, ‘I didn’t know the Bible could be read like this. I wish someone had told me.’”

As a seminary student I often found myself wondering if the church had failed me in not providing me with tools for biblical interpretation. Why were these tools such a well-kept secret?! That was many years ago, but this kind of work with the Bible continues year after year in the seminary classroom. Most students come to us with little awareness of the tools, and very often they become fired up about Scripture as they become familiar with tools for interpreting it. In fact I would say that even as Bible study has faded away in many Mennonite congregations, it is ever more alive and well in AMBS classrooms.

So how is it that while the work of New Testament scholars, Old Testament scholars, and seminary students is *flourishing*, many people in the pew are wringing their hands and giving up hope of hearing the Bible speak? With all this expertise at our disposal, why is it that so many Mennonites have lost their zeal for Bible reading, and tell us that Scriptures won’t make much difference in the matters that confound us?

This chasm between academic biblical scholarship and the use of the Bible in the church isn’t just a Mennonite phenomenon. It is found across denominations. Christine Eaton Blair (2001), a Presbyterian pastor, Christian educator and practical theologian, sums up the issue this way:

For most of this century, the majority of ministers and Christian educators have received training in the use of [scholarly] tools. For the most part, however, the laity in our congregations have not been taught even the simplest of these tools This lack of lay training has undermined the foundational tenet of the Protestant Reformation, which insists on the right and duty of every Christian to read and interpret the Bible (Blair, 2001, pp. 70-91).

Blair points out that pastors typically shy away from teaching the technical tools they learned in seminary to people in the congregation because, for one thing, they have received no guidance in how to do that.

There is indeed a gap. One pastor in my study told me, "Seminary taught me to learn to use resources and to be attentive to texts. It made me a good interpreter of texts. But a lot of attention was given to scholarly minutiae. I learned to be very good at using resources and diagramming things, but not how to pull back and look at a question like, 'What does it matter?' or 'How is this formational?' I had to figure that part out on my own." Another pastor said, "I think everything I did in seminary Bible classes has been valuable in my ministry. However, I would say the biggest gap in my seminary education with regard to teaching the Bible would be learning adult pedagogy."

We are working on bridging this gap at AMBS, but it has been an area of growth for us in recent years.

Blair goes on to say that pastors, along with not receiving guidance in how to translate scholarly interpretive skills into the congregational setting, may be unsure that what they learned in seminary has value in congregational teaching settings. She says, "In my experience, [they] worry that using [scholarly] tools will, at best, bore their adult students, and at worst, shake their faith" (Blair, 1995, p. 91).

And, you might be asking, how is it helpful to expose people in the pew to literary construction, or ancient geography, or the editorial processes involved in putting the Bible together? Some might argue that only a few churchgoers are interested in such seeming trivia and that these matters are best left in the hands of experts so that pastors are free to carry out the so-called "real work" of attending to people's spiritual needs.

I believe that experience tells a different story. Without access to solid interpretive tools, many Christians are prone to misuse the Bible. In the past century alone, mis-interpretation of Scripture has made the Bible a weapon in the hands of despots, a tool of perversion by church-going perpetrators of abuse, and a metaphorical club in the so-called culture wars. As Lisa Miller wrote in *Newsweek* a few years ago, "The Bible has, at certain times in history, been read to support slavery, wife-beating, kidnapping, child abuse, racism and polygamy" (Miller, 2011).

Indeed, the Bible has been abused. But rather than throwing out the Bible, let's learn to read it well, and to recognize when someone is not reading it well.

And so I am going to boldly proclaim, and invite you to consider, that there are better and worse ways to read and interpret the Bible, *and* that we need scholarly tools to provide crucial information to help us interpret texts. I will go even further and say that the inverse is also true: lack of these interpretive tools can lead even well-meaning, dedicated believers far afield in their efforts to understand and apply Scripture to their lives.

I am well aware that Christians normally shy away from evaluating their own or others' interpretation of Scripture. On the one hand, conservative-leaning Christians often resist the idea that people need advanced education or sophisticated analytical techniques to understand Scripture. They will tell you that academic study of the Bible can lead to making it a mere object, and to a failure to grasp and communicate the Bible's simple message and spiritual power for everyday life. They remind us that Jesus' followers were poor and uneducated, and that the religious leaders of the day were often targets of Jesus' anger and rebuke.

On the other hand, many liberal-leaning Christians have given up on the Bible's relevance for moral and ethical matters. At the 2011 assembly of Mennonite Church USA, delegates stated that "Scripture has been used in ways in the past which are abusive and harmful, further alienating a generation from it" (Shue, 2011, p. 2). As one Mennonite scholar reports, "This sense of the Bible as violent, racist, and patriarchal creates 'difficult barriers for modern readers'" (Jacobs, 2013, p. 3). One young Mennonite pastor, a fairly recent graduate of AMBS, wrote to me recently, "Biblical authority is a big issue in my congregation. I find myself having to defend Scripture in Sunday school from adults who have been Christians their whole lives. Somehow there needs to be a way past the idea that a literalistic understanding of Scripture is the only one."

I believe that when either the liberal or conservative view is taken to its logical conclusion, relativism reigns and the Bible is stripped of its authority. Both perspectives deny the Bible objective meaning, and in turn, deny its place as a source of guidance for the church. Through either line of thinking, we lose our common foundation in Scripture. For that reason, I believe that my claim that there are better and worse ways to read and interpret Scripture is not evidence of academic snobbery, but rather it is evidence of a strong commitment to Scripture as the Christian's guide for faith and life. It is a call for us to honor Scripture for all it has to say to us.

But let me be clear: While I am convinced that there are better and worse interpretations of Scripture, I do *not* believe that only professional exegetes and biblical scholars can learn from or understand the Bible, or that biblical scholars have a "corner" on truth found in Scripture. It is the experience of the church throughout the world that extraordinary wisdom can emerge from study circles, home fellowships, youth groups and a variety of adult education settings where participants share freely their insights into Scripture texts. People like my parents, who studied the Bible continuously throughout their lives, were deeply biblical and profoundly wise followers of Jesus Christ.

Because ordinary readers often bring a deep hunger to their Bible study, they are full of expectation and hope, and their capacity to learn from Scripture is profound. Similarly, reading the Bible *cross-culturally* exposes the limits of Western exegetical study methods. While these methods were dominant in seminaries for most of the 20th century, they are certainly not the *only* lens through which we ought to approach Scripture.

Further, there are limits to the professional approach. Academic tools are no substitute for spiritually formative practices like prayer and worship, among others. Likewise, there are many other ways to study the Bible that deepen understanding and aid spiritual growth. Ancient practices like *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian spiritual exercises, as well as biblical storytelling, inter-cultural Bible reading and the use of the arts in Bible study are important examples.

Nevertheless, even as we own the concern that Bible study is not only for academicians, we must keep in mind the *foundational* place of interpretive tools in shedding light on the text. We must acknowledge that while interpretive tools are not *sufficient* for understanding and applying Scripture, they are *necessary*. The fact that such interpretive tools are not present and available to every church member should not deter church *leaders* from using and sharing them to the greatest extent possible. I believe that pastors who wish to interpret Scripture well will seek ever-deepening understandings of the contexts, language and history of the Bible, and that they will use these interpretive tools in creating communities of engagement around Scripture.

We are in good company here. While our Anabaptist forbearers helped open the door to making the Bible accessible to all people, they also benefited greatly from the *theological education* many of them had, some of whom were actually *leading* biblical scholars of their day. These leaders' expertise, rather than being minimized for the sake of creating equal access, was valued and tapped, even as the wisdom of those who weren't educated was also valued and tapped.

In my work with churches and church leaders I have observed that people sometimes seem eager to throw out the baby with the bathwater. That is, sometimes in our eagerness to make sure everyone is welcome at the interpretive table, we have displaced the important role of the pastor as teacher, as the person who can help us to understand. We have wanted so much to be careful not to leave anyone out, that we have failed to take advantage of what wisdom and knowledge has become available to us.

This, I think, is one reason we end up unable to speak the same language and unwilling to study Scripture *together*. In addition to our busyness and failure to take time to read Scripture, we also have not known what to *do with it* by ourselves and on our own. As a 60-year old Mennonite woman in my study told me, “I find it hard to just sit down and read the Bible, because it doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

And so we have thrown up our hands and put our Bibles on the shelf. And in doing so, we have lost our language, our ability to speak to one another. It is no wonder we find ourselves confused, disoriented, and afraid.

But I am an optimist. And the Spirit of God brings us hope. So as I mentioned, I went on a search to talk with pastors who are leading ordinary readers in studying the Bible in ways that not only scratch the surface, but dig deep, and draw on tools of biblical scholarship learned in seminary. I looked for pastors who are leading weekly or bi-weekly Bible studies in settings beyond the Sunday morning service.

In the next session I will tell you more about what I found and some of what I think we can learn from these congregations and their leaders.

Presentation 2

As I mentioned, there are some congregations where people are, in this very time, meeting together weekly or bi-weekly in settings beyond the Sunday morning service, to study the Bible. There are churches where both pastors and ordinary readers are not only scratching the surface, but digging deep, drawing on tools of biblical scholarship to study the Bible. There are congregations where people have, like the early Anabaptists, re-discovered scripture and are speaking to each other in the *common language* of Scripture.

I believe Mennonite *pastors* are uniquely poised to help us create *communities of engagement* around scripture. Pastors serve as vital links in the “chain” or network of relationships that connects biblical scholars and lay people, seminaries and congregations. Further, Mennonite pastors have been *charged* with making God’s Word known. According to our most recent polity statements,

The Mennonite minister’s *central concern* is to know God and to proclaim God’s Word to all the world—in the church and outside it. The minister’s life is, therefore, a life of study, prayer, contemplation, and action in and on the Word of God, God’s creation, the lives of people, and the events of life in the world (Thomas, 1996, p. 21).

Let me repeat that: “The minister’s life is, therefore, a life of study, prayer, contemplation, and action in and on the Word of God, God’s creation, the lives of people, and the events of life in the world.”

Friends, did you know this? If our pastors decided to devote their lives to study, prayer, contemplation, and action in and on the Word of God, would it be okay with us? Do we call our pastors to this kind of work? Do they feel and hear that call from us?

Pastors face multiple obstacles to teaching the Bible. Most significantly, despite concise denominational statements like this one, confusion abounds regarding the role of the Mennonite pastor. Both the denomination-wide *Pastorate Project* (Meyer & Sutter, 1995) and the AMBS *Engaging Pastors* project (Longenecker, 2010b) found that pastoral responsibilities in

Mennonite churches are often poorly defined. Former AMBS professor Arthur Paul Boers (Boers, 2007) has written that, “Teaching—especially teaching Scriptures—is one place where we again encounter issues of pastoral leadership and authority. It is not clear whether [Mennonite] churches see teaching as intrinsic to the pastoral vocation” (Boers, 2007, p. 1).

Along with lack of clarity regarding whether Mennonite pastors ought to spend time in Bible teaching, questions of authority surround the pastoral role. At the *Engaging Pastors* Summative Conference in 2010, the listening committee reported that a question emerged consistently among the 103 Mennonite conference and denominational leaders who attended: “How do we read the Bible well, and to whom do we look to tell us that we’ve read it well? And who can take the authority and make it so (Longenecker, 2010, p. 108).

Nevertheless, despite these great obstacles, there *are* pastors who are leading communities of engagement around Scripture.

As part of my leadership studies, I found and interviewed six seminary-educated pastors who:

- (a) regularly lead adult Bible studies in their congregations;
- (b) are consciously drawing on tools of biblical interpretation gleaned in seminary as they prepare for and teach adult Bible studies;
- (c) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are enthusiastically engaged with Scripture; and
- (d) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are making use of tools of biblical interpretation in their own study of the Bible.

In addition I interviewed participants in the Bible study classes these pastors are leading, and attended several of the Bible studies as they were in session.

I found these pastors by asking conference and denominational leaders and seminary faculty for the names of Mennonite pastors who fit the criteria. I spoke with six pastors. I certainly didn’t talk with every Mennonite pastor who fits the criteria.

But in any case, in the end, through this rather arbitrary process, I had quite an interesting mix of pastors and participants to interview. It turned out that the six pastors I studied graduated from six different denominational seminaries, including one from AMBS and one from Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and the other four from seminaries of other denominations. They grew up in five different denominations. Only one was raised Mennonite. One was raised Roman Catholic in Guatemala. One was raised United Methodist, and the other three were raised Baptist. All are Mennonite pastors today.

In many ways, these pastors exemplify what has been called “positive deviance.” That is, they are examples of “outliers who succeed against all odds” (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, p. 3)—people “who have succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others” (p. 4).

So how are these pastors doing it? How, in the face of so many odds stacked against them, are they drawing together enthusiastic Bible students who want to meet regularly and dig deep into Scripture? How are they creating communities of engagement around the Bible?

These pastors currently serve in congregations scattered across the country, in five different regional conferences of Mennonite Church USA. Their churches are located in urban communities as well as small cities and rural areas. Their congregations range in size from 30 to 300. They are lead pastors, church planters, solo pastors and associate pastors. They carry full-time and part-time roles. Participants in their Bible studies are young adults in their twenties, adults in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, and elderly adults. Relatively few participants are in their 30s.

These pastors are not ideological. That is, they cannot be easily pegged as either conservative or liberal, or even moderate, for that matter. They *appreciate* aspects of both conservative and liberal views and *challenge* aspects of both conservative and liberal views.

So, besides being a diverse mixture of Mennonite pastors, what do these people have in common? How could it be that each of them is today doing the relatively rare thing of creating a community of engagement around Scripture? I was curious.

Before I interviewed the pastors and participants, I expected I would hear reports of something about what pastors were *doing*, something technical, something that had to do with using a lot of small groups, or dialogical adult teaching methods, or Thomas Groome's "shared praxis" model. Or maybe, I thought, it would have to do with using clay, or painting, or calligraphy. I just didn't have any idea what I would find, but I assumed it would have something to do with a successful and usable technique.

As it turns out, these people have no technique in common at all! They are all over the map when it comes to technique. One pastor starts every session with insights from blogs, newspapers and other current happenings and spends the majority of class time in guided discussion, ending with several minutes of silence. Another pastor lectures most of the time, breaking it up every 15 or 20 minutes with times for open questions and comments. Another pastor puts people in groups of two or three and gives them questions they work on together all evening, then uses Sunday mornings to teach on the passage they studied that week. All this is just to say that these pastors' teaching techniques don't seem to be the answer to the question of how they are creating communities of engagement around Scripture.

But I did find that they had some other things in common, things that I think might be instructive for us. In the beginning of my interviews, I wanted to get straight to the point and ask pastors what they are *doing* in their Bible studies. My professor, however, advised me to ask some easier questions to get the conversation started. So I included some questions about "How did you first start studying the Bible?" just to break the ice. To my great surprise, it turned out that it was in the answers to these "preliminary" questions that I found an amazing amount of commonality among the pastors.

To give you a quick overview, I found that pastors shared:

1. An **intense passion** for biblical formation for the sake of **transformation**
2. A common conviction that teaching is **central** to their ministry
3. Many formative experiences
4. Several personal characteristics
5. An overall educational approach

The first commonality was one that was especially striking to me—that these pastors share: *an intense passion for biblical formation for the purpose of transformation*. They find the Bible's vision of life *compelling*. They see the Bible not as a rulebook, but as "God's Story," as the "Grand Narrative of God," as the "Biblical story," as "the Big Story of God's work in the world."

They have *confidence* in the Bible's overarching coherence, and in the truth of how it talks about life and reality. They find the meaning of their *own* lives bound up with the biblical story. Out of this deep connectedness to the Story of God's work in the world, these pastors have an intense desire to see others drawn into this biblical story.

They believe that biblical formation *matters*.

These pastors' posture toward Scripture is humble, emphasizing a desire to learn from, be shaped by and *submit to* Scripture rather than to master it as information. While pastors spent little time describing their views of Scripture in *doctrinal* terms, they repeatedly and consistently demonstrated Scripture's authority for their lives. One pastor put it this way:

Something I took from Eugene Peterson is the notion that we don't approach the Bible from a strictly utilitarian point of view. It's not up to us to handle or manage the truth, or to *use* the Scriptures, as much as it is to place ourselves before the Scripture and allow the Scripture to exercise authority over us. If we're going to teach the Bible, I think we need to begin there. *We need to be people who are in*

the process of being shaped by Scripture, not simply people who have learned how to handle Scripture.

Another pastor said,

Most people I teach the Bible to are trying to figure out how to apply the Bible to their life and to their world. But I'm more and more inclined now to try to get the traffic running on the bridge the other direction. How does our story, and how do our lives, I mean the narrative of our history, get caught up into the narrative of the text and the narrative of how God is narrating the world, or 'storying' the world? I don't want you to apply Easter resurrection to your life; I want you to be caught back up into the resurrection so that something more interesting happens to your life. So it's about traffic and direction on the bridge ... moving from applying the text to our lives to applying our lives to the text.

These pastors view the Bible as the story of God's activity in the world and God's invitation to human beings to participate in that story. One pastor said, "We just need to help [people] see how to find their story in the biblical story and allow the biblical story to help shape and form their stories."

His approach seems to be working. One of the participants in his Bible study said he finds himself developing a type of relationship with Bible characters as he participates in these studies:

If I'd have been asked before the Bible study last night, 'What sense did you get from reading Amos of Amos' personality?' I would've said, 'I didn't see any personality! It was just vanilla.' And yet when we left after the Bible study last night our pastor had developed a personality in my mind! And personality is a relationship kind of thing. The book of Amos now means a whole lot more to me because in my mind I've developed a personality for Amos and I can relate to him a little better.

So, as you can see, these pastors passionately desire biblical formation for themselves and the people they serve. They long to participate more fully with their people in "the biblical story," a metaphor they use for Scripture and God's unfolding work in the world.

Surprisingly, neither pastors nor participants mentioned struggling with questions of the role and authority of Scripture.

Second, pastors share a common conviction that teaching is **central** to their ministry.

All pastors reported feeling called to make Bible teaching part of their ministry. Some experience that call in the form of support from the congregation. Some hear it as an inner call from God. One associate pastor talked about it as the support of the lead pastor and two as the support of seminary professors. In most cases more than one of these forms of call is present, helping the pastor to know that teaching the Bible is part of what she or he should be doing.

One pastor gained a helpful lens on her calling while in seminary. She said,

Luke [meaning the Gospel writer] acknowledges that some of the people who have passed on this stuff were "servants of the Word." That was one thing that became available to me in seminary. At least I learned that Mennonites historically had this idea of a leader in a congregation being a servant of the Word. I really latched onto that.

Another pastor reflected on how the church where he taught on weekends during his young adult years gave him positive feedback on his teaching. He said,

It was a local congregation in Guatemala, age-wise very mixed, with mostly adults. I loved teaching! I became very passionate about it, doing my own research. I was nineteen years old, twenty years old, and I was the official professor of my local church! Seeing people grasping information—that made my day!

Another pastor said, “The people have given me permission to teach them. I started a Bible study because I felt called to do it. I have all these good feelings. I feel called to teach. I feel embraced. I feel empowered.”

All pastors stated that they *love* teaching the Bible. They find it thrilling and deeply satisfying when people in their studies experience “aha moments” as an aspect of the Scripture’s meaning becomes clear.

Pastors find ways to teach Bible even as they carry out complex pastoral assignments, including regular preaching, pastoral caregiving, and administration. Several pastors reported that their Bible studies serve a pastoral care function, directly and indirectly addressing pastoral care issues. One mentioned that regular Bible study substantially increases people’s capacity for dealing with life.

[In the previous generation] people wouldn’t come to us with the kind of spiritual angst that they come to us with now. The spiritual underpinnings of the average American are so shallow.... People are not equipped to handle the questions of death and loss and pain and separation and brokenness like they used to. And I think they’re creating more situations of brokenness and hurt and pain than they did.... There’s a component [of the church] where there are people who face a crisis and they are not prepared to handle it. And so I feel like biblical literacy gives people the framework.... I want people to fall in love with the Word of God and I think if they fall in love with the Word of God a lot of other things fall into place.

Another pastor said,

If I were to tell new pastors one thing, it’s that I have gotten more relational collateral out of our [senior] Bible study. It’s freed up our worship and it’s freed up our leadership decisions because they love it and they feel my investment in them there. The leadership team has suggested that I drop it and I keep saying, “You have no idea what’s coming out of this.” I just can’t believe everything that’s coming out of it, talking about theology and politics and family and legacy.

So we see that these pastors believe that teaching Bible is both central to their ministry role and supportive of other aspects of ministry.

We have seen that each of the six pastors has an intense passion for the Bible. They find the Bible’s vision of life compelling. They have confidence in the Bible’s overarching consistency, and in the truth of how it talks about life and reality. And we have seen that because of this they are devoting a lot of their ministry time to Bible study and teaching. This passion is fueling their teaching and their leading.

But how did they come to be that way? How is it that they are so deeply, viscerally, wholeheartedly connected to the Bible? How were these pastors so clearly formed to teach, and formed to lead communities of engaged Bible students?

It turns out that these Mennonite pastors, despite having grown up in very different denominations—all but one of them grew up outside the Mennonite church, but are Mennonite now—whatever their denominational background, these Bible-enthused pastors had many

formative experiences in common. Despite coming from all over the country and even outside the country, these pastors share five types of formative experiences with one another.

First, each pastor had at least a few family members who were intensely involved with Scripture and with the church. Pastors' homes and church experiences made a huge impact.

Second, as young adults, all of the pastors had several opportunities to teach and study the Bible. They studied it informally with peers in homes, dorm rooms and churches. They studied it formally with mentors and professors in Bible studies and classrooms. They taught vacation Bible school and Sunday school classes. They led Bible studies. As they pursued theological education they taught in assigned teaching practicums. For whatever reason they received invitations from church leaders to teach, long before we might have expected to tap them as teachers.

Third, as young adults, all of these pastors made consequential choices regarding faith. They experienced major shifts in their theology.

One pastor remembered:

I had my own crisis of faith, so I thought. It was really more a crisis of faith in relationship to fundamentalism because I didn't know anything else. I was taught that there wasn't anything else. So I thought maybe this was a choice between being a Christian and not being one. So I went through three or four years of just searching, to sort some things out. I ended up in seminary because of my searching, not because I was going to be a minister or something. I wasn't sure if I was going to be a Christian at that point.

Fourth, these pastors went to seminary. They all report that in seminary, the Scripture "opened up" to them as they learned tools of interpretation, learned to exegete and exposit the biblical texts, and discovered new biblical concepts. Through seminary they found new ways to access the Bible for spiritual formation. They learned a great deal.

I work in a seminary, so that may sound self-serving. But I believe there are a variety of ways people can pursue learning about how to exposit and exegete the Bible. For example, a few months ago I read in *Mennonite World Review* about a Hesston student who had tattooed the "salvation history" timeline on his arm as a way to remember the Story of God's love. I believe seminary is important, but the most important thing is to take the *next step* in your learning journey in biblical interpretation, whatever next step you are ready for.

And fifth and finally, these pastors had mentors throughout their lives who were deeply engaged with the Bible and available to them at key points in their lives.

One pastor remembers studying the Bible with his pastor and professor in Guatemala, who continued to be his mentor and friend after both of them moved to the United States. "I was inspired and intrigued," the pastor recalled. He also remembers his pastor's constant encouragement to go to seminary in the U.S. "Every time I'd see him he was like, 'So when are you gonna do it? When are you gonna do it?' and I'm like, 'Shut up! Come on!' But he pushed and he actually inspired me to do it!"

Being formed to lead a community of engagement around Scripture is not an accident. There are many things about these pastors' formation that I believe we would do well to notice.

There is, of course, much more to my study. There is more that could be said about formation. In addition, there are also the pastors' personal characteristics and educational approach, each of which were very enlightening and took reams of paper in my dissertation.

But what I most want to tell you is that these pastors are leading communities of engagement around Scripture, and in these diverse contexts the Scripture is *speaking* and providing common language for knowing God's heart and desires, and for grappling with life.

Does this guarantee that there are no disagreements? I sincerely doubt it.

But what IF we found ourselves in communities of engagement around Scripture, all around Mennonite Church USA? What IF we found ourselves meeting regularly to study the Bible with well-prepared teachers, who would lead us into in-depth grappling with the Scripture and its many contexts, marinating in God's Story together over time? What if we kept on listening and talking, challenging and persuading, until we could articulate not only our own, but EACH OTHER'S perspectives on what the Scripture is saying to the church? What if we found ourselves, with all of our differences, seeking *to hear the call of Scripture together* in an ongoing way?

Would this guarantee we would all come out on the same place on sexuality issues? Probably not, since we already know that there are biblical preachers and scholars and writers who have arrived at different viewpoints on questions related to sexuality. Despite the conventional wisdom that says that the Bible speaks definitively about matters of sexuality, there are, in fact, people speaking directly from Scripture to offer views about why the traditional understandings might be challenged. *If they are speaking from their understanding of Scripture*, can we, at the very least, listen to what they have to say as we study the Bible together?

Perhaps membership in Mennonite Church USA should be based, not on our beliefs about sexual ethics, but on our willingness to commit to participate in in-depth weekly Bible study in our own congregations. I would very much like to be part of a church where studying the Bible is more central to our identity than our conservative-liberal labels, and where studying the Bible is as central to our identity as it was to the early Anabaptists.

I have no doubt that if we start studying the Bible together, our growth toward the reign of God will be stretching and challenging to us. *To all of us*. That's because, as Borsch says, "Throughout the church's history, the Holy Scriptures have called for the *formation and re-formation* of faithful communities before God" (Borsch, 1995, p. 360).

The deep engagement with Scripture our parents and grandparents and Anabaptist forbearers experienced was hugely important for *their* time and *their* place. It enlightened and strengthened them for faithful discipleship. But this is *our* time, and *our* opportunity to grapple with Scripture in light of the questions and experiences and stories of *our* time. We cannot rely on their study, and their spiritual practices, and their experience. We cannot take shortcuts and continue to call ourselves a biblical people. We have to experience Scripture for *ourselves*. As Walter Brueggemann has written, "Scripture cannot be effectively appropriated as long as it is treated as though it were a set of settled conclusions or abstractions, without reference to the realities of life among the readers."

I don't pretend that this kind of work with Scripture will be easy. It's tough, actually. It requires time, and preparation, and emotional and social intelligence, and the setting aside of ego issues. It requires a commitment to guiding learning for transformation, not just teaching to show off knowledge. It is not an easy task.

But let's not let the difficulty of the task cause us to lower the bar. Instead, let's take up the challenge, and ask ourselves who can lead us in this work. If our pastors feel called but not empowered to teach, what can we change? If some of our pastors feel gifted differently, let's figure out who in each congregation *is* gifted to teach, and let's equip and train and educate them to teach on the pastor's behalf. Let's make Bible study and effective teaching a priority, and learn to dig deep, so that we might begin to truly know and love the one thing that can unite us: that is, so that we can know and love the Story of God's love, revealed in Jesus Christ, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and given to us in the pages of the Bible.

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