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**GOD’S STORY, OUR STORY:
TELLING, RE-TELLING, AND RE-STORYING**

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Shifting trends within and beyond the walls of the church are reshaping Christianity in our present context. Many Christian denominations are in the midst of a paradigm shift as great as or greater than the 16th century Reformation. Because the way forward looks nothing like the path the church has journeyed, church leaders, theologians, and scholars recognize the need for innovative and adaptive leadership expertise to meet the opportunities and challenges of the present time.

For more than two decades, Mennonite Church Canada congregations have been on a journey of development, learning, and growth, transitioning theologically and experientially to a missional ministry framework. “Missional” is grounded in God’s missionary nature and Jesus’ post-resurrection instruction to his disciples (John 20:21).¹ Undergirding “missional” ecclesiology is the conviction that God is ahead of God’s people, present and active in the local neighbourhood and the world. Thus, the church’s call is to join with God to further God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation. The transition underway for Mennonite Church Canada congregations not only leads to fresh encounters with the Divine but is also a process that potentially leads to the transformation of congregational culture.

This narrative inquiry research project investigated that amidst the current unstable and changing context, narrative engagement with predominant congregational narratives is a vital leadership tool that can be utilized to lead organizational change. Stories within a culture, including congregational culture are containers of meaning, experience, values, assumptions, world views, and more. As humans, we live storied lives. As Christians, we locate ourselves within God’s unfolding story of salvation and redemption. Stories provide a framework to

¹ All Biblical references New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

understand lived experience and they inform future action. Additionally, stories are an invaluable leadership resource in that they can be analyzed to identify barriers and facilitators. The process of telling and re-telling predominant congregational stories uncovers limiting narratives as well as the presence and activity of God. Re-storying is a process of living into new stories which God is writing amongst us for God has said, “See I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:19).

Literature in the field of pastoral leadership has focused heavily upon missional ecclesiology, organizational change, and adaptive leadership theory. Organizational culture change and narrative leadership theory provide unique lenses through which to examine and analyze pastors’ lived experience. Through open-ended focus group interviews, research participants were invited to share stories about their lived experiences adapting and responding to change.

Analyzing the storied lives of seventeen experienced pastoral leaders, barriers, that is, obstacles that risk keeping a congregational system stuck were identified. Additionally, facilitators, that is strengths, capacities, and hope-filled stories that shimmer with the presence and activity of God were also identified. Leaders can effectively initiate change through stories as both barriers and facilitators are identified, examined, and when necessary re-storied. As new stories are embedded in an organizational system, individuals grasp what the change involves and why it may be desirable. New stories can effectively usher in a new life stage and propel the church into God’s future, thus impacting culture change within Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) congregations and beyond.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Context of Ministry	4
Qualifications for Ministry	8
A Changing Ministry Context	10
Goal of the Study	20
Research Question	20
Key Words	20
Defining Terms	20
Purpose and Justification	21
a. Personal	21
b. Practical	22
c. Theoretical	22
Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	24
Missional Ecclesiology	24
Navigating a Wilderness of Change	41
a) Paradigm Shifts	43
b) Liminal Space	44
Liminality and Pastoral Leadership	48
Liminality and Social Theory	52
Shifting Religiosity in Canada and Beyond	55
The Church in an Unstable Season	58
Cultural Organizational Change	65
Learning Theory	68
Discontinuous and Continuous Change	70
Change Theory & Cultural Change	71
Institutions and Movement Theory	75
Social Movement Theory	79

Leadership Theory	84
a) Adaptive Leadership	85
b) Organizational Leadership & Systems Theory	87
Narrative Leadership	92
a) Leadership Storytelling	94
b) Pastoral Life-story	96
c) Stories of Spiritual Process	97
d) Philosophy of Narratives	98
e) Storytelling in Organizations	100
f) Knowledge-management	101
g) Metaphors	103
h) Story De-construction	104
i) Narrative Intelligence	105
Narratives & Pastoral Leadership	107
a) Narratives & Psychotherapy	108
b) Narratives & Liminality	108
Conclusion	110
Chapter 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	113
Research Question	113
Research Design	113
Narrative Inquiry Methodology	113
Suitability of Narrative Approach	118
Focus Groups	118
Participant/Co-researcher Demographics	121
Procedure	124
Data Collection and Transcription	125
Data Analysis and Interpretation	126
Benefits of the Study/Significance of the Findings	127
Ethical Considerations	128
Chapter 4. FINDINGS	130
Sample	130

Narratives	130
Themes / Resonant Threads	131
1. Identity	132
a) Origin Stories	133
b) Identity Under-Construction	135
c) Culture, Ethnicity, Language: the immigrant and refugee story	138
d) Identity and Values	142
2. Metaphors and Images	147
3. Buildings and Properties: protectionism, re-imaging, re-purposing	150
4. Leading in Liminal Space	156
5. Living the Story	161
a) Experimentation	161
b) Organizational Decision-making	164
c) Professional Development	165
d) Relationships: formal, informal, collaboration, neighbourhood	167
6. Integrating Theological Frameworks	172
a) Biblical	172
b) Missional	173
c) Anabaptist Tradition	178
d) Discipleship	180
7. Hope: Stories of Transformation	181
Summary of Findings	185
Chapter 5. DISCUSSION	188
Journeying the Wilderness	188
Appreciation Expressed for the conversation	193
Conversation Starter	194
Storying: The Contextual Landscape of Research Participant's Congregations	194
Canadian Religious Landscape	196
Wider Religious Landscape	201

The Cultural Landscape of MCEC Congregations	211
Identity	217
Liminality	222
Missional Ecclesiology: a theological framework	226
Cultural Organizational Change	229
Re-storying: Shimmering Hope	239
Experimentation	240
Relationships	241
Narrative Leadership	242
Conclusion	253
 Chapter 7. PERSONAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION	 255
 Chapter 8. CONCLUSION	 264
Limitations of the Study	270
Future Direction	271
 APPENDICES	
A – Wilfrid Laurier Research Ethics Board (REB) Approval	273
B – Recruitment Letter	274
C – Information Letter and Consent Form	275
D - Demographic Information Form	278
E – Focus Group Research/Interview Questions	280
F – Focus Group Narratives:	
Focus Group #1: Thomas, Li, Kale, Eshe	281
Focus Group #2: Ken, Grant	286
Focus Group #3: Peter, Marcel	290
Focus Group #4: Ruth, Yang, Stan, and Dan	294
Focus Group #5: Wanda, Ted, Anna, Ruby	302
G – Summary of MCEC Environmental Scan	310
 REFERENCES	 309

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the mid 1990's I served on the building committee at my home congregation. As a committee we were tasked with the oversight and construction of a new sanctuary and office space. During one meeting the committee wrestled late into the night. *How large do we build? What seating capacity is needed? What projection for growth ought to be considered?* After a lengthy and unfruitful discussion, the decision was made to invite the president of the construction company to a follow-up meeting. I still recall with clarity the president's response to the committee's dilemma: *"Build it and they will come."*

For decades, for the Christian church in North America "build it and they will come" was a successful story. It was a story steeped with meaning, beliefs, expected outcomes, assumptions, and more. Having served in pastoral ministry in the Mennonite church for seventeen plus years and having experienced significant change in the church and culture in that time, I would argue that this predominant story has become a limiting narrative, even problematic. Such creates a pastoral leadership challenge in that many congregants continue to live into this story, even if verbalized today with different language. Today pastors may hear, "let's launch a new program to strengthen children's and youth ministries" or "we need to ramp up music in worship." Deeply embedded in these stories is the expectation that programmatic changes will prompt the community to "come," resulting in congregational growth. This is a limiting story. My personal lived experience with limiting stories has inspired and motivated me to pursue this research study. Telling, re-telling, and re-storying is an area of growth I have identified for myself personally as a pastoral leader, MCEC congregations, and the broader Mennonite Church Canada community of congregations.

Stories do not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, stories are created, scribed, and shaped culturally through communal and individual lived experience. All of humanity is held within a

web of intricately connected stories authored across time and place. Family narratives are rich containers of experience and meaning. They tell the story of connectedness and belonging, pioneering and settler experiences, beauty and brokenness, each story contributing to and shaping familial and individual identity. Family narrative threads are deeply woven into the fabric of congregational stories and contribute to a community patchwork of narratives.

Community stories steeped in deep historical roots are rich with experiences of both strength and struggle, communal values, belief systems, world views, and more. Nationally, as the horrors of the Residential School experience come into light, the Christian church has been faced with the painful story of institutionalized and systemic abuse inflicted in the name of God. As survivor's stories are told, held, and honoured, a new story is beginning to be written in Canada. It is the story of truth-telling, healing, restoration, redemption, and reconciliation. This new story sows the seeds for a new beginning including forming new practices such as land acknowledgement statements, educational and training opportunities, and relationship building.

God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer continues to author a story amongst God's people. Theologian Brian McLaren in his book *A New Kind of Christianity* digs deeply into the overarching story line of Scripture, presenting the biblical narrative as three-dimensional saying, "If Genesis is a story of sacred creation and reconciliation, Exodus is a story of sacred liberation and formation."² The third narrative according to McLaren, is the story of the peace-making kingdom and new creation revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's vision of a peaceable kingdom ignites the faith of God's people "with a sacred vision for the future, a vision of hope, a vision, of love. It represents a new creation and a new exodus – a new

² Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 56.

promised land”³ It is this story and vision which Jesus invites his followers to live into as co-authors. The resurrected Jesus speaking to his followers said, “as the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). And “when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). Through the power of God’s Spirit, Jesus’ empowered followers are commissioned and “sent” to carry on the ministry Jesus had begun and further the mission of God. It is this story the church continues to live into as it is shaped and transformed by God’s Spirit.

What began as a movement of Jesus’ called and sent followers, has evolved over time into a complex story of denominationalism, contextual ministry, church policy and procedure, and institutionalism, each shaping the church’ history, present, and future including ecclesiology, theology, discipleship, and the education and training of Mennonite pastors.

This research study is situated within the context of multiple stories - the biblical story, evolving cultural stories, denominational stories, congregational and pastoral leadership stories, and individual stories. One story that was not anticipated upon completion of the five focus group conversations (July 18 – October 8, 2019) is the story of pandemic and its impact on the church. The stories the church live into inform church policy and structure, pastoral leadership, education and training, congregational culture and more. This research study is also informed by my personal story. Across time and space, God continues to write new stories through creation and through God’s people. God’s people as co-authors are the utensil in God’s hands as God continues to author the ever-unfolding story of restoration, reconciliation, and redemption for all creation. Pastoral leaders attuned to congregational and their own personal predominant stories,

³ Ibid., 65.

including experiences of re-storying are situated well to give leadership amidst the complexity and multiplicity of stories.

Following is the story of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC), its diversity and governance structure, educational requirements/expectations for leaders, and an overview of a changing ministry context.

Context of Ministry

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) is an Anabaptist community of approximately 107 congregations spanning geographically across Ontario, Quebec, and extending east to New Brunswick. MCEC congregations are committed to extending the peace of Jesus Christ. MCEC is one of five regional churches across Canada in covenantal relationship under the denominational structure and leadership of Mennonite Church Canada.⁴ Nationally, Mennonite Church Canada includes approximately 31,000 baptized believers and over 225 congregations.⁵ On a global scale, Mennonite Church Canada is one of approximately 100 national churches that make up Mennonite World Conference, consisting of approximately 14,000 congregations and 1.7 million baptized members. In April 2013, General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference César Garcia at the 25th Anniversary Celebration of MCEC reported that 65% of the global Mennonite church resides in the global south including Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁶ Africa at present is the fastest growing Anabaptist body, globally.

⁴ Mennonite Church Canada is made up of five regional churches: Mennonite Church British Columbia, Mennonite Church Alberta, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, Mennonite Church Manitoba, and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

⁵ “Churches,” Mennonite Church Canada, accessed March 30, 2019.
<http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/churches>.

⁶ César Garcia, “Seeds Scattered and Sown.” (Sermon, MCEC Annual Church Gathering & 25th Anniversary Celebration, Kitchener, ON, April 27, 2013).

Mennonite World Conference is a richly diverse body including theological beliefs, ethnicity, structure and governance, conflict management styles, pastoral and congregational leadership models including gender roles, and more. MCEC has also evolved as a richly diverse body. In Ontario during the 1980's three branches of Anabaptist Mennonites integrated to form MCEC: the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec, the Western Ontario (Amish) Mennonite Conference, and the Conference of United Mennonite Churches, which had origins in the Russian immigration to Canada.⁷ The integration was voted on at a delegate session in Leamington in March 1987 and MCEC officially started March 1, 1988. The historic decision to merge the three streams was made, according to MCEC Executive Minister David Martin (October 2005 – July 2020) “so that together we could more faithfully respond to God’s call to be a Church in mission.”⁸

Another significant event unfolded during the 1980's. By 1982, at least one woman had been ordained in each branch of the church. According to retired pastor Mary Schiedel, “because it was a new experience for the church to have a woman as a minister, there was some confusion at times in the conferences and congregations, and also some pain – especially for the women involved.”⁹ In 2021, for the majority of MCEC congregations, calling women to lead pastoral roles no longer results in the heated and divisive theological debates as occurred in the past including my home congregation in the early 1980's. Ultimately, the Mennonite church responded and adapted, and cultural change occurred.

⁷ Schiedel, Mary A. *Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973-2003* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 22.

⁸ David Martin, “Seeds Scattered and Sown.” (MCEC Annual Church Gathering & 25th Anniversary Celebration, Kitchener, ON, April 27, 2013).

⁹ Schiedel, *Pioneers in Ministry*, 22.

I have been called by God and the church to pastoral ministry and have served in pastoral roles in two MCEC congregations: Poole Mennonite Church (2001 to 2008) as half time youth pastor, and Wellesley Mennonite (November 2011 to present), where I serve as full-time lead pastor. Wellesley Mennonite Church was formed in 1974, founded by a group of people who came from conservative, less-progressive neighbouring Mennonite congregations. The early founders had a vision for a Mennonite congregation within the village limits of Wellesley at a time when many Mennonite families were travelling outside the village to rural congregations. The founders, progressive for their time, sought a more flexible approach to church life and order and from its earliest beginning they took pride in being more inclusive and tolerant in terms of ideas, theologies, and people. Over the years, the congregation has found ways to meaningfully blend diverse worship, navigate theological diversity, and successfully hire their first full-time female lead pastor. For the Wellesley Mennonite congregation, Anabaptist roots are healthy and deep: Christ-centeredness, centrality of Scripture, peace theology, rich community life, and engagement in mission that extends into the surrounding neighbourhood and beyond. Diverse interpretation of Scripture at times has been at the root of some misunderstandings and congregational conflict. Diversity is not uniquely congregational. Rather, diversity is also noted denominationally.

Today MCEC is a multi-cultural body and is striving to become an intercultural church. Anabaptist scholar Safwat Marzouk defines *intercultural church* as a covenantal community whose:

differences are received as a gift, not a threat, and boundaries are not rigid but instead porous and mutually negotiated. When individuals and groups in the church learn how to claim and be critical of who they are, when they learn to offer to and to receive from one another, the church embodies an alternative beyond the models of assimilation and segregation. When the church becomes an *intercultural* covenantal community, moving beyond being a *monocultural*

or *multicultural* church it proclaims a message of hope in a polarized and divided world.”¹⁰

From its predominant Russian and Swiss roots, today MCEC congregations worship in 17 different languages. Beyond English-speaking, MCEC congregations are Tamil-speaking, French, Spanish, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Chin, Hmong, Chinese, Cantonese, and Laotian. From 2005 - 2020, 29 congregations were welcomed into “Provisional Status” within MCEC. Of these congregations, 20 congregations self-identity as new Canadian, immigrant or refugee population faith communities. First Hmong Mennonite Church in Kitchener, the first Asian church in MCEC is now 40 plus years old. MCEC is a growing denominational body. As denominational statistics indicate, the most significant growth over the past decade has emerged through new Canadian, immigrant, and refugee populations. MCEC’s newest congregations have been drawn to Anabaptist’s focus on discipleship, social justice, and peace theology.

MCEC worships in diverse styles, modern, traditional, and a mix of both. Worship is held in aged sanctuaries, gymnasiums, and new state-of the art auditoriums. MCEC is also theologically diverse. Following a 7-year national church discernment process, *Being a Faithful Church*, four resolutions were passed in Saskatoon in October 2016 related to same-gender relationships. The resolutions are as follows.

1. One of our foundations of unity has been the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. We recommend that it continue to serve the church in the ways suggested in the Introduction of the Confession itself.
2. We call upon our family of Christ to respectfully acknowledge that there are those among us (congregations and individuals) whose careful study of Scripture and prayerful journey of discernment lead them to a different understanding on committed same-sex relationships than is commonly understood by readings of Article 19 in our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.

¹⁰ Safwat Marzouk. *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 16.

3. We recommend that we create space/leave room within our Body to test alternative understandings from that of the larger Body to see if they are a prophetic nudging of the Spirit of God.
4. Since continued discernment will be required after Assembly 2016, we recommend that Mennonite Church Canada and Area Churches develop ways of to hear one another around the implementation of this recommendation.¹¹

Wellesley Mennonite Church, as with the wider national Mennonite Church body have navigated some troubled waters in response to *Being a Faithful Church* resolutions. Some voice disappointment that the resolutions went too far. Others have expressed disappointment that the resolutions did not go far enough. In the past few years five sister congregations have departed from MCEC having actively processed and pursued alternate denominational affiliation that align with a more conservative theology related to, but not limited to human sexuality. Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, evangelism, and ecclesiology, in recent years have also emerged as divisive theological issues.

Qualifications for Ministry:

According to Mennonite Church polity, qualifications for ministry fall into four major categories: personal character, calling, function, and formation/training.¹² Foundational to ministry “is a commitment to the way of Christ and the church through believers’ baptism, membership covenant with a Mennonite congregation, and affirmation of the current Mennonite confession of faith.”¹³ The Mennonite Church affirms that ministry involves both an inward and an outer call. Calling from God involves a journey of discernment, testing, and confirmation.

¹¹ “Being a Faithful Church,” Mennonite Church Canada, accessed March 30, 2019. <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/sites/home.mennonitechurch.ca/files/2016AssemblyResolutionsSummary.pdf>.

¹² *A Shared Understanding of Church Leadership: Polity Manual for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA* (Working document) (Kitchener, ON: MennoMedia, 2014), 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

Ordination is understood as a “joint act of the congregation, the area conference, and the denomination which calls and appoints members to ongoing leadership in the life and mission of the church.”¹⁴ Following a lengthy discernment process including nearly 10 years of pastoral ministry experience, Wellesley Mennonite Church recommended me for ordination. I was subsequently ordained by MCEC in April 2015.

Mennonite Church Canada affirms that some leaders will begin ministry with pastoral training while others may have little or no formal pastoral training as their call begins with the congregation’s outer call.”¹⁵ Leaders come with diverse and varied levels of educational preparation, life experience, and specific training for pastoral ministry.¹⁶ In response, Mennonite Church Canada developed “The Ministerial Credentialing, Competencies, and Education” document which identifies six areas of leadership formation all Mennonite pastors are encouraged to develop throughout their life of ministry. The six core competencies are: biblical story, Anabaptist theology, Christian spirituality, self-awareness, contextual awareness, and leadership. While the Master of Divinity degree is the recommended standard for pastoral ministry, it is equally important for a pastor to be willing to grow and learn.”¹⁷

MCEC is involved with the congregational call process and oversees ministerial credentialing. During a search process, a congregational profile is created and pastors complete an in-depth Ministerial Leadership Inquiry (MLI) form. When the potential for good fit is discerned, the MLI is shared with a search committee. MLI’s are reviewed. A potential candidate is invited to interview. Search committees make decisions to proceed with multiple interviews,

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

reference checks, candidating, and ultimately a congregational vote is held. When a pastor is called by an MCEC congregation, the pastor, congregation, and denominational minister sign a “Covenant Regarding Ethics in Ministry” which defines the covenantal relationship of each. A “Memo of Understanding” which includes length of term is also signed. It is common for the pastor to initially accept a 3-year term from the calling congregation. A major pastoral review is held within the first two years of ministry to discern the congregational/pastor relationship, including mission, vision. It is common for subsequent terms to be five years in length. It is rare for an MCEC pastor to serve with an open-ended term. Currently, I am ministering in my 10th year at Wellesley Mennonite.

At times the pastor/congregational relationship breaks down and either party can give 3 months notice to dissolve the relationship. During highly conflicted situations a shorter dismissal period may be agreed upon in consultation with congregation, pastor, and MCEC leadership.

A Changing Ministry Context

In recent years, MCEC congregations and denominational leadership have experienced significant change. In October of 2017 a special Delegate Session of Mennonite Church Canada was held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The purpose of the session was to approve the “Future Directions Task Force” (FDTF), an organizational restructuring proposal involving the nationwide church body. Launched seven years’ previous, FDTF was initially visioned as a revitalization process for Mennonite Church Canada. Not long into the process however, financial constraints created a sense of urgency. Denominational leadership deemed the current structure including financial plan no longer feasible or sustainable. MCEC reported in 2013 that denominational financial givings have been in steady decline for 10 years.

Nationally and locally the Mennonite church has experienced much transition. In response in 2013, MCEC leadership led a strategic planning process, an “environmental scan to acquire a clear picture of the existing and emerging context for MCEC ministries.”¹⁸ MCEC sought to identify trends both within and beyond the church. Data was acquired through personal interviews and surveys. Some general observations emerged, including the priority placed on reaching out to the community. Indeed, 80% of interviews “indicated that local community involvement is a crucial part of being missional.”¹⁹ Two emergent themes were identified. Firstly, “people are worried about the future of the church” due to aging congregational demographics and declining attendance.²⁰ Secondly, “some people are looking to MCEC to provide congregations with the right tools, staff or programming to be able to solve their issues.”²¹ At a time when culture within and beyond the church is shifting dramatically, approaching changing trends as a problem to “solve” is problematic. Looking to programs or structures to “fix” the church points towards a church deeply embedded in a particular story, mental model, and institutional culture.

A significant paradigm shift is underway within MCEC as God’s people seek to align with God’s mission. The shift involves a leadership transition away from a “chaplaincy model” of pastoral ministry. The chaplaincy model “assumes that the surrounding culture is friendly and supportive of the congregation.”²² Chaplaincy leadership focuses upon meeting its member’s needs, performing rituals, comforting people in times of crisis, and passing along faith to

¹⁸ Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Kitchener, ON. *MCEC Environmental Scan Report* February 2014, Arli Klassen, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² Diana Butler Bass. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 78.

children. While chaplaincy and pastoral care giving is a vital calling of the church, MCEC congregations are currently being equipped and encouraged to live more fully into their identity as sent missional communities which reflect the values of God’s kingdom including living out God’s counter-cultural kingdom.

Anabaptists have long understood that “the church is not simply a *sending* body, but a *sent* body – a fresh rediscovery that came to be broadly affirmed within the missional church movement.”²³ Over the past century Anabaptists have recognized they have not been immune to the enticements of Christendom despite its deep historical missional engagement. In response, Anabaptism is reclaiming its conviction about “mission being inherent in the true nature of the church.”²⁴

Anabaptists understand the church’s call is to be more than a place of nurture for its members, but rather a body that lives out a “sent” identity. Rather than undertaking community needs-assessments and responding to data collected, the value of relationship building in the local context is being upheld. Thus, the local neighbourhood has emerged as the primary context through which God’s people grow in awareness to God’s presence in order to join with God’s mission. A February 2021 conversation with a long-term congregant disclosed an ongoing tension saying, “it is all fine and good to connect with the neighbourhood, but we have to look after our own first.” The presence of either/or stories over both/and thinking remains strong.

The current paradigm shift involving local engagement stands in contrast to the church’s historical approach to mission whereby “missionaries” were commissioned and sent to foreign lands. The church is in process of acknowledging that the location of mission field is shifting.

²³ Stanley W. Green and James R Krabill. *Fully Engaged: missional church in an Anabaptist voice* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2015), 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

Recapturing Anabaptist's missional engagement is rooted in the "conviction that the church and mission *are not and cannot be* separate realities. Indeed, the earliest Anabaptists demonstrated in both their words and acts of witness that to be the church is to be about God's holistic mission of salvation, healing, reconciliation, justice, and freedom in the world."²⁵ Many MCEC congregations aware of the tendency toward an inward-focused mission, a maintenance model of ministry, or attractional models of church, have expressed a readiness to live into a renewed vision of the church that involves furthering God's mission within the local neighbourhood.

Leading the way for this significant culture shift, MCEC has invested heavily to support congregations through the development of a disciplining and equipping process (Re-Learning Community) and through the hiring of staff tasked with assisting congregations to make the paradigm shift.²⁶ MCEC supported Rev. Dr. Stephen Drudge in his 2015 action-reflection doctoral research project which focused upon equipping Mennonite (MCEC) missional pastors in a post-Christendom context through the implementation and evaluation of a missional change process.²⁷ MCEC has also partnered ecumenically with missional consultants to glean skills and wisdom from specialized expertise in support of organizational cultural change. MCEC has been generously supportive as I seek to examine congregational narratives including identifying barriers and facilitators which are impacting culture change as the church lives more deeply into

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ 'Re-learning Community' is an MCEC initiative which was launched in 2014. Re-learning is a discipling process/opportunity to support a shift in congregational culture by emphasizing the making and sending of disciples. A focus of Re-learning is to shift focus from institutions to people who follow the example of Jesus Christ. Emphasis is given to identify God's presence locally and discernment regarding joining with God. <https://mcec.ca/relearning-community>.

²⁷ Stephen Drudge, "Developing Leadership Capacities for a post-Christendom context: Implementing and Evaluating a Mission Change Process with Mennonite Pastors" (DMin diss., Tyndale College, 2015).

its missional identity. Additionally, Drudge and I have been working closely over the past six years with the Canadian-based agency *The Missional Network* (TMN) seeking to launch “Going Local” a missional equipping process with a cohort of MCEC pastors and congregational leaders.²⁸

A current challenge I believe for the church, including its pastoral leaders, is to re-claim the nature and primary purpose of the church. I affirm Suderman’s definition of church as follows:

The church is meant to be an alternative community, subverting the values of our dominant society with kingdom of God priorities. It is to be radical, counter-cultural, and prophetic. It is to be a mobile and portable reservoir of kingdom-living that can be present and contextualized everywhere.²⁹

Building upon Suderman’s definition I affirm that the church is a Christian faith community that is being transformed by God’s love, grace, and care. The church bears witness to God’s kin-dom values including peace, justice, liberation, and reconciliation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the church is being built up for the sake of the world that God loves.

At a time when compliance to incorporation and the maintenance and strengthening of institutional structures has become a focal point for many within the church, Anabaptists are in the process of re-claiming the church’s call and identity including responding to the call to grow in their capacity for risk-taking, vulnerability, and journeying the wilderness of unknowns.

²⁸*The Missional Network (TMN)* is a Canadian-based consultative group that fosters learning through engagement with denominational leadership, clergy, and lay leaders across North America. *TMN* promotes learning and partnering together so that the people of God might join with God in our local contexts. “Going Local” is a discipling/equipping process, initiated by the Canadian-based, *The Missional Network* and supported by MCEC Denominational Leadership. The purpose of “Going Local” is to build congregational capacity to discern God’s presence and activity in the local neighbourhood as we seek God’s presence and activity.

²⁹ Robert J. Suderman, *Re-imagining the Church: Implications of Being a People in the World*, ed. Andrew Gregory Suderman (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 3.

Following Jesus in life has been at the heart of Anabaptist belief and practice.

Anabaptists believe Jesus is:

the clearest reflection we have of God's purposes for the world. Matched with the conviction about the centrality of Jesus is a resolute commitment to follow Jesus in life. Jesus and the reign he announced as inaugurated – given life and form in his life, ministry and teaching, death, and resurrection – are seen as the embodiment of God's purposes for the world.³⁰

A leadership challenge I encounter as I seek to adapt and respond to a changing ministry context, is the perception that the missional pilot project “Going Local” is a “fix-it” strategy. Some congregants believe restructuring congregational ministries (committees) will “fix” the decline of young families, aging congregational population, and changing attendance patterns. The “fix it” story has a tight hold on the church.

In a telephone interview October 12, 2017, Canadian missiologist Alan Roxburgh said, “missional has emerged as yet one more way to ‘fix the billboard,’ that is, the church.”³¹

Roxburgh explains in this way, referencing a conversation with Sally Mann, *Journal of Missional Practice* (JMP) editorial team member.³² Mann attended a fall 2017 “Think Tank” in which the editorial team listened to stories from various church leaders, suggesting existing structures and the continued unravelling of the Protestant churches is preoccupying leaders. In response Mann reflects:

The most compelling picture that came to my mind at the 2017 Think Tank was that of a dilapidated billboard with a beautiful view beyond. Broader Western imaginations, our constructions, the ways we expect to see God to work and the ecclesial structure that we have relied upon to ‘do mission’, are falling apart. Some might feel called to try and repair then, to make them work again; to do more of the same, only better. Perhaps this is because we have been slow to notice the beautiful view behind the billboard? Could it be that what looked so ‘set in stone’ in our ways of thinking about church and mission

³⁰ Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill, *Fully Engaged*, 15.

³¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, Interview by author, Wellesley, Ontario, October 12, 2017.

³² Ibid.

were temporary constructions of our own making; perhaps useful for a time but disassembling now. How should we feel about this? One option is to embrace the shift, to be hopeful. Beyond this deconstruction, if we attend well, do not panic or attempt to seize back agency, signs of something new and beautiful might be emerging.³³

As a pastoral leader I witness how many church leaders and congregants are deeply invested in “fixing” the billboard. Leaders fixate on the billboard mulling over “fix it” questions, strategies, and attractional programs. Roxburgh asserts it is vital for God’s people to attend to a different conversation/question asking: “How do we discern what God is doing ahead of us in our neighbourhood and communities and join with God there.”³⁴ In his book *Joining God in the Great Unraveling* Roxburgh suggests, “A focus on fixing our churches will misdirect us from what God is doing because the church’s shape emerges from retrospect and out of the risk of relationality.”³⁵ Scriptures including Philippians 2: 1-8 and John 1: 14 “make it clear that the place where God is found and known is in the ordinary and the everyday. God has pitched God’s tent right in the neighbourhood.” Accordingly, the primary location of God is not contained within the four walls of the church, but in the world. Therefore, to shape the church for mission, one must start with God, asking God questions rather than asking “church” questions.³⁶

Growing and developing congregational capacity to identify the presence and activity of God within the world, in order to join with God and further God’s mission presents a tension for Anabaptist Christians who have historically been suspicious of “the world.” It is a vital pastoral

³³ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Outside the Walls and Beyond the Billboard,” *Journal of Missional Practice*. November 2017, www.journalofmissionalpractice.com/billboard.

³⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), ix.

³⁵ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), 10.

³⁶ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking the Church, Changing the World*, ix.

leadership task today to assist one's congregation to unpack and challenge this limiting story and re-story it in ways that brings transformation and new life.

Living with uncertainty, transition, and unknowns, is cause for anxiety for God's people and for many pastoral leaders. And yet, as the biblical narrative and history reveals, God's relationship with God's people is an experience of re-creation, death and resurrection, estrangement and reconciliation, oppression and deliverance, liberation, and transformation, unbinding and resurrection, God's Spirit actively enlivening, disrupting, and bringing forth new life, new possibilities, new opportunities. Located in the liminal space of leaving the familiar behind and living with uncertainty regarding what is to come, is currently the space where God's people locate themselves in God's ongoing story. Liminality is a recurrent and primary location where God abides and leads God's people. Pastoral leadership in the context of liminal space calls for leaders' awareness of culture, congregational lament for the "golden glory days," and a deep attentiveness to the disruptive, challenging, and transforming movement of God's Spirit.

Culture change is slow involving the transformation of beliefs, practices, habits and attitudes, and world views.³⁷ Some leadership theorists suggest culture change can take as long as three to 12 years while others suggest for change to become deeply embedded in a system it can take as long as a generation.³⁸ Ultimately the culture of an organization – including the church – "shapes individual morale, teamwork, effectiveness, and outcomes."³⁹

As a pastoral leader committed to leading cultural organizational change, rather than looking to denominational leadership for the "right tools, staff, or programming to solve," or to

³⁷ Samuel R. Chand. *Cracking Your Church's Code* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 103.

³⁸ John P. Kotter. *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 13.

³⁹ Chand, *Cracking Your Church's Code*, 2.

“fix” the church during this liminal season, I have encountered resistance amongst pastoral colleagues and congregants. The story “build it and they will come” continues to have great power. This has led me to curiously reflect upon the power of story and the implications of unexamined stories which may be keeping God’s people stuck or bound to a time past. Legitimizing narratives have a tight hold on behaviors, beliefs, and values thus impacting individual and corporate actions and future direction. Given the powerful nature of culture, it is crucial that pastoral leaders gain skills to unpack predominant congregational stories including unearthing the values and beliefs that are deeply embedded within and guide their congregation through a process of re-storying. This is a gap that I have identified in current studies related to pastoral leadership.

As humans, we live storied lives, live into stories, and make meaning through stories.⁴⁰ Christians locate themselves within God’s unfolding story of salvation and redemption. At a time of significant culture change within and beyond the church, God is inviting God’s people to boldly live into a new story. Engagement with narratives through the exploration of experiences, the telling of stories, unpacking and re-storying is a creative process that can result in organizational cultural change at this uncertain time.

It is the thesis of this study that narratives are deeply embedded in congregational culture and when examined narratively, unpacked, and re-storied, it is possible to lead culture change. The focus of this study is to investigate the lived experience of MCEC pastors as they lead culture change, transitioning from a chaplaincy ministry model to a missional leadership model. The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to examine and interpret narratively, predominant

⁴⁰ D. Jean Clandinin. *Engaging in narrative inquiry* (NY: Routledge, 2013), 13.

narratives as told in focus group conversations with MCEC pastors, in order to identify barriers and facilitators and their impact on organizational culture change.

Focus Group interviews for this research study were held between July 18, 2019 and October 8, 2019, just months prior to the global Covid-19 pandemic. While the research was gathered pre-pandemic, the data was analyzed and dissertation was completed mid-pandemic. The pandemic has drawn the church into a significantly new, unsettling, and unexpected story that is being lived and experienced. Literature has just begun to address the potential impact of the pandemic for the church. In a *Winnipeg Free Press* article, John Longhurst engages with Canadian scholars who focus on the impact of religion on society.⁴¹ Scholars note that the pandemic has dramatically accelerated changes for the church and has amplified changes already existent. It is projected that the decrease of religious participation pre-pandemic will continue post-pandemic. Because the pandemic has created new habits the return of regular attendees is less likely and this shift is expected to be most noted among young families and young adults, a demographic that was already in decline. When places of worship were shuttered for in-person worship, many congregations moved to an on-line presence. It is projected that many congregants will continue to expect an on-line presence moving forward. A question to ponder, “what will congregations do that cannot afford this technology?” Further, while the majority of religious communities have followed government restrictions, a small minority have pushed back. This action has exposed just how quickly fellow believers can turn on each other. Resultant has been a negative view on Christianity. While the pandemic has brought religious freedom, declining attendance, and participation to the fore, all is not doom and gloom. Many

⁴¹ John Longhurst, “Common Themes Emerge on Pandemic’s Impact on Religion,” *Winnipeg Free Press* (Winnipeg, MB) May 15, 2021, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/common-themes-emerge-on-pandemics-impact-on-religion-574426562.html>.

congregations have found creative and adaptive ways to minister and stay connected with one another and our communities. Pre-recorded worship services have been shared far and wide, leading to virtual congregations. Generosity has been unleashed as has compassion, collaboration with community partners, and increased awareness of community needs. As the church continues to live into this pandemic season, a new story is being written, a new identity is being fashioned, and God's people are being transformed. The pandemic is a season to reflectively ponder with curiosity, "What is God up to?"

Goal of the Study:

The goal of this study is to examine and analyze MCEC pastors' predominant stories in order to identify barriers and facilitators impacting cultural organizational change. This project will constitute a contribution to the field of pastoral leadership.

Research Question:

What are MCEC pastors' lived experiences of the facilitators and barriers to congregational culture change: A Narrative Inquiry.

Key Words: narrative leadership, adaptive change, narrative inquiry, missional, organizational change, culture change

Defining Terms:

Christendom "refers to the time period in the Middle Ages of Western Europe when all of society (church, state, schools, work, art) was united under the one umbrella of Christianity."⁴²

Christendom is a social construct that identifies the alliance of church and state.

⁴² David E. Fitch. *The church of us vs. them: Freedom from a Faith That Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2019), 6.

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) is one of five regional churches that make up Mennonite Church Canada. MCEC includes approximately 99 congregations, representative of diverse backgrounds, ethnic make-up, rural and urban settings, and cultural and theological diversity.

Missio Dei is a Latin term understood as “the sending of God.”

Missional refers to the “mission of God.” The God of the Bible is a “missionary God” who sends people on a journey for the sake of God’s world.⁴³ God is active in the world and God calls people to participate in God’s mission.

Missional church is the framework that describes congregational culture and leadership.⁴⁴ The missional church is understood as a community of Jesus followers who live out of the awareness that the church is sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.⁴⁵

Post-Christendom refers to the cultural reality in which the alliance of church and state wanes.

Story/Narratives are often used interchangeably. By definition, a story has a beginning, a middle, and an ending including characters and plot whereas a narrative is much larger. Narratives unfold over time with no clear beginning, middle, and ending. Narratives tend to be more open-ended than story and generally do not reach a resolution. If a story is as a musical note, narrative is a composition that creates the song.

Purpose and Justification

Personal:

This research project is of interest and significance to me personally as it

⁴³ Alan J. Roxburgh. *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 43.

⁴⁴ Mark Lau Branson, “A missional church processes: post-intervention research.” *Journal of Religious Leadership*. 13 No. 1 (Spring 2014): 99-132.

⁴⁵ David W. Boshart, “Revisioning Mission in Postchristendom: Story, Hospitality and New Humanity.” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*. 4, No. 2 (Fall) 16-31.

represents a continuation of leadership development and growth as I seek to lead God's people during a season of great uncertainty. Leading during a liminal season and amidst a changing context, I am intrigued by the implications of engaging with narratives, my own and those of colleagues. It is also intriguing to explore potential new stories that God is writing amongst God's people.

Practical:

Discovering barriers and facilitators in predominant congregational narratives which can keep the church stuck or help launch them into God's future, is a vital leadership tool that can equip current and future pastoral leaders.

Theoretical:

New knowledge in pastoral leadership will serve pastoral leaders well as they continue to journey the current season of opportunity and challenge.

For this study 17 MCEC pastor participants in five focus groups, were asked to narratively reflect on their lived experience leading missionally.

Following the introductory chapter, the structure of this dissertation will be as follows:

Chapter two is an overview of the literature from the past decades including the fields of missional ecclesiology, liminality, narrative and adaptive leadership.

Chapter three explains the method of narrative inquiry used and its suitability for this area of research. Narrative inquiry methodology is explained, participant demographics presented, followed by a description of the study, and ethical considerations.

Chapter four explores the results of this study, beginning with a cultural demographic summary of participants, followed by an analysis of the seven "resonant threads" or themes and barriers and facilitators identified through focus group storytelling.

Chapter five explores how these findings interact with scholarship including missional theology and leadership theory. Limitations of this study and direction for further study are also considered.

Chapter six is an exploration of personal and theological reflection.

Chapter seven summarizes findings and includes suggested future direction.

Finally, in the appendices the reader will find Research Ethics Board (WLU) approval, recruitment letter of invitation, information letter and consent form, demographic information form, and focus group interview questions. The appendices includes the narratives of each focus group discussion, perhaps the most important inclusion in this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Upon reviewing relevant literature for this doctoral study, it has been vital to look at missional ecclesiology, the changing landscape of religiosity in Canada and beyond, liminality, cultural organizational change theory, adaptive and narrative leadership theory.

As a narrative researcher I am aware that a literature review is never a complete process. The narrative researcher's goal is not to post a 'period at the end of a sentence.' Rather, a literature review is an ongoing process of engagement and dialogue between the researcher and the literature which continues to enrich and develop within the field of study. As Clandinin and Connelly assert, narrative inquiry is never considered complete but rather a process of ongoing discovery, to which co-researchers contribute.⁴⁶

Because this study is grounded in narrative inquiry methodology, the literature review is formatted to tell a story. Initially I began my literature review by looking at literature related to missional ecclesiology as this is the theological grounding denominationally for Mennonite Church Canada. With time however, my research attention and interest expanded to include a deep dive into literature related to current pastoral leadership challenges amidst a season of unsettledness. This chapter reviews literature in the fields of missional ecclesiology, a changing ministry context, liminality, cultural organizational change, narratives, and narrative leadership theory. Each field of literature is relevant for the current changing and changed context of the Christian church.

Missional Ecclesiology

Over the past two to three decades a large body of literature and journal articles has

⁴⁶ D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 20.

emerged as the Christian church transitions from maintenance of a Christendom model of church to a missional church model. South African theologian Cornelius J.P. Niemandt asserts “missional ecclesiology has emerged as a significant trend in mission studies”⁴⁷

The missional framework is grounded in the Trinitarian model *Missio Dei*: God the Father sends the Son; the Father and Son send the Spirit; the Father and Son and the Spirit send the church into the world.⁴⁸ God the Creator, the missionary God, who sends and participates in the world also sends the church into the world.”⁴⁹ God’s people are sent into the world to be agents of God’s transformation of God’s world.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry he announced, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near” (Matthew 4:17). Following, Jesus invited disciples to follow him (Matthew 4: 18-20; Mark 1: 16-20, Luke 5: 1-11; John 1: 43) and to participate in God’s mission (Luke 10: 1-11). The risen Christ commissioned the disciples “to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:16-20). At Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the gathered community of Jesus followers were empowered to be witnesses.

The character of the New Testament church is presented as a community called and formed to be Christ’s witnesses. Of the 96 images Paul Minear outlines in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament* many describe a church that is fundamentally missional.⁵⁰ The Apostle Paul wrote to the church of Corinth: “You yourselves are a letter, written on our hearts,

⁴⁷Cornelius J. P. Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 68 (1) (June 2012): 1-9, doi: 10.4102/hts.v68i1.1198.

⁴⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991). 390.

⁴⁹ Roxburgh. *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 43.

⁵⁰ Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3: 2-3). The people of God described as Christ’s letter to the world defines a missional purpose for the Corinthian church. Luke’s theology of the early church as instructed to the gathered disciples is articulated at the ascension, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). John’s theology of mission as sending is articulated post-Easter by the Risen Christ: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). From its beginnings, the church was apostolic. The church was “sent” in order to continue the ministry of the “sent ones,” the apostles, the first missionaries who founded churches. Each of the early New Testament churches were formed “with the express purpose of continuing the witness that had brought it into being.”⁵¹

“Missional” is not a new construct. Rather it is a renewed vision of the biblical narrative. *Missio Dei* emerged from the foundational work of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (1909 – 1998) an English missionary who spent nearly four decades in India. Upon returning to his home country in the mid 1950’s Newbigin discovered the west had become a “pagan society” and was a more difficult mission field than India.⁵² Newbigin assessed the challenge presented by a changing Western society. Britain once a Christendom society - Christendom defined as “a system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony on which the Christian religion was the protected and privileged religion of society and the church its legally established institutional form” - had

⁵¹ Darrel L. Guder. “Nicene Marks in a Post-Christendom Church,” *Presbyterian Mission*, 10 March 2010, www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/nicene_marks1.pdf, 6.

⁵² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 1.

evolved to a post-Christendom society.⁵³ Newbigin's extensive work of articles and books, beginning in 1933 and continuing until his death in 1999 provide the theological basis and foundation for missional theology. The focus of Newbigin's work which other missiologists have adopted "began to construct a new paradigm for mission, one whereby mission would be indispensable to the being of the church, and one that might release new energy for the contemporary mission of the church."⁵⁴

Newbigin's ground-breaking work undergirds missional thought and discussion amongst missiologists. A primary focus according to Newbigin is the congregation as "the hermeneutic of the gospel" which emphasizes the core nature and purpose of renewed "believing" communities of faith. According to Newbigin, gospel begins with compassion, as recorded in John 6.⁵⁵ When a great crowd gathered, they did not convene because they believed in Jesus' teachings but rather because they had witnessed healings (vv. 1-2). The crowd was hungry. Without a request from the multitude and seeing their hunger, Jesus provided for the crowd, more than enough to satisfy their hunger (vv. 3-13). In response, the crowd wanted to make Jesus "king" (v. 14). Seeing what was occurring, Jesus withdrew by himself to the mountain (v. 15). Eventually, however, the crowd found Jesus (vv. 16-25). Jesus told the crowd that they will hunger again and should therefore "not work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life" (v. 27). When those gathered asked what they must do to "perform the works of God" Jesus told them what is required is not work but belief, faith (v. 30).

⁵³Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 6.

⁵⁴ Darren Sarisky, "The Meaning of the *Missio Dei*: Reflections on Lesslie Newbigin's Proposal That Mission." *Missiology: An International Review* Vol. 42 No. 3 (2014): 257-270 doi; 10.4102/hts.v68i1.1198.

⁵⁵ Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 225-227.

According to Newbigin, John 6 reveals something vital about the way the church is authorized to represent the Reign of God. Indeed, John 6 offers an alternative narrative to that of society's predominant success stories. The gospel is credible as people come "to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross.... the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."⁵⁶ Jesus' ministry involved forming community. The believing community "has at its heart the remembering and rehearing of his words and deeds, and the sacraments given by him through which it is enabled both to engraft new members into its life and to renew this life again and again through sharing in his risen life through the body broken and the lifeblood blood poured out."⁵⁷

According to Newbigin, if the gospel is to influence public life and society it can only be achieved through local congregations in which "the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel."⁵⁸ This gospel outcome will only be possible when "local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."⁵⁹ According to Newbigin, this community has six primary characteristics: it is a community of praise; a community of truth; a faith community that does not live for itself but rather is deeply invested in the concerns of its neighbourhood (it will

⁵⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 232-3.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 232.

be the church for the specific place where it lives); it will be a community prepared and sustained by priesthood in the world (a royal priesthood Peter 2: 5,9); it will be a community of mutual responsibility; and finally it will be a community of hope.”⁶⁰ Newbigin’s ground-breaking and extensive work continues to influence the missional movement.

Missional Church: A Vision for Sending of the Church in North America, edited by Missiologist Darrell L. Guder and his colleagues was published in 1998.⁶¹ This work emerged from a study and research process initiated by the *Gospel and Our Culture Network* which had evolved from Newbigin’s work.⁶² Guder claimed a theological revolution was needed and suggested that as “denominational and centralized structures diminish in importance and power local congregations are beginning to see their own context as their mission.”⁶³ In his article “Walking Worthily,” Guder distinguishes missional churches as those who understand “the church as fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God’s healing purposes *for the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.*”⁶⁴ This orientation stands in contrast to those congregations organized primarily “around the maintenance of Christendom culture and faith practices.”⁶⁵ Core to Guder’s ecclesiology is that the church is sent into the world as the faithful continuation of Jesus’ own sending by God as

⁶⁰ Ibid., 231-2.

⁶¹ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶⁴ Darrell L. Guder, “*Walking Worthily: Missional Leadership after Christendom,*” Princeton Seminary Bulletin 28, no. 3 (2007): 251-291, www.ia801901.us.archive.org/25/items/princetonseminar2832prin/princetonseminar2832prin.pdf, 252.

⁶⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 29.

articulated in John 20:21: “As the Father sent me, so I sent you.” As such each congregation is a “witnessing community” and has an apostolic mission to fulfill.

Guder argues, “the church on earth is by its very nature missionary since according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁶

Accordingly Guder strives to foster an “understanding of the church as fundamentally and comprehensively defined by its calling and sending, its purpose to serve God’s healing purpose *for all the world as God’s witnessing people to all the world.*”⁶⁷ The church defined by its calling and sending to serve God’s healing purposes cannot be reduced to several clusters of activities: worship, fellowship, service, and in some cases mission.⁶⁸ When the church is inwardly focused on its members and salvation, the activities of the church concentrate on mediation and maintenance of their salvation and preservation of the institution itself. In this way, God’s saving purposes for the world in effect, are reduced to God’s salvation for the members of the church alone and the purpose of gospel is the formation of the church community of the saved.⁶⁹ Guder proposes a shift from the church seeing itself as an end to itself to an understanding of the church as a called people and witnesses of God’s gospel (Matthew 28: 16-20), from being member-centered, salvation-oriented and institutional viability linked to the congregation’s capacity to meet the religious needs of their members.⁷⁰

Further, according to Guder:

The apostolic mission was not merely the saving of souls and their collecting into community of the saved. The apostolic strategy, whose message was the event of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ and whose method was defined

⁶⁶ Guder, *Walking Worthily*, 252.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

by the earthly ministry of Jesus, was the formation of witnessing communities whose purpose was to continue the witness that brought them into existence.⁷¹

Accordingly, when mission is not viewed as a program of the church, local congregations can begin to see their own ministry context as their mission. Drawing upon the term *missional* to define the nature and vocation Guder argues that missional ecclesiology is biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological, and translated into practice.⁷²

Ground-breaking for Mennonite Church Canada congregations was the release of Anabaptist leader Robert J. Suderman's 1991 document *Navigating the Missional Church Understanding the Journey*.⁷³ Thus began a significant theological transition for Mennonite Church Canada congregations which MCEC continues to foster through leadership development, formation of disciples, and support to congregations.

According to Suderman, former General Secretary of Mennonite Church Canada, "If God initiates mission, then our role is to respond to God's initiatives."⁷⁴ Suderman articulates an Anabaptist denominational shift from that of popular chaplaincy model of leadership with primary focus upon congregant's needs, to a missional leadership model. According to Suderman while mission was not a new concept for North American Mennonites, "the notion of speaking of mission with adjectives and adverbs instead of nouns and verbs" was very new.⁷⁵ New language articulated that mission is not simply a program or committee of the church but its purpose.

⁷¹ Ibid., p 256.

⁷² Guder, *Missional Church*, 11-12.

⁷³ Robert J. Suderman, *Navigating the Missional Church*, Mennonite Church Canada, 2001.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

Indeed, “the vision of a missional church is that all members and actions of the church intentionally carry out the mission of God in the world.”⁷⁶ As such the church is a “sent” body.

In late 1999 and early 2000, Suderman, who at the time served as Executive Secretary of the Ministries Commission of Mennonite Church Canada wrote a series of six articles for the denominational periodical *Canadian Mennonite*. Doug Klassen, current Executive Minister of Mennonite Church Canada reflecting upon the “Re-imagine Mission” series suggested Suderman’s articles revealed how little the Mennonite church had been thinking about mission and that it is not Mennonite’s reflex to share the mystery of Christ with neighbours and strangers.⁷⁷ Noting vigorous Anabaptist mission globally during the 20th century with the theological centre of the Mennonite church shifting from North America to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, in his final article entitled “New wineskins for renewed mission,” Suderman concluded structural shifts are needed in order to adapt to changing contexts and an unpredictable future. Suderman argues, “mission has come ‘home’ and our ‘home’ has become the globe.”⁷⁸

As a global people impacted by institutional “sin” such as militarism, corporate financial crimes, gambling, shoplifting, human trafficking, computer crime, pornography, and more, “globalization of sin needs to be confronted by global possibilities of liberation and salvation.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Drudge, “Developing Leadership Capacities for a post-Christendom Context,” 9.

⁷⁷ Robert J. Suderman’s six articles published in the *Canadian Mennonite* include: “The reluctant missionary,” (Vol. 3 No. 21, October 25, 1999); “The mistaken missionary,” (Vol. 3 No. 22, November 8, 1999); “God: The model missionary,” (Vol. 3 No. 23, November 22, 1999); “Sharing gifts is the heart of mission,” (Vol. 3 No. 24, December 6, 1999); “The church as missionary,” (Vol. 3 No. 25, December 20, 1999); “New wineskins for renewed mission,” (Vol. 4 No. 1 January 10, 2000).

Doug Klassen, “Open to us a door,” *Canadian Mennonite* Vol. 24 Issue 11 (May 20, 2020), www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/open-us-door.

⁷⁸ Robert J. Suderman, “New wineskins for renewed mission,” 7.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

Suderman argues global conditions will need to be met with new structures that include partnerships because mission is reciprocal. An effective missional movement includes global accountability, local initiatives, sensitivity to cross-cultural dynamics and financial imbalances, networking with multiple partners rather than inflexibility, making churches accessible, expertise without being bureaucratic, and finally having lean and efficient structure.⁸⁰ In conclusion, Suderman writes: “Wineskins are not wine. Yet the wineskins affect the flavour of the wine. Structures are not the gospel, yet the structure nourish the communication of the gospel and affect the flavour.”⁸¹

Having served the church for fifty plus years as an educator, scholar, and denominational leader, Suderman’s thought and research focused on missional ecclesiology and implications for leadership culminate in his book *Re-imagining the Church: Implications of Being a People in the World*. At the heart of Suderman’s thought and study is the provocative question, “Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, incarnational reconciling/saving vocation of peoplehood (the church) is the foundational strategy of God for the transformation of the world that should in turn inform our own strategic planning?”⁸² Suderman answers the question boldly asserting “no, we do not believe this.”⁸³ He claims the church has “replaced the ecclesial vision with multiple other strategies that appear to be more easily implemented, defended, and measured.”⁸⁴ Suderman summons the church to reclaim its ecclesial identity and missional vocation which he purports is a primary responsibility of church leadership. Clarifying ecclesial identity and missional vocation is critical for the church

⁸⁰Ibid., 7.

⁸¹ Ibid. 7.

⁸² Suderman, *Re-imagining the church*, 24.

⁸³ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

considering the magnitude of change and upheaval in our world and most especially in response to the 2020-21 global Covid 19 pandemic.

Several prominent voices have arisen over the past decade to engage in the missional discussion including Missiologist Alan Hirsch. In his book *The forgotten Ways* Hirsch contends the word “missional” has become very fluid over the past years, “often used as a substitute for *seeker-sensitive, cell-group church*, or other church-growth concepts, thus obscuring its original meaning. According to Hirsch, the mission or “sentness” is “the church’s true and authentic organization principle”⁸⁵ Hirsch argues the missional church is:

A community of God’s people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world. When the church is in mission, it is the true church. The mission of God flows directly through every believer and every community of faith that adhere to Jesus.⁸⁶

Missiologist and leader of Canadian based *The Missional Network* Alan Roxburgh and psychologist and organizational consultant Fred Romanuk, in their book *The Missional Leader: Equipping your church to reach a changing world* assert that amidst a time of rapid and discontinuous change what is needed is “a new approach to leadership for missional communities.”⁸⁷ Roxburgh and Romanuk argue that the church needs to move from a consumerist model of church to a missional model since the very nature of the church is to be God’s missionary people.⁸⁸ The leadership transition needed must occur first personally for leaders so they can lead the church through transition.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Alan Hirsch. *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 82.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006). 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid., xiii.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

Four main themes within North American literature that appear regularly regarding missional understanding have been identified by the authors of *The Missional Church in Perspective*: God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world; God's mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God; the missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage in a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context; the internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission.⁹⁰ Focus upon the communal dimension of discipleship rather than individual dimension has implications for leadership including spiritual practices, worship, communicating mission as a core identity rather than activity or programs of the church, discovering missional identity through practices, and reframing church organization for mission.⁹¹ Van Gelder and Zscheile contend "a key turn in the missional church conversation has been its shift toward focusing mission on every congregation's immediate context rather than on some distant community."⁹²

Over the past decade there has been a vast emergence of missional literature that focuses upon ecclesial life centered in the local neighbourhood. Accordingly, rather than approaching the current context of ministry with re-strategizing tools or renewal programs, emphasis is placed upon equipping congregations to engage in spiritual practices that deepen capacity to discern God's presence within the local neighbourhood to join with God to further God's mission.

The authors of *The New Parish: How neighborhood churches are transforming mission, discipleship and community* explore three primary questions: Why do we need a new parish?

⁹⁰ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile. *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 153 – 161.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 129.

What is the new parish? How do we practice the new parish?⁹³ Core to this focus is the understanding that “neighborhood – in all its diversity – has a voice that contributes to the form of the church”⁹⁴ This stands in contrast to the Christendom era in which the “institutional church more or less dictated the form of the neighbourhood.”⁹⁵ According to *The New Parish* authors, “There is a growing sense that the Spirit works through the relationships of the neighborhood to teach us what love and faithfulness look like in that particular context.”⁹⁶ Thus, God who is active amongst faith communities is equally active within the local context of neighbourhood.

Alan Roxburgh in his 2015 book *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* draws upon the metaphor of “unraveling” to discuss the “coming undone” of Euro-tribal church. Roxburgh defines Euro-tribal churches as those churches he has worked most closely who trace their migrations from the United Kingdom and Europe over the past four to five hundred years. It is these churches who “form the primary Christian groups in the United States and Canada.”⁹⁷ According to Roxburgh, Euro-tribal churches have “created denominations shaped largely by ethnic and religious identities coming out of the fifteenth and sixteenth century reformations.”⁹⁸ Emergent from these churches which have been influenced by significant cultural movements and events, are four misdirecting narratives, that in multiple ways have become misdirected in their practice and understanding of mission.

Roxburgh sees four narratives driving the churches’ actions as:

1. Functional Rationalism (“We have the technology; we can fix it.”)
2. Management and control (“(With the right management, we can guarantee success.”)

⁹³ Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen. *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 153-161.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁷ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 3.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 3.

3. Ecclesiocentrism (“If we can fix the church, all will be well.”)
4. Clericalism (“We are the ordained; we must have the answers.”)⁹⁹

It is Roxburgh’s contention that churches have so turned in on itself, “they presume the church is the primary focus of their energy; they work on being attractational, on growing, on meeting needs and helping people, or on designed programs to send a segment of their members to serve outside the walls.”¹⁰⁰ Due to long-term introversion and anxiety, the church has lost sight of the disruptive activity and presence of the Spirit of God, which is primarily out ahead of the church, not only within. In response to this introversion and anxiety, Roxburgh sets out a practical path which invites God’s people to align with what God is doing in the local neighbourhood. *Joining God* offers practices for the journey: listening, discerning, testing and experimenting, reflecting, and deciding, a spiritual process to bring new life to God’s people. “We need to lay down and turn away from questions about how to fix the church or make it effective again and discern what God is doing ahead of us in our neighbourhoods and communities and join with God there” says Roxburgh.¹⁰¹

In his 2016 book *Structured for Mission* Roxburgh builds on his previous work, noting that in the context of significant shifts and challenges, it has become “evident that structures and institutions that once served the North American Christian church so well are no longer producing the results the church has come to expect. Indeed, current structures seem to be a “primary block of any real change.”¹⁰² Roxburgh suggests structures and institutions are actually the problem itself, needing to be either changed or discarded. At one time denominational structures provided identity and purpose to congregations which explains why denominations

⁹⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., ix.

¹⁰² Alan J. Roxburgh. *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 20.

invested heavily in resources for restructuring, reorganizing, and renewing. Roxburgh examines church structures through the lens of “legitimizing narratives” arguing that structures and organization embody the core narratives of either a group or society. When “legitimizing narratives” which once articulated core norms erode, structures are often re-examined rather than the underlying narratives.¹⁰³ With time, structures and institutions change. However, according to Roxburgh, real “change emerges out of a period of wrestling with these deeper changes in legitimizing narratives.”¹⁰⁴ In order to build a mission-shaped church, leadership is needed that will cultivate biblical imagination, engage in experiments, implement new practices and habits, grow in capacity for adaptation and resilience, discern the Spirit’s movement, and focus on the local including networking. Rather than trying to manage an unknown future, now is the time to cultivate practices and habits that invite a movement of people to live into new narratives.

In his 2021 book *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, Roxburgh humbly reflects upon his decades long missional journey of learning and formation and acknowledges that congregations have struggled to grasp the reality that God is ahead of them in the neighbourhood. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that asking congregants “to join with God is like inviting them to describe the taste of yellow.”¹⁰⁵ Roxburgh draws upon the metaphor of ‘ferment’ as discussed by the late Mennonite scholar Alan Kreider in his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. Kreider found the metaphor “ferment” to be a useful way to describe how early Christian church growth occurred.¹⁰⁶ Fermentation articulates a slow-moving

¹⁰³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁵ Roxburgh. *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Alan Kreider. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3

process. It is a process beyond sight and can easily be missed.¹⁰⁷ Kreider describes ferment in this way:

It operated reticently, by what theologian Origen called God's 'invisible power.' It was not susceptible to human control, and its pace could not be sped up. But in ferment there was a bubbling energy – a bottom-up inner life – that had immense potential.¹⁰⁸

Expanding upon the metaphor, Roxburgh asserts patient ferment, neither visible nor in a hurry, is “not amendable for those wanting some project, strategy, or method for managing change” as most pastoral leaders have been trained.¹⁰⁹ This is because ferment requires a different way of knowing.

The question of knowing undergirds *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*. Roxburgh's own reading and reflection and has led him to the writings of four women who have engaged and struggled in the unravelling of their own contexts. The discussion is enriched by exploring metaphors including Mary Jo Leddy's metaphor “reweaving,” a metaphor “which steps away from the technical language of experts and technocratic elites who keep wanting to get congregations to buy their language worlds.”¹¹⁰ Roxburgh contends images and metaphors evoke one's capacity to “ask how we can know what God is doing in our current situation.”¹¹¹ Additionally, metaphors “open us to the Spirit's reweaving in this unraveling.”¹¹² This is vital work for this present time when the church's default position navigates toward “build it and they will come,” rooted in human agency, rather than God as active agent in creation.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁹ Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 16.

¹¹⁰ Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 37.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹¹² Ibid., 35.

Roxburgh is bold to say that “there is an absence in the church of any focal sense of God as the primary agent in all this unraveling.”¹¹³ Accordingly, the question “how will congregations know where God is at work in the neighbourhoods?” involves a way of knowing that is beyond programs, structures, and strategies. When expected outcomes including the mental model, “Return on Investment” is the church’s default position, a new story is needed, a new “language house including the language of *being with* rather than *doing for* or meeting needs is needed.”¹¹⁴

The missional ecclesiology literature review began with the ground-breaking work of Lesslie Newbigin and returns to that point of reference. To be clear, Newbigin’s “hermeneutic of the gospel” cannot be minimized nor reduced to correct ecclesiology. Such reveals the default to ecclesiocentrism. Rather, Roxburgh returns once again to “how do we know where God is at work?” drawing upon Newbigin, British missiologist Paul Weston’s *Newbigin Reader*, and the thought of philosopher Michael Polanyi to make six claims about knowing:

1. Knowing is grounded in God’s self-revelation. Thus, knowing is not grounded first and foremost in our knowing. God is source of all knowing.
2. Creation and the incarnation of Jesus reveal to us that the world is personal, therefore fundamentally relational. Knowing is about interrelationality.
3. Knowing is dependent on the other revealing themselves. Knowing involves relationship, being present with others in such a way that over time we reveal ourselves to one another.
4. Knowing requires risk and commitment. We cannot know without risk and emptying ourselves of power and control. When we risk relationship with people in our community, we reveal something of ourself. As such, God is revealed in community.
5. Knowing requires community. Being with others invites revelation.

¹¹³ Ibid., 57.

6. Knowledge requires skill. As Newbigin asserts, “one must learn to know....¹¹⁵This skill which is acquired by the process of practice contains elements which cannot be specified in any formula which would henceforth obviate the necessity of learning”¹¹⁶

Grounded in decades of missional thought and practice Roxburgh articulates the church’s primary attention must be upon the agency of God. Voices from the margins have articulated culture and context is changing, requiring new imagination. Such stands in contrast to the church’s “fix it” strategies. Congregations that are attentive to their default positions, language, metaphors, and “ways of knowing” will develop the discernment skills necessary to identify God’s presence activity in the neighbourhood.

Based on a literature review, missiologists are the primary contributors to the field of missional leadership development. Resources include books, articles, and a missional change process.¹¹⁷ Resources are well grounded in theological, historical, theoretical, biblical, and practical missional frameworks. Missiologists have begun to address the crisis of leadership.

Navigating a Wilderness of Change: an introduction to paradigm shifts and liminality

The Christian church, as research participants generously shared through story, is journeying through a significant season of change, some would say as significant as the 16th century European Reformation. Congregational demographics and attendance patterns have shifted, a decline of denominational loyalty is widely noted, and bookstores devote entire sections to spirituality and yet studies report an increase of religiously unaffiliated and

¹¹⁵ Paul Weston, ed., *Lesslie Newbigin Missionary Theologian: a reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 22.

¹¹⁶ Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 143-151.

¹¹⁷ For an overview of Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk’s Missional Change Process, see *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 79-108.

“nones.”¹¹⁸ Pastoral leaders identify and at times lament that the church they trained for no longer exists. Programs and worship including music styles that once drew in the community no longer results in congregational growth as the church had come to anticipate. Indeed, in many instances, such no longer is even keeping congregants active in their local congregation. Today many neighbours, due to shifting cultural demographics are not even familiar with the purpose or the function of the church. The relationship and interconnectedness between local congregation and its neighbourhood can be difficult to identify and many pastoral leaders recognize that the community is not “attracted” to the church. Still, many congregations continue to place responsibility upon the community to “come to us” rather than live into its call and missional purpose and identity of “sentness.”

Research revealed many participants make meaning narratively of the current ministry context by drawing upon the biblical story of Exodus and the metaphor “wilderness.” Walter Brueggemann in his article *Who will lead us out this wilderness* writes, “our current crisis of virus and economic meltdown invites a rereading of this narrative. The crisis has led us into a wilderness-like context where Pharaoh’s certitudes are no longer adequate or persuasive. It is an arena without visible life supports wherein wilderness-like protest and complaint are the order of the day.”¹¹⁹ Amidst the current “wilderness” experience, just as it was for God’s ancient people, the choice between fear and hope remains.

Pastoral leaders are becoming increasingly aware that an ending – a way of “being” and “doing” church is ending - and that a significant shift is underway that will transform the

¹¹⁸ Pew Research Center, “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape,” June 27, 2013, www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape.

¹¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “Who Will Lead Us Out Of This Wilderness?” *Church Anew*, July 24, 2020, www.churchanew.org/brueggemann/who-will-lead-us-out-of-this-wilderness.

Christian church. There is growing awareness that the church for which pastoral leaders were trained to lead, no longer exists. In response to a shifting context within and beyond the church walls, what is needed are further developed leadership skills, training, knowledge, and adaptive capacities, and a new story to discern and align with what God is doing. What was, is fading from view and what is emerging is not yet clear. Holding tightly to the past holds the church captive from freely moving forward into God's future.

The church is situated in a liminal space, the borders of Christendom and post-Christendom overlapping, the borders of chaplaincy leadership and missional leadership overlapping, the borders of consumerist and missional models of church overlapping. A significant paradigm shift is underway which impacts leadership. In response, an overview of paradigm shifts and liminal space is vital.

Paradigm Shifts: Pioneering leaders and a changing worldview

Thomas S. Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* popularized the phrase "paradigm shift." A paradigm shift involves a radical change of belief systems or theories. According to Kuhn, transformation of paradigms, that is "successive transition from one paradigm to another via revolution is the usual developmental pattern of mature science."¹²⁰ *Building upon* Kuhn's work, Richard Rohr asserts "paradigm shifts become necessary when the plausibility of the previous paradigm becomes so full of holes and patchwork 'fixes' that a complete overhaul, which once looked utterly threatening, now appears a lifeline."¹²¹

¹²⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Second Edition)* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 12.

¹²¹ Richard Rohr, "A Trinitarian Revolution," *Center for Action & Contemplation*, February 28, 2017, <https://cac.org/a-trinitarian-revolution-2017-02-28>.

Kuhn describes paradigms as patterns or models of behavior. Humanity as a whole, including groups of people, live out patterns daily, which shape ways humanity both think and behave. When a new paradigm emerges, it is time-consuming work to deconstruct and reconstruct previous assumptions. Such work is strongly resisted by an established community, including the church. Renowned leadership scholar Margaret Wheatley asserts paradigm pioneering leaders face some common challenges as they seek to invest in the future while dealing with the past. Amidst the challenge of inventing the new, paradigm pioneering leaders must break with tradition. Supporters will complicate the pioneering work by insisting they use familiar and traditional leadership processes. And while impossible for pioneering leaders to get it right the first time because no one has drawn the map, paradigm pioneering leaders learn as they go, even when the current culture does not support this kind of experimentation.¹²²

Central to this study is identifying patterns of thinking, behaviors, and actions embedded in narratives to identify barriers and facilitators as the church adopts a missional model of church. Deconstructing primary narratives brings to the fore the assumptions of the faith community, creating space for reconstruction and a re-storying, leading to culture change. When a revolution of thinking emerges, a paradigm shift is underway and in the in-between, exists liminal space.

Liminal Space

The words “liminal” and “liminality” derive from the Latin *limen*, meaning a threshold, that is the bottom of a doorway which is crossed when entering or departing a building.

“Liminal” as an adjective describes a time in-between what was and what will be. Liminal space

¹²² Margaret J. Wheatley *Finding our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005), 167-169.

is a place of transition, a season of waiting and unknowing.¹²³ It is “a place where transformation occurs if we learn to wait and let it form us.”¹²⁴

A gift of thresholds which are inevitable and exceedingly disruptive given the future appears uncertain, is that the in-between space holds rich potential when we are brave to confront the discomfort. Liminal spaces are not “stuck” spaces but rather rich soil for learning, growth, and transformation for individuals, communities, including the church. Research participants articulated liminality clearly without ever naming the term directly revealing with clear insight that the church is in a state of significant change and re-shaping, a liminal space.

The modern use of the term “liminality” was developed in the field of anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 in his seminal work *Les rites de passage. (Rites of Passage)*.¹²⁵ Van Gennep developed the term to discuss rituals such as coming of age, anointing tribal leadership, and marriage. According to Van Gennep these rituals exist in every culture and follow a sequential structure: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal.¹²⁶ An initiate, the person undergoing the ritual, is stripped of social status held prior to the ritual, is inducted into a liminal period of transition, and finally granted new status and reoriented into society.¹²⁷ Relating this model to the biblical exodus story, God’s people were liberated from Egyptian slavery and led by Moses into the wilderness where they journeyed for 40 years as wanderers prior to their entrance into the Promised Land where they became settlers. During the liminal period, God’s people lived

¹²³ “Liminal Space: finding life between chapters,” accessed May 10, 2021, <https://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Charles LaShure, “What is Liminality?” *Histories and Theories of Intermedia*, 18 October 2005, <http://umintermediat501.blogspot.com/2008/12/what-is-liminality-charles-la-shure.html>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

outside their usual environment and experienced physical, emotional, and spiritual discomfort before reorientation into a new land, a new beginning.

Anthropologist Victor Turner expanded upon Van Gennep's concept in the late 1960's including its usage beyond a ritual setting, turning his focus to the middle stage of passage – the transitional or liminal stage.”¹²⁸ According to Turner, “Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.”¹²⁹

Amidst liminality, transformation occurs including *communitas*. *Communitas* is a Latin noun that refers to an unstructured community. Victor Turner developed this term to explain what happens when the old identity and structures die. In *communitas*, a common humanity emerges. Released from old expectations and assumptions related to how the community ought to function, a new way is discovered.¹³⁰

Franciscan contemplative Richard Rohr utilizing a spirituality lens describes God's use of liminal experience in this way saying:

We often remain trapped in what we call normalcy, 'the way things are.' Life becomes problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers. It can be a pretty circular and even nonsensical existence. Instead, we have to allow ourselves to be drawn into sacred space, into liminality All transformation takes place there. We have to move out of 'business as usual' and remain on the 'threshold' (*limen*, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between There, the old world is left behind, but we're not sure of the new one yet. That's a good space. Get there often and stay as long as you can by

¹²⁸ Ibid., (For fuller discussion see Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 6.

¹²⁹ Victor Turner. *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97.

¹³⁰ Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You are Going* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 15.

whatever means possible. It's the realm where God can best get at us because we are out of the way. In sacred space the old world is able to fall apart, and the new world is able to be revealed. If we don't find liminal space in our lives, we start idolizing normalcy. We end up believing it's the only reality, and our lives shrivel."¹³¹

Thresholds are sacred spaces of divine waiting and transformation. While humanity including the church may prefer the stable and predictable over transformation, to fully embrace the “betwixt and between” is to encounter God in the waiting, in the pauses, in the unknown wildernesses. Many are resistant to dwell fully in liminal spaces because liminality always begins with an ending or awareness that a major shift is underway. Effective leaders lead their people and organizations through the loss, out of normalcy, and each time they successfully do, it is sacred ground.

Sociologist and political scientist Agnes Horvath in her book *Modernism and Charisma* contends “being pushed to the limit, or on the threshold, is an extremely difficult moment in the life of individuals, or any community. If this happens, it is never certain that there is a way back to life as before; even to any kind of rational existence.”¹³² For Horvath “any situation where borderlines and boundaries that previously were stable and taken for granted are dissolved generates a ‘liminal’ situation which needs some solution, as the elimination of such boundaries generates uncertainties in which a decent and meaningful normality becomes impossible, returning the world into chaos.”¹³³ On the other hand, the dissolution of borderlines has an attractive quality, providing freedom from previous structures and the possibility of providing space for autonomy.

¹³¹ Richard Rohr. *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer (Revised and Updated Edition)*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2020), 155.

¹³² Agnes Horvath. *Modernism and Charisma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Building upon the foundational work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, Horvath digs deep. Horvath critiques Turner's approach to liminality who limited its meaning to concrete settings of small-scale tribal society and framed liminality in positive light as a means to renewal. Taking a wide-angle longitudinal view, Horvath argues that liminality, that is transitory stages of tribal ritual, has become the general condition of humanity in the modern world. As such, liminality is a permanent state.

Horvath introduces the "trickster" within the system, a character who may emerge in moments of distress, abusing the anxieties of a community for ego purposes or for purposes of personal gain. Tricksters often appear during liminal periods, appearing as a charismatic leader but unable to live well within community, choosing rather to sow confusion and discord.

Liminality and Pastoral Leadership

Utilizing a leadership lens within the context of faith communities, Susan Beaumont a congregational consultant, applies liminality to pastoral leadership, weaving together organizational practices with a contemplative leadership stance. Rather than pointing to a destination point for the church or pastoral leaders, Beaumont helps leaders to dwell deeply in the disorientation, in the liminal space. In her book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, Beaumont offers four types of work that is appropriate for organizations in liminal spaces: tending the soul of the institution (finding soul in place); deepening group discernment (seeing what God is up to); shaping institutional memory (tell me our story), engaging emergence (are we there yet?). This is vital work for pastoral leaders immersed in liminal space.

Because new beginnings can feel overwhelming and frightening for many, leaders can expect some common reactions amidst liminality: as people experience loss, old anxieties begin to reemerge; stepping out into new territory or initiating a new way represents a gamble because

there is no guarantee a new approach will be successful; uncertainty can remind people of failures, possibly triggering trauma responses; some people may feel less marginalized in liminality and want to stay there.¹³⁴ Effective pastoral leaders will “help individuals and groups remain in a liminal state for the time that it takes to get clear about identity and discover new structures that are more appropriately suited to their emerging identity.”¹³⁵ This takes time, intention, and non-anxious presence.

Amidst the unsettledness and uncertainty of liminality, it is common for anxiety to rise within the congregation and within the pastoral leader. Taking a systems approach including a self-differentiation leadership approach as explained in Edwin Friedman’s book *Generation to Generation* involves taking responsibility for one’s needs, goals, and values amidst the unsettledness. Effective leaders take responsibility for who they are and how they function.¹³⁶ As Jack Shitama, clergy-in-residence of the Center for Clergy Excellence asserts, effective leaders are a non-anxious presence who strive to contain their own anxiety while staying emotionally connected.¹³⁷ Effective pastoral leaders are attentive to *process* (how the congregation is articulating themselves) rather than focused on the *content* (what the congregation is saying).¹³⁸ Such requires deep listening to the stories including valuing the importance and the resource of congregational stories.

Returning to the biblical story, Walter Brueggemann references the exodus experience and writes, “the old wilderness was a liminal moment. In the old wilderness, Israelites stood

¹³⁴ Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going*, 19.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁶ Jack Shitama. *Anxious Church: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety* (Earleville, MD: Charis Works, 2018), 20.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

between the not-yet-in-hand of promise and the chance to go back to the old brutalities that were pervaded by certitude. Our wilderness-like crisis today is just such a liminal moment.”¹³⁹ Moses was a leader who led God’s people into liminality, where they existed for 40 years. During that lengthy season a new identity would be shaped, nurtured, and birthed, an identity that evolved from slavery to liberation, from scarcity to abundance. And following 40 years, God raised up a new leader, Joshua to lead God’s people through the “threshold” into the Promised Land.

Amidst the questioning of identity and the reshaping of identity which research participants unanimously identified, it is vital to be attentive to the landscape of actors and influences. Drawing upon the ‘trickster,’ first introduced by Victor Turner Beaumont argues that tricksters “are attracted to the chaos in seasons marked by pastoral transition, major renovations, governance restructuring, mergers, planning and innovation.”¹⁴⁰ The instability of liminal seasons creates a ripeness for a “naturally stressful, emotive and reactive environment” for an organization.¹⁴¹

The strength of Beaumont’s work are the concrete leadership interventions she offers when a trickster has been identified in an organization. Through identification, negative impact can be minimized. Firstly, it is crucial for leadership to focus on the healthy members within the organization and establish policy and practices which reinforces a healthy system. Secondly, leaders can define a new normal for the organization amidst liminality. While leaders can not resolve liminality, they can create temporary structures that promote health. Thirdly, as the “trickster” sows discord and deception by spreading half-truths and lies, effective leaders can

¹³⁹ Brueggemann, “*Who will lead us out of this wilderness?*”

¹⁴⁰ Beaumont, “Beware the Trickster,” *Susan Beaumont & Assoc.*, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://susanbeaumont.com/beware-the-trickster>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

help members identify assumptions that are driving their assumptions and actions. Finally, effective leaders can tend to the congregational narrative. While tricksters are oriented toward developing problem-saturated narratives, a leader will help their organization examine story lines including providing “truthful and more empowering ways to frame the experience.”¹⁴² While providing a rich theoretical framework to understand liminality, Beaumont takes her research and thought forward with practical strategies for pastoral leadership including interventions.

Beaumont’s chapter entitled “Shaping Institution Memory” focuses upon the value of story, which is core to this research study.¹⁴³ Christians are people of a story, a sacred biblical story. Scripture reminds God’s people to remember the story including the love of God. Scripture also “tells us that our core identity is shaped by God’s remembering of us and of God’s [his] covenantal relationship with us.”¹⁴⁴ Remembering and passing along stories occurs within the context of community. “Revisiting institutional memories and tending to the ways in which we recount them is critical work in a liminal season” writes Beaumont.¹⁴⁵ A core leadership task amidst liminality is to help the congregation examine its memories and reinterpret its core stories. Effective engagement with predominant stories aids a congregation in discerning “what it needs to do, based on the best of its past identity.”¹⁴⁶

Stories that a congregation tell are predictable: “stories about the founding era, the glory eras, troubled chapters, hero figures, and lessons learned” including “who we are” and “shame” stories as demonstrated by this study’s research participants.¹⁴⁷ Re-shaping stories always begins

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, 93-112.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

with listening. As stories are told and retold pastoral leaders learn more about the congregation's strengths and limitations of its past. As stories are shared, leaders can shape "more intentional narratives that create a positive hope-filled future."¹⁴⁸ In so doing, meaning-making occurs as the congregation journeys through liminality.

Liminality and Social Theory

Liminal space, according to Franciscan Richard Rohr, is a location humans are most resistant to dwell. Dwelling on a threshold of which there is no return and facing a future landscape that is not yet clear, creates a state of flux. This liminal space unsettles assumptions and beliefs and can stir confusion and systemic anxiety. Social theorists offer another view of liminal space, which contributes to the understanding and examination of the current changing ministry context relevant to the overlapping edges of congregations and their neighbourhoods/communities.

Social theorist Britta Kalscheuer contends, "As long as people are not confronted with members of a different culture, their own culture seems natural and unquestioned."¹⁴⁹ A review of scholarship focused upon diversity of cultural traditions and practices and the constant meeting of different cultures overwhelmingly references one scholar's work. Postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, is one of the most influential theorists and contributors to the field of social theory. Bhabha analyzes the complex dynamics and formation of cultures and cultures' overlapping borderlands which he refers to as *hybridity*. Cultural hybridity according to Bhabha emerges "in moments of historical transformation."¹⁵⁰ For Bhabha, "beginnings and endings may

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴⁹ Karen Ikas and Gerhard Wagner. *Communicating in the Third Space* (NY: Routledge, 2009), 29.

¹⁵⁰ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

be the sustaining myths of the middle years,” that is, periods of disorientation, disturbance of direction, a location between the here and there.¹⁵¹ Liminal space, “in-between the designation of identity becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white.¹⁵² The neither here nor there of temporal movement allows and prevents “identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities.”¹⁵³ As research participants described, the present “between here and there” creates an identity crisis in which the question “who are we now?” arises. Bhabha asserts:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause and aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living.¹⁵⁴

Congregational encounters with ‘newness’ require an examination of the current cultural context and consideration of its impact. Dwelling deeply at the borderlands, in the “in-between” space, creates a hybrid cultural space. As the church is challenged for its introversion and risks stepping beyond homogeneity of its community, interactions create a new dynamic. In *Communicating in the Third Space*, Karen Ikas and Gerhard Wagner cite Bhabha who “conceives the encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation or translation that takes place in a Third Space of enunciation. This negotiation is not only expected to produce a dissemination of both cultural traditions that leads to a displacement of the members of both groups from their origins. It is

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵² Ibid., 4.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

also supposed to bring about a common identity, one that is new in its hybridity.”¹⁵⁵ MCEC’s growing focus on becoming an Intercultural Church, serves as an example. Accordingly, identity is neither one nor the other, a binary construct, but rather an and/also reality. Negotiation of differing cultures is not only expected to produce a dissemination of both cultural traditions but leads to hybridity, also referred to as thirdspace.

Thirdspace enables a blending and merger of understandings resulting in new positions, new knowledge. Dialogue and interaction across cultures gives rise to something unrecognizable, something new and different. Emergent is an intercultural site of enunciation. Social theorists draw heavily upon Bhabha’s seminal work including Edward W. Soja and Julia Lossau who assert thirdspace is “an analytical concept that enables us to come to terms with representational strategies of real and imagined places...Moreover, it is also a process, a dynamic force that is actively being produced and reproduced all that time, and as such it is inseparable from society.”¹⁵⁶ Thirdspace is a time and a place that exists in-between but even more so, thirdspace is also conceived as a site. Theorists Ikas and Wagner write:

Whether it is empires, states, nations, public spheres, religious communities, ethnic groups, townships, or neighborhoods, today millions of migrants challenge the existing power structures and expose the available self-image of ideologies. Meanwhile, the residents’ collective identity is ceaselessly confronted with newly arrived minorities, which bring along their very own traditions. Neither these newcomers nor the changes they bring about can be simply ignored. That is why communication between members of different cultures is such an important affair these days. In fact, it has not only become a world-historical necessity but also a challenge of everyday life.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner, eds., *Communicating in the Third Space*, 2.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3,4.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

The in-between site, liminal space is the ground for discussion, dispute, confession, apology, negotiation.¹⁵⁸ It is a useful common space because it “enables us to see recurrent misunderstandings occurring in interactions across languages and cultures as opportunity to create something new out of a plurality of realities that must be endured.”¹⁵⁹ Kalscheuer suggests “It is a place which facilitates cultural encounters.”¹⁶⁰ Of course, this site is not fixed but rather temporary and provisional. It is not bounded or fixed “as in the sense of a building site..... Rather it is more like a shifting caravan site.”¹⁶¹ Truth commissions, including Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007-2015) have provided such dialogical third space. Social theorists’ attention to spaces in-between and overlapping spaces provides a unique lens in a study that analyzes the church and its changing cultural context. Liminal space highlights how enlivened and rich for learning and insight the in-between spaces and overlapping edges are. Confronted with divergent and diverse worldviews, one has opportunity to navigate meaning. Bhabha’s poststructuralist approach informs postcolonial theory and practice and is sited in academic journals, essays, and research studies across a wide spectrum of cultural studies.

Shifting Religiosity Landscape in Canada and beyond

The Christian church is in a time of great change. Since 1975 Reginald Bibby, professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge (Alberta) has been monitoring and reporting upon social trends in Canada through surveys involving adults and youth. According to Bibby’s 2008 research, twenty percent of Canadians attend worship services weekly.¹⁶² In a January 2021

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., x.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁶² Reginald W. Bibby. *A new day: the resilience and restructuring of religion in Canada* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada Books, 2012).

report entitled *Millennial Mosaic: How Pluralism and Choice are Shaping Canadian Youth and the Future of Canada*” Bibby et al., present a survey that discloses ongoing changing trends.¹⁶³

Bibby’s sample includes 3030 participants including 853 millennials.

In response to the survey question: “Do you believe that God exists?” Bibby reports a sharp decline. In 1985, 61% responded “Yes, I definitely do” whereas in 2000, 49% responded affirmatively and in 2020, 32% responded affirmatively.¹⁶⁴ Regarding average weekly attendance Bibby’s 2020 survey discloses average weekly attendance has dropped to 14%.¹⁶⁵ Related to personal spirituality Bibby et al. asked: “Do you believe you have spiritual needs?” Results reveal that in 2015, 67% indicated yes and in 2020, 53% indicated yes, revealing yet another marked decline.¹⁶⁶ Bibby’s survey results are in line with Canadian missiologist Alan Roxburgh assertion that “if you were born after 1984, there is less than a 10 percent chance you are in church today.”¹⁶⁷

Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, professors at the Toronto School of Theology in their book *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* address the question “what happened to Christianity in Canada?” Examining a Canadian context of disaffiliation from organized religion, Clarke and Macdonald seek to assess the how, when, why, and consequences of this significant shift in Canadian culture including religious institutions. Drawing heavily upon demographic information and Canadian census data, Clarke and Macdonald present a decline of Christian affiliation, membership, and participation which they

¹⁶³ Reginald W. Bibby et al., “*The Millennial Mosaic: How Pluralism and Choice are Shaping Canadian Youth and the Future of the Church*,” December 2020, 1-38, http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/Millennials_update_Jan_21_2021.pdf

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶⁷ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 6.

assert started in the 1960s. They assert this decline “has picked up pace rapidly since then.”¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, Canadian society has entered a new era, a post-Christian era. The authors believe the end of Christendom happened in the closing decades of the 20th century. This was a time when churches lost “their social power and their place in the nation’s cultural fabric.”¹⁶⁹

Secularization, characterized as industrialization, individualism, and complex organizational and institutional structure dominates discussion about religious change. Accompanying a shifting worldview, religion’s institutions lost power to define cultural norms and values. Amidst the sharp decline, one group, however, has experienced steady growth since the 1960s, the “No Religion” demographic. This changing landscape of organized Christianity in Canada, impacted by factors such as consumerism, the pursuit of self-fulfilment, organized religion one option among many, shopping for spirituality, has implications for the church. As a growing number of Canadians report little or no contact with churches, our neighbours have no idea what churches are about and they have little inclination to find out.¹⁷⁰ While many Canadians express interest in spirituality, many “would not think to look for that among mainstream Protestant churches, perhaps not realizing that these denominations do in fact have rich spiritual traditions.”¹⁷¹ Thus common practices such as updating websites, September “Gathering Sunday,” or the story “build it and they will come” assumes guests and neighbours have a basic understanding of Christian worship and community. When rituals are unfamiliar or when visitors are unclear what to do and when, including what Bible to read, the “build it and they will come” is not only ineffective but rather a significantly limiting story. While many

¹⁶⁸ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald. *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 11.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

congregations are comfortable to wait for visitors to attend, the changing landscape places the task of proclaiming what the church is about on the church itself. Clarke and Macdonald predict that Canadian Christian churches will continue to decline as long as the church fails to name how much Canadian culture has changed. Strengthening music or programs are no longer the “fix” as they had once been. The church is situated in a post-Christian Canada and according to these authors, this is the story that needs to be told and understood.¹⁷²

The church in an Unstable Season

Theologians, leadership and organizational change theorists, sociologists, and systems theorists, contribute to a vast field of literature relevant to leadership in an unstable season. The literature related to shifting trends amidst the Christian Church is not limited to a Canadian context. Founding editor of the Religion Department of *Publishers Weekly*, Phyllis Tickle has written extensively about the current shifting landscape of the church that is unfolding. Tickle places the conversation of changing context within the wider historical context. Tickle refers to the present age of re-formation as the “Great Emergence” asserting “every five hundred years, give or take a decade or two, Western culture, along with those parts of the world that have been colonized or colonialized by it, goes through a time of enormous upheaval, a time in which essentially every part of it is re-configured.”¹⁷³ Tickle argues that what is unfolding is the formation of an entirely new expression presentation of Christian faith.” Tickle tracks culture, Christian movements, including the rise of the “spiritual but not religious.” Experiencing the church as institution and tradition, restrictive in dogma and doctrine, groups of people emerged

¹⁷² Ibid., 245.

¹⁷³ Phyllis Tickle. *Emergence Christianity: what it is, where it is going, and why it matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 17.

who believed radically and were not afraid to question expressions of faith because they were not bound by institutional policies.¹⁷⁴

Gregory A. Boyd in his foreword in Stuart Murray's *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* writes, "it is becoming undeniably clear that western civilization has entered a post-Christian age. Whereas Christians once believed the world would eventually be brought within the expanding empire of Christendom, it is now obvious this will never happen."¹⁷⁵ G. R. Rendle, former Senior Consultant with the Alban Institute asserts this time of shifting paradigms, "test our very assumptions about life."¹⁷⁶

Theologian Brian McLaren is a leading voice in contemporary religion. According to McLaren, "For centuries Christianity has presented itself as an 'organized religion'- a change averse institution or set of institutions that protects and promotes a timeless system of beliefs that were handed down fully formed in the past. Yet Christianity's actual history is a story of change and adaptation. We Christians have repeatedly adapted our message, methods, and mission to contours of our time."¹⁷⁷ When faith is equated to a set of beliefs or embodied, as some research participants discussed, as protectionism to buildings and focus upon programming, faith is viewed as loyalty to the externals including structures and systems which are core to institutions. In response McLaren offers a fresh perspective asking: "What might happen if we understand the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning – as 'organizing religion that challenges all institutions (including its own), to learn, grow, and mature toward a deepening,

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷⁵ Stuart Murray. *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁷⁶ Gilbert R. Rendle. *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Alban Institute, 1998), 3.

¹⁷⁷ Brian D. McLaren. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the world's largest religion is seeking a better way to be Christian* (NY: Convergent, 2016), 3.

enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbour, enemy, and creation?”¹⁷⁸ McLaren challenges pastoral leaders to re-envision their leadership and commit to culture change which leads congregations beyond an institutionalized system of beliefs.

Diana Butler Bass is a popular speaker, author, and commentator on religion and culture. In her book *Christianity after Religion*, Bass contends religious Christianity is in a sea of change which she traces to the 1970s, a time she describes as “the beginning of the end of older forms of Christianity.”¹⁷⁹ Bass presents a historical survey which identifies three significant awakenings, that is - movements of cultural revitalization that restructured our institutions and redefined social goals - in the United States and Canada.¹⁸⁰ During the period of each awakening “old patterns of religious life gave way to new ones and eventually, spawned new forms of organization and institutions that interwove with social, economic, and political change and revitalized national life.”¹⁸¹ According to Bass, The First Great Awakening (1730-60) “marked the end of European styles of church organization and created an experiential, democratic pan-Protestant community of faith called evangelicalism.”¹⁸² The Second Great Awakening (1800-1830) “ended Calvinist theological dominance and initiated new understandings of free will that resulted in a voluntary system for church membership and benevolent work.”¹⁸³ Finally, the Third Great Awakening (1890-1920) “had two distinctive manifestations: the social gospel movement, with its progressive politics and the Pentecostal movement, with an emphasis on miraculous transformation. Despite the theological differences between the two movements each

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 7.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 29.

emphasized the shift away from personal sin toward the idea of communal transformation of the social order through an experience of God active in history.”¹⁸⁴ New forms of mission emerged during the Third Great Awakening as did an increased focus upon the poor and oppressed. Resultant, these ministries became more ecumenical in both practice and vision.

According to Bass, through each Great Awakening, older forms of Christian faith “were revitalized, reoriented, remade, and sometimes replaced by more cultural resonant conceptions of the self, God, community, and service to the world.”¹⁸⁵ Bass argues that a fourth awakening is currently underway, characterized by a crisis of legitimacy, disorientation, the rise of new vision and understandings, new pathways that give life meaning, and institutional transformation.¹⁸⁶ Amidst the current awakening, it is vital for God’s people to develop awareness of God’s presence in the world in order to discern what is needed for the flourishing of all creation and live into a new vision.

Rooted in her research and countless conversations with congregations, Bass’s vision for the church involves restructuring, thus a re-storying the historic script of the church and faith: believing, behaving, and belonging. The path to an awakened Christianity that is deeply spiritual according to Bass involves a reversal in which belonging (relational community) as Jesus embodied in his public ministry, leads to changed behavior (intentional practice), and finally believing (experiential belief). Bass argues such a reversal is an authentic returning “toward what Jesus preached: “a beloved and loving community, a way of life practised in the world, a trust in God that eagerly anticipates God’s reign of mercy and justice.”¹⁸⁷ Bass wisely invites tradition

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 214.

and change into dialogue, a theme that permeates her book *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*.

In the introductory chapter of her book *The Practicing Congregation* Bass notes that the book “does not argue that mainline churches should change. Rather, it argues that mainline churches *are* changing and have *already* changed.”¹⁸⁸ Rather than taking a programmatic approach to initiate change, Bass suggests mainline churches that are experiencing vitality are *practicing congregations*, that is, “experiencing vitality through engagement with traditional Christian practices.”¹⁸⁹

The Anabaptist tradition historically has been deeply steeped in spiritual practices, a core value of discipleship and conveyed through narratives. Bass contends, “without stories, tradition and practice would mean either nothing or anything. Any stories - both about the past and the future – are crafted through the imagination.” Having surveyed a large swath of Protestant Christian churches, Bass notes revitalization and new life have emerged in congregations that have refused to be limited by stories, including the story of mainline decline. Bass’ invitation to reframe prominent congregational stories and embrace narrative theology aligns with and supports the focus of this narrative study.

The strength of Bass’ discussion of narrative theology is undergirded and enriched through her engagement with the research and insights of several scholars including Urban Holmes who writes extensively about the resource of pastoral and congregational imagination.¹⁹⁰ In his book *Ministry and Imagination*, published in 1971, Holmes names a crisis in ministry

¹⁸⁸ Diana Butler Bass. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 3.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ For Bass’ discussion regarding Urban Holmes see *The Practicing Congregation*, 94-96.

which he saw expanding over the past generation: the narrowing of ministry led by the seminary-educated; the decline of natural community resultant from the industrial revolution (previously, ministry had been built upon stable congregations and as people moved to the cities, community systems of ministry collapsed); the disestablishment of the clergy role (the loss of symbolic function and authoritative role in society); and finally, disenchantment of culture.¹⁹¹ Holmes also identifies four responses which compounded the crisis in ministry which he articulates as: “business as usual;” “ministry of the gaps;” “I-can-do-anything-you-can-do-better;” and finally, a preoccupation with “doing” for its own sake, a “band-aid” approach to social life.”¹⁹² For Holmes, imagination is an act of wilderness pilgrimage, a going “outside the city” to find God’s presence.¹⁹³ “The ‘city’” according to Holmes may be the accepted way of doing things, a community’s predominant narratives, the structure of God’s “people’s past experiences of God.”¹⁹⁴ Wilderness pilgrimage and the image of wilderness is significant throughout the biblical story as the place where one meets God. Wilderness is not an empty place but rather a place where “God is to be known,” a place of holy purpose,” a journey of expectation of a new “vision of God, that we might know who we are to be.”¹⁹⁵ Bass suggests that when congregations can move beyond normative patterns and programmatic fixes, the church becomes the church that embodies the Christian story and its practices of faith.¹⁹⁶

Another important voice Bass brings into discussion is James Hopewell. In his book *Congregation: Stories and Structure*, Hopewell argues congregational culture “is not an

¹⁹¹ Urban T. Holmes. 111, *Ministry and Imagination* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 2-5.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 5-8.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13-34.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 94.

accidental accumulation of symbolic elements but a coherent system whose structural logic is *narrative*.”¹⁹⁷ Explaining, Hopewell suggests congregations define themselves primarily in narrative form, communicate amongst themselves through story, and participate with the larger world through narrative.”¹⁹⁸ In this way, stories not only shape a congregation’s distinct identity and mission, they are also a primary means to understand a congregation.

Further, Bass in her book *Grounded: Finding God in the World, a Spiritual Revolution* continues the discussion she began in her previous books.¹⁹⁹ Bass argues that the current decline in the church signals a major transformation, not just in how people understand God but how people experience God. A cultural turn is underway, evidenced as people are discovering new ground where God dwells in creation with humanity: the soil, water, sky, our homes, and neighbourhoods. Given the growing focus on the local neighbourhood by missiologists, Bass’ discussion is relevant, strengthened through inclusion of current data, pop culture, scripture, and ancient spiritual practices.

The church has a sacred story that has been and continues to be written by God, the Master Storyteller. Faith communities live into the sacred story, interpret the story, make meaning of the story, and live into the story in relation to other stories. It is vital for congregations to know their story, to communicate their story well, and to embody their story as co-creators with God. Reframing stories, challenging limiting stories such as the story of decline, and living deeply within the power of story not only shapes new stories but also creates new pathways, enabling the church to move forward into unknown sacred spaces.

¹⁹⁷ James F. Hopewell. *Congregation: Stories and Structure* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), xii.

¹⁹⁸ Holmes, 111, *Ministry and Imagination*, 46.

¹⁹⁹ Diana Butler Bass. *Grounded: Finding God in the World: A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 4-26.

Cultural Organizational Change

As pastoral leaders seek wisdom, vision, and skill sets to lead the church forward into an unknown sacred space given the *changing* and *changed* nature of the church, it is vital to explore culture in context, the influence of culture on an organization, and change processes leading to culture change with an organization. Effective pastoral leaders and healthy congregation benefit as they learn to examine their culture and address culture change. In response to MCEC denominational focus to strengthen congregational missional identity and practice, there is awareness amongst pastoral leaders that they are not just building leadership capacity to lead missionally. Rather pastoral leaders are leading organizational culture change that will reframe assumptions, beliefs, practices, values, predominant stories, thus the church's future.

Edgar H. Schein is a recognized expert in the field of organizational cultural change. In the introduction of his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership* Schein writes, "The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."²⁰⁰ Culture as an abstraction includes observable events and underlying forces. Schein identifies several concepts and phenomena that relate to culture and/or reflect culture in that they deal with things that group members share or hold in common:

1. observed behavioral regularities when people interact (such as customs, traditions, and rituals)
2. group norms
3. espoused values
4. formal philosophy (ideological principles that guide a group's actions)

²⁰⁰ Edgar H. Schein. *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 18.

5. rules of the game (the way we do things around here)
6. climate (feelings related to how the group interacts)
7. embedded skills (competencies)
8. habits of thinking, mental models, and/or linguistic paradigms (shared cognitive frames)
9. shared meaning (understandings created by the group)
10. root metaphors or integrating symbols (ways that a group characterizes themselves, consciously or unconsciously)
11. formal rituals and celebrations.²⁰¹

According to Schein the concept of culture is a practical tool to understand both organizations and change. His in-depth text which is widely referenced focuses on applying principles of culture as a tool to achieve organizational goals and outcomes. Schein unpacks the “what” and “how” of cultural organization change examining: what culture is, how culture is created, how culture evolves, and how culture can be changed within an organization.

Schein asserts:

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious. In another sense, culture is to a group what personality or character is to an individual. We can see the behavior that results, but we often cannot see the forces underneath that cause certain kinds of behavior. Yet, just as our personality and character guide and constrain our behavior, so does culture guide and constrain the behavior of members of a group through the shared norms that are held in that group.²⁰²

Schein argues culture can be analyzed and studied at three levels.

Artifacts: Artifacts are visible elements in a culture. They include observable behaviors, language, technology, artistic creations, style embodied in clothing, emotions, myths and stories, values, and observable rituals and ceremonies.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Ibid., 13-16.

²⁰² Ibid., 14.

²⁰³ Ibid., 23-24.

Espoused Beliefs and Values: Beliefs and values include ideals, goals, values, and aspirations. Schein notes that beliefs and values at times may not be congruent with behavior and other artifacts.²⁰⁴

Basic Underlying Assumptions: Assumptions which are not visible include the unconscious, even taken-for-granted beliefs and values which determine behaviors, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.²⁰⁵ For Schein, this third level is most important. He writes, “The human mind needs cognitive stability. Therefore, any challenge or questioning of a basic assumption will release anxiety and defensiveness.”²⁰⁶ It is for this reason many change processes fail. Relating the levels of culture to leadership, Schein asserts that “leadership is originally the source of the beliefs and values that get a group moving in dealing with its internal and external problems. If what leaders propose works and continues to work, what once were only the leader’s assumptions gradually come to be shared assumptions.”²⁰⁷

Culture evolves in an organization according to its life cycle. Given that MCEC congregations are at diverse places in their life cycle as revealed by research participants, it is a vital leadership task to understand how the culture was formed at its birthing. In the founding and early growth stage, the primary cultural ethos comes from the founders and their assumptions which become embedded in the organization if there is success. The founding of congregations emerged frequently during focus group discussions, including the long-term influence and presence of founding values, practices, and ethos. As Schein argues, at the

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 25-27.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 23-32.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 29.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 32.

formative stage, “culture tends to be a positive growth force,” a sentiment, research participants expressed.²⁰⁸

In the organizational midlife stage, it is common for the founders to have released control of the organization and while perhaps still engaged, primary leadership is delegated to the next generation of leaders. During organizational mid-life, diversity flourishes and multiple subcultures are formed. At this stage much of the organization’s culture comes under challenge. Many of the first generation and new Canadian research participants named this reality for their congregation. Emerging from immigrant or refugee roots, second and third generation members emerge as a subculture. Amidst the challenges of the mid-life stage, opportunities are ripe for a change and cultural evolution.

At the maturity stage of the organization’s life cycle, as assumptions are brought to consciousness, members tend to hold tightly to them as they “justify the past and are the source of their pride and self-esteem.”²⁰⁹ Schein contends that in the maturity stage, culture often “becomes partly dysfunctional and can only be changed through more drastic processes such as scandals and turnarounds.”²¹⁰ Crisis as opportunity is rich soil for transformation.

Learning Theory

An area that Schein does not address which the current Christian church is widely experiencing, is the life stage of decline. For the Christian church, decline is noted as declining worship attendance, aging congregational demographics, declining financial resources, and more. Schein does, however, argue that cultural change can be managed which is crucial for the present reality of the church. For example, unlearning creates space for new learnings and

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 296.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 289.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 296.

cognitive restructuring. Schein draws upon the three-stage learning theory of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) as the basis for cultural organization change. Lewin's stages of learning and change involve unfreezing (creating the motivation to change); learning new concepts (including trial and error learning); and re-freezing (internalization of new concepts, meanings and standards).²¹¹ "Culture change inevitably involves unlearning as well as relearning and is, therefore, by definition, transformation" says Schein.²¹²

Dr. John Dewey's (1859-1952) learning theory philosophically, grounds this research study's methodology. For Dewey learning involves experience and consequently, "continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learned."²¹³ While humanity may be oriented toward dualism, that is, "either/or" thinking, for Dewey, true learning is longitudinal, historical and social, orderly and dynamic.²¹⁴ Dewey critiqued learning theory of his era which forbid active participation in the development of what was being taught, focusing rather primarily upon the acquisition of knowledge of current scholarship or the knowledge of instructors. Such learning methodology according to Dewey "is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as education food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception."²¹⁵

Dewey emphasized the freedom of the learner rather than rigid subject-oriented criteria. In this way, education based on experience allows for more teacher-learner interaction, thus a learner-centered pedagogy. Congregations are containers of learnings and experiences and when honoured, reflected upon and integrated, new learnings emerge.

²¹¹ Ibid., 299.

²¹² Ibid., 313.

²¹³ John Dewey. *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 10.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

During the current liminal season during which a significant paradigm shift is underway as the church transitions from a Christendom mental model to post-Christendom and chaplaincy leadership to missional leadership model, pastoral leaders benefit when attentive to learning theory and its impact to influence and shape a new organizational/congregational culture.

Pastoral research participants are aware the church is situated in the liminal space between what was and what is emerging. A new culture will emerge as leaders guide their congregations through a learning process of unlearning to relearning and ongoing reflection/action cycles.

Discontinuous and Continuous Change

Missiologists Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk in their book *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, engage in the discussion regarding culture by distinguishing between two kinds of change: continuous and discontinuous.²¹⁶ Continuous change they assert, “develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be expected, anticipated, and managed.”²¹⁷ Discontinuous change on the other hand is disruptive, therefore, challenges assumptions and skills that are tried and true, deeming them no longer effective. According to Roxburgh and Romanuk, “discontinuous change is dominant in periods of history that *transform* culture forever, tipping it over into something new.”²¹⁸ New technologies, especially social media platforms and electronics “illustrate the effect of rapid discontinuous change transforming a culture.”²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 6-10.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

In the current pandemic season as pastoral leaders navigate new ways to gather their congregation for worship while facing continuously changing pandemic restrictions and as they discover fresh ways to provide pastoral care, journey through relational challenges, and offer discipleship opportunities, discontinuous change abounds. The 2020-2021 Covid-19 pandemic is re-shaping the church's culture – assumptions, values, and beliefs - reshaping how we “do church,” including worship, further mission, and engage with the local community. Amidst the unsettledness of discontinuous change, threads of new experiences will shape a new story, validating and at times challenging core assumptions, values, and beliefs.

Change Theory and Cultural Change

In today's unstable and changing context, theologians and leadership management theorists are addressing the role of culture and cultural change. During unstable seasons it is not uncommon for congregants to direct energies toward organizational re-structuring. While effective structure is vital amidst instability, more effective is attentiveness to cultural change. Foremost educator on change and leadership, John P. Kotter defines culture as “the norms of behavior and the shared values in a group of people. It's a set of common feelings about what is of value and how we should act.”²²⁰ Kotter argues that to test whether something is embedded in a culture, examine whether peers, without really thinking about it “find ways to nudge us back to group norms when we go astray”²²¹ Group norms and shared values are powerful influences within an organization and are often barriers to change. “Until changes sink down deeply into the

²²⁰ John P. Kotter. *The heart of change: Real-life Stories of How People Change Their Organization* (Boston, MS: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 165.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

culture, which for an entire company can take three to ten years, new approaches are fragile and subject to regression” says Kotter.²²²

Kotter’s 8-stage change process includes: establishing a sense of urgency; creating a guiding coalition; developing a vision and strategy; communicating the change vision; empowering employees for broad-based action; generating short-term wins; consolidating gains and producing more change; anchoring new approaches in culture. While Kotter proposes transformation through establishing a sense of urgency, a significant paradox of leadership is the reality that change takes time through ongoing reflection, patience, and persistence, an approach foremost leadership theorists Heifetz and Linsky call letting an issue “ripen.”²²³

According to Heifetz and Linsky a leader must wait until an issue ripens or ripen the issue themselves. Firstly, to determine if an issue is ripe there is generally widespread urgency to deal with it. Secondly, an issue is ripe when the people/community is deeply impacted by the problem. Thirdly, at times a lack of knowledge on a certain issue is “in direct proportion to its lack of ripeness” for example, an unexpected crisis such as climate change crisis, pandemic, political or economic instability.²²⁴ Finally, “what are people in authority saying and doing?”²²⁵ “Formal authority confers license and leverage to direct people’s attention,” according to Heifetz and Linsky.²²⁶ Vital for leaders, most especially amidst liminality, is taking into consideration the learning required of the community, agendas that are already filling person’s lives, and not getting too far ahead of the community raising issues before the issue is ready to be addressed.

²²² John P. Kotter. *Leading change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 13.

²²³ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 146 – 154.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

Change theorist Samuel Chand asserts “culture – not vision or strategy – is the most powerful factor in any organization. It determines the receptivity of staff and volunteers to new ideas, unleashes or dampens creativity, builds or erodes enthusiasm, and creates a sense of pride or deep discouragement about working or being involved there.”²²⁷ Organizational culture, according to Chand, “is the personality of the church or non-profit. Like all personalities, it’s not simple to define and describe.”²²⁸ Organizational culture includes tangibles and intangibles and while the latter is harder to grasp, intangibles “give a better read on the organizations’ true personality” including values, beliefs and assumptions.²²⁹ Intangibles can include what and how successes are celebrated, how challenges or conflicts are addressed, or manifestations of trust and respect at all levels of the organization.²³⁰ Core to Chand’s discussion is that culture “is about the people” which stands in contrast to many organization’s focus on vision, strategy, services, outcomes.²³¹

A strong and healthy culture “stimulates people to be and do their very best and reach the highest goals”²³² Indeed, “the culture of an organization is the platform for building a strong church or non-profit.” Wise leadership will seek to unearth underlying stories, examine them, determining whether they still hold or if they have become a barrier to change. According to Chand changing organizational culture occurs through a four-stage process: knowledge (change of mind); attitude (changing attitude involving role, goals, and relationships); individual behaviour (forming new habits); changed institutional behaviors (the cumulative effect of

²²⁷ Chand, Samuel R. *Cracking your Church’s Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision and Inspiration* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 3.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²³² *Ibid.*, 4.

knowledge, attitudes, and new habits.²³³ The good news is anyone in the system can become a change agent. Qualities of effective change agents include heart motivation (a desire for one's life to count); positive demeanor; courage to ask the tough questions; honesty without limitations; warmth and humour; willingness to reflect reality."²³⁴ Many of the research participants exhibited these qualities, revealing they are up for the challenge of leading cultural change within their congregation.

Tod Bolsinger, Chief of Leadership Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary acknowledges culture is changing, the world is rapidly changing, and the Christian church is facing change on an unprecedented scale. Furthermore, the cultural advantage the church experienced during 17 centuries of Christendom has all but completely dissipated. According to Bolsinger, during the Christendom context "the leader's primary responsibility was to bring a people *back* to God, *returning* to the church, *turning back* to the values they had strayed from. reaching *reiterated* the shared story, the shared vision of life, the shared values of a culture they had once learned and now forgotten."²³⁵

In the Christendom mental model pastors were teachers, worship leaders, counsellors, social workers, community organization, program providers, and primarily chaplains for congregations amidst Christendom culture.²³⁶ New skill sets, including learning how to navigate liminal space is required at this present time to dwell within and journey uncharted territory.

Bolsinger offers a rich practical, biblically and theologically grounded guidebook for "learning to lead in a world we weren't prepared for" by engaging with literature related to

²³³ Ibid., 103-106.

²³⁴ Ibid., 103-106

²³⁵ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 37.

²³⁶ Ibid., 39.

organizational culture, missional ecclesiology, adaptive leadership, and transformative learning theory.²³⁷ A strength of Bolsinger's thought in *Canoeing the Mountains* is the parallelism of Lewis and Clark's exploration (1803-1806) during which they sought a water route that would connect the Mississippi river and the Pacific ocean. Faced with a daunting mountain range when the explorers expected an uninterrupted waterway, illustrates how mental models die and the way painful shifts begin to unfold. With the demise of Christendom, a new missional model has been needed including new leadership capacities. Facing uncharted territory, it is vital to clarify identity, grieve the loss of what was, and embrace the value of new learnings, including unpacking limiting narratives. And as leaders experientially know, it is a challenge to do all of these at the same time.

Further, theologian Andy Crouch in his book, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* suggests culture is "what we make of the world. It is the combination of 'the *language* we live in, the *artifacts* that we make use of, the *rituals* we engage in, our approach to *ethics*, the *institutions* we are a part of and the *narratives* we inhabit [that] have power to shape our lives profoundly"²³⁸ According to Bolsinger culture "is all the unnoticed, taken-for-granted and powerfully present elements that shape our lives and work." Given the narrative focus of this study, Crouch confirms the power of narratives within organizational culture, a power that can keep a system stuck, or power that can serve to launch the organization into an unfolding unknown future.

Institutions and Movement Theory

Institutions resist change, not because of any special trait personality or culture, but because that's what an institution does. Or better yet, because that's what an institution

²³⁷ Ibid., 13.

²³⁸ Andy Crouch. *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling*, (Downers Grove, IL, 2008), 73.

is. An institution is a way of getting people to engage in repetitive behavior, Resistance to change, in other words, is baked into the whole concept.²³⁹

A discussion related to cultural organizational change would not be complete without an overview of discussion about institutionalism and movement theory. Jesus began a movement, inviting those he encountered to “follow me” (Matthew 4:19). The growing movement suffered a traumatic setback when Jesus was crucified and yet through the power of God’s love, Jesus was resurrected, raised to new life. Acts 2 describes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the empowering presence of God within and amongst God’s people who would become known as “The Way.” As with any movement, structure, organization became necessary to further what Jesus of Nazareth began. In the current unstable season when the church is steeped in institutionalism, it is vital to consider whether the church can reclaim movement ethos.

“Institutions and organizations are initially set up in order to fill a necessary religious and social function and to provide some sort of structure support for whatever that function requires” writes Missiologist Alan Hirsch, founding director of Forge Mission Training Network.²⁴⁰ Structures are necessary so an organization can “act collectively for a common cause.”²⁴¹ According to Andy Crouch “in the broadest sense, an institution is a cultural pattern of rules and roles, artifacts, and arenas for human creativity and action that passes from one generation to the next.”²⁴²

²³⁹ Dan Hotchkiss, “Should the Leader Advocate for change?” *Congregational Consulting Group*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/leader-advocate-change>.

²⁴⁰ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 187.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁴² Andy Crouch, “Planting deep roots,” *Christianity Today*, July 11, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/june/why-we-love-institutions-planting-deep-roots.html>.

A growing focus amongst contemporary missiologists, leadership consultants, and theologians including Roxburgh, Hirsch, and McLaren, is the discussion regarding movement ethos. Frost and Hirsch use *movement* as a “sociologist term to describe organization structure and ethos of the missional church.”²⁴³ Walker and Soule, authors of a Harvard Business Review article *Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, not a Mandate*, argue, “We often think of movements as starting with a call to action. But movement research suggests that they actually start with emotion – a diffuse dissatisfaction with the status quo and a broad sense that the current institutions and power structure of the society will not address the problem.”²⁴⁴ In the current liminal space, previous skill sets will not and do not adequately meet the ministry challenges of the day. Trying harder, launching a new program, or hosting food trucks nights will not bring about lasting fruitful change.

Today pastoral leaders and congregations live within the tension of reliance upon programming and organizational structures knowing structures are not working for the church as they once did and in fact at times working against the church. And yet as Crouch suggests, “For cultural change to grow and persist, it has to be institutionalized, meaning it must become part of the fabric of human life through a set of learnable and repeatable patterns. It must be transmitted beyond its founding generation to generations yet unborn.”²⁴⁵

Problematic for an organization is when the institution takes on a life of its own. When institutions, including the church succumb to institutionalism, energies and resources become

²⁴³ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2-13), 278.

²⁴⁴ Bryan Walker and Sarah A. Soule, “Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate.” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2017, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/06/changing-company-culture-requires-a-movement-not-a-mandate>.

²⁴⁵ Andy Crouch, “Planting deep roots.”

invested in self-preservation, growth, and stabilization rather than furthering the purposes of God, at the detriment of movement ethos. On the other hand, “movements that fail to institutionalize are like seeds that spring up quickly but fail to become rooted.”²⁴⁶

A fresh perspective including organizational challenge has emerged within MCEC. Newly installed MCEC Executive Minister Leah Reesor Keller in her November 14, 2020 installation service articulated a new vision for the church saying:

We are the people of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, of Mennonite Church Canada, of the global Anabaptist family of Mennonite World Conference, and part of the body of God’s Church through the ages.

We are not here to be an institution; we are a spiritual movement together, seeking to follow Jesus in life and put our faith into action.

We are a movement that builds up communities of healing and hope, sharing God’s love out in a hurting world.

We are a movement that is rooted in the deep joy and love that comes from knowing that we, and all human beings, are created good, in God’s image.

We are a movement that says we must seek out and care for the vulnerable among us. We welcome strangers, we lift up the lowly, and we live in hope for God’s Great Shalom, where there is wholeness, justice and peace for all.

We are a movement that is both ancient and new, drawing on Scripture and seeking to follow the Spirit’s leading in our lives today.²⁴⁷

During the current season of change for the church when many believe congregational re-structuring or re-organization will “fix” the system, Reesor-Keller’s offers an alternative story, vision and focus for the missional Anabaptist church. She reminds the church of its rootedness, its rich Anabaptist heritage, its roots of biblical engagement, spiritual practices, core values of discipleship - its primary call, its sacred call to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Leah Reesor Keller, “Installation Sermon,” MCEC Fall Gathering, Kitchener, Ontario, November 14, 2020.

Bill Easum, past President of The Effective Church Group, a church consulting and coaching firm in a chapter entitled “Christianity as an Organic Movement” in his book

Unfreezing Moves challenges an institutional worldview writing:

Most theories about congregational life are flawed from the start because they are based on an institutional and mechanical worldview... Such a view is not biblical. Instead, it is fatalistic and self-serving because the goal is to fix and preserve the institution for as long as possible. Such a worldview allows one to focus on mere organizational and institutional survival rather than following Jesus onto the mission field for the purpose of fulfilling the great commission. However, the Old and New Testaments are based on an organic worldview. They clearly show a bias for “salvation history” rather than institutional viability.²⁴⁸

Easum, as Reesor Keller focused upon in her installation message, articulates the need for the church to “move away from institutional forms of organization and recover a movement ethos if we are going to become truly missional.”²⁴⁹ This assertion has significant implications for both seminary and continuing-education training, most especially for pastoral leaders who have been trained according to an institutional and/or maintenance model of church ministry.

Social Movement Theory

A growing focus amongst contemporary missiologists Roxburgh and Hirsch, as well as theologian Brian McLaren, is the discussion regarding movement ethos. Frost and Hirsch use *movement* as a “sociological term to describe organizational structure and ethos of the missional church.”²⁵⁰ In other words, missional is movement, it is the process. Hirsch’s working definition of movement is as follows: “a group of people organized for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change; who are

²⁴⁸ Bill Easum. *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus into the Mission Field* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 17.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁵⁰ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st Century Church*, 278.

actively engaged in recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated.”²⁵¹

Walker and Soule assert, “brewing discontent turns into a movement when a voice arises that provides a positive vision and a path forward that’s within the power of the crowd.”²⁵² It is typical for movements to start small with a cohort of passionate enthusiasts. With the emergence of small wins, efficacy is demonstrated to nonparticipants, thus helping the movement gain steam. Skillful movement makers frame the issue, demonstrate quick wins, harness networks, create safe havens, and embrace symbols.²⁵³

Sociologist Todd N. Fuist draws upon 30 years of social movement theory to construct a framework to demonstrate three ways that culture works to shape collective action and collective identity, thus impacting social movements. Over the past years we have witnessed the rise of social movements including the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, right-wing and left-wing movements. Cultural studies provide a unique lens through which to examine collective mobilization, influences that impact mobilization, and for the purpose of this study, resources within the Christian church that can be built upon which can influence and facilitate culture change. In his article entitled, *Culture Within Sites, Culture as Resources, and Culture as Wider Contexts: A Typology of How Culture Works in Social Movement Theory* Fuist articulates a framework including three primary ways sociologists understand culture as contributing to collective actions.²⁵⁴ Breaking down culture in “analytic building blocks that can be arranged,

²⁵¹ Hirsch. *The Forgotten Ways*, 191.

²⁵² Bryan Walker and Sarah A. Soule, “Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate.”

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Todd N. Fuist, “Culture Within Sites, Culture as Resources, and Culture as Wider Contexts: A Typology of How Culture Works in Social Movement Theory,” *Sociology Compass* 7/12 (2013): 1044-1049, doi: 10.1111/soc4.12087.

refined and expanded” Fuist’s model holds significant potential for the church, leadership development, and culture change.²⁵⁵

Culture within Sites: Why are some cultures fruitful for mobilizing social movements? Fuist contends social movements “tend to emerge out of communities and social networks.” The “pre-existing culture within social sites and cultures created by movements serve as connective tissue within these spaces, helping make mobilization possible.”²⁵⁶ A prominent area of research in which culture within sites is discussed is in the study of religious movements. For example, the Black Church through which cultural meaning and the content of the church’s teachings emerged, became a rich resource for mobilization of the 1960’s civil rights movement. The content of preaching and spiritual practices are rich resources for the Christian church which can mobilize a social movement.

Culture as resource: As it is for “culture within sites” cultures provide a resource for social movements. One reason a culture renders a particular site fruitful for mobilization is because a culture “provides meaning that can be put toward collective action” and serve to sustain a movement.²⁵⁷ Cultural resources include shared-meaning, languages, group practices, and networks which frame collective identities. Fuist references the seminal work of Snow et al., who “suggest that examining how grievances are constructed and disseminated represented a rich avenue of research for understanding collection action.”²⁵⁸ These “framing processes” are not focused on “grievance interpretation.” Rather, “by framing grievances, social movements

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 1044.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 1045.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 1047.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 1047.

identify problems, suggest solutions and strategies, and mobilize constituents for action.”²⁵⁹

Using the language of this research study, framing is a process of ‘telling, re-telling, re-storying.’”

Further, collective identity and/or the shared connection members have to a movement allows a community to act collectively. According to Taylor and Whittier’s research which Fuist references, because collective identity highlights the role of meaning and ideology it is vital to pay attention to “how the injustices that are at the heart of most movements are translated into the everyday lives of collective actors.”²⁶⁰ Additionally, collective identity is understood “as both a prerequisite for mobilization as well as a result of collective action.”²⁶¹ Thus, how a congregation defines who they are, most especially, amidst unsettledness and liminality is vital as the church ministers and lives more deeply into its’ “sentness” identity and purposes.

Fuist draws upon scholarship that has turned toward narratives and emotion to understand how meaning serves as a movement resource, central to this research study. Narratives and story-telling strategies used by faith-based groups enable a group to connect with diverse groups from a variety of contexts. Scholars studying emotional and social movement theorize that “feelings such as anger, shame, and pride can influence movement action in ways that are both conscious and purposeful as well as ‘operating beneath conscious awareness.” The intentionality which a community uses the resource of storytelling and narratives including emotions holds significant potential to motivate social movement.

Culture as wider contexts: Wider contexts include ideologies, norms, and values.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 1047.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 1047.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 1047.

These shape how “social movements understand the world and act collectively.”²⁶² Culture is not self-contained but rather “embedded in a wider cultural context that shapes how it [they] operate[s].” Fuist writes, “Sociologists have proposed a number of concepts for thinking about cultural as a context, including “codes,” “scripts,” “tool-kits,” and the “discursive context”... all of which situate culture outside of individual cognition in wider fields of meaning that exist within institutions, structures, and relationships.”²⁶³ In this way it is vital to understand culture as “culturally situated” within a wider environment which influences how and what a community defines as legitimate and shapes collective action.”²⁶⁴ Because wider meaning provides a context for collective action, the church can draw upon its practices, rituals, and its predominant narratives to effectively mobilize action. Fuist contends that “movements cannot be thought of as culturally self-contained entities.”²⁶⁵ Accordingly, the existing context can act as a barrier or facilitate the actions of a social movement.

Finally, Fuist suggests individual biographies can help one better understand how the meaning associated with a particular site makes it fruitful for mobilization. This highlights the value of communal storytelling. Faith communities are rich with stories, symbols, and meaning making. Thus, congregations as a social network hold great potential to initiate cultural change, shifting from a maintenance model of church to a missional model. Engaging in storied ways is an effective pastoral leadership approach to attend to congregational anxiety amidst liminality. Congregational stories are containers of values, beliefs, and attitudes including clues – holding both barriers and facilitators – which impact institutional stuckness, cultural resources, including

²⁶² Ibid., 1048.

²⁶³ Ibid., 1048.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 1048.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 1049.

motivation and capacities for change. Stories can also hold clues regarding the future which God is inviting the church to live into.

The response to the current unstable context of the church is not as simplistic as discarding the institution or congregational structures. Rather it is vital to understand the role of culture, structural and institutional function, purpose, strengths, and limitations. It is crucial for pastoral leaders to be attentive to the ways the institution can take on a life of its own and become the congregation's mission to fulfil. This occurs when primary focus is given to budget, attendance records, or compliance to policy, structures, and bylaws rather than investing in the formation of disciples empowered to join with God in God's mission, so central to Mennonite congregational culture. When the institution becomes the commodity to preserve, the institution and its structures become a barrier rather than facilitator to further God's mission. At a time when it is the impulse for congregations and leaders to seek 'quick fixes,' strategies, or restructuring to 'fix the church,' a new set of questions and skill sets are needed in order to adapt to changing context.

The literature reveals that pastoral leaders benefit from understanding their current cultural context, its impact on the organization, and that amidst an unstable and uncertain time, the pastoral leaders and the church can influence and shape culture and mobilization. As pastoral leaders reflect upon their being as leaders and as they insert new narratives, most especially narratives of hope that counters the decline story, it is possible to lead cultural organization change.

Leadership Theory

Amidst a vast field of leadership literature my focus has been narrowly drawn to those who are addressing leadership in an unsettled and uncertain time. Narrowing the literature field

even further, I have examined leadership literature that addresses narratives as a resource to lead cultural congregational change.

Adaptive Leadership

Exploring adaptive leadership theory, one scholar's seminal work persistently rises with prominence. Ronald Heifetz is an educator and leadership specialist, the founding director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Heifetz' adaptive leadership theory is referenced in a vast field of doctoral studies spanning a wide range of disciplines and fields of study including health care, business management, academia, military, religious organization, and the social sciences. At its foundation, adaptive leadership is "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive."²⁶⁶

Definition:

For Heifetz, leadership is an *activity* rather than a set of personality qualities or characteristics.²⁶⁷ The primary activity of leaders is to "mobilize people to face their problems, and communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them do so."²⁶⁸ Distinguishing leadership as "adaptive work" Heifetz writes, "adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior. The exposure and orchestration of conflict.....provides the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways."²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Martin Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 14.

²⁶⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 1994), 20.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Adaptation has three characteristics: it preserves the DNA essential for continued survival; it discards the DNA that no longer serves current needs; and it creates DNA that gives society the “ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenging environments.”²⁷⁰ Adaptive change builds on the past and occurs through experimentation.

According to Heifetz, “the most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as though they were technical problems.”²⁷¹ Technical challenges are understood as problems or issues that are effectively resolved through expertise, resources, or technical skill sets. Adaptive challenges, however, ask people to address problems which they do not yet know the answers and of which there is no obvious single solution. Addressing and tackling adaptive challenges is a vital stance amidst liminality the absence of a road map. Adaptive challenges can be difficult to identify and describe and “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.”²⁷² To make progress requires going beyond authoritative expertise “to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.”²⁷³ Without learning new ways, changing attitudes or adopting new values and behaviors, people cannot make the adaptive leap to thrive in a new environment.”²⁷⁴ Adaptive leadership has been described as “improvisational art” given experimentation is a core practice.²⁷⁵

Leading cultural organizational change involves recognizing an organization’s predominant narratives and identifying within those narratives barriers and facilitators that

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 14.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

²⁷² Ibid., 19.

²⁷³ Ibid., 19.

²⁷⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. *Leadership on the Line*, 13.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 73.

impact and influence cultural organizational change. As Heifetz asserts, “refashioning narratives means refashioning loyalties.”²⁷⁶

Central to Heifetz’ and Linsky’s thought is that most “people do not resist change per se. People resist loss.”²⁷⁷ Living into a new story involves releasing what was, a loss that can be deep, most especially when values and beliefs have been deeply attached to communal narratives and identity. They write:

Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people’s habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and culture. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That’s a lot to ask. No wonder people resist.²⁷⁸

Inviting a congregation to reconsider their beliefs, habits, and values – the very core of adaptive work – requires more than communicating denominational missional ecclesiology. Change is achieved when “the people with the problem go through a process to become the people with the solution.”²⁷⁹ Such is achieved by placing the work amongst the people, where it belongs. When an organization such as the church can adapt, it can thrive. Losses will not dismantle, but rather teach us, according to Bolsinger.²⁸⁰

Organizational Leadership & Systems Theory

Those who carry a new story and who risk speaking it abroad
have played a crucial role in times of historic shift.
Before a new era can come into form, there must be a new story.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, “Leadership, Adaptability, Thriving,” *Faith & Leadership*” November 18, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSZId1VIYxc>.

²⁷⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky. *Leadership on the Line*, 11.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁸⁰ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 14.

²⁸¹ Margaret Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, 6.

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Finding our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* approaches leadership in an uncertain time through a systems lens. She argues organizations are living systems, a system of interconnected networks and have the capacity for self-organization, able to sustain themselves, and move toward greater complexity.²⁸² To that end, a slight disturbance in one part of the system creates an impact in another. In a world that seeks order, not only does chaos erupt, dismantling current structures, conditions are also ripe for a new order to emerge.²⁸³

Grounded in living-system framework, Wheatley argues organisms shape themselves in response to their environment, each element responsive, coevolving and cocreating.²⁸⁴ As evidenced in the natural world, life is system-seeking, organizationally oriented with organization naturally occurring. Systems, including congregational systems seek to maintain and experience equilibrium, that is homeostasis, and will work together to maintain the status quo. “Ways of relating and being, decision making, symbols, values and other parts of the organizational culture and naturally work together to *keep things the same*” writes Tod Bolsinger.²⁸⁵ It is a state which Edwin H. Friedman, renowned systems theorist refers to as “the persistence of form.”²⁸⁶

Wheatley contends that a “clash” between old and new stories can be seen everywhere, most especially within organizations “that were created to birth the new story.”²⁸⁷ A new story is

²⁸² Ibid., 33.

²⁸³ Margaret Wheatley, “Leadership Lessons for the Real World,” *Leader to Leader Magazine*, Summer 2006, <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/leadershiplessons.html>.

²⁸⁴ Margaret Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, 25.

²⁸⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 127.

²⁸⁶ Edwin H. Friedman. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 249.

²⁸⁷ Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, 26.

birthed “in response to the call of the new story” emerging from the need “to find more meaning in life, to bring more good into the world, to serve others.”²⁸⁸ However, over time an organization “created in response to the new story becomes a rigid structure, exemplifying yet again the old story.”²⁸⁹ When pioneers embrace settler identity, such creates a leadership challenge. A “new” story will hold a different vision for the organization whereas “old” stories are often bound to a world view that seeks stability, control, and the story that change is undesirable. Such is the soil from which resistance is deeply rooted.

Drawing upon a rich resource within organizations, Wheatley asserts new stories can usher in a new era.”²⁹⁰ Experiences and beliefs tell a story and new stories are birthed through conversation, thus opening systems of relationships to “new discoveries about who we are as a people, as organizations, and as leaders.”²⁹¹ An observant leader can discern it is time for a new story when, “holding onto the past only intensifies our dilemma,” when “we experience our ineffectiveness daily and [when we] descend into a profound sense of lost.”²⁹² Amidst this wilderness lostness, what is asked of the tellers of the new story is their courage and their voice. Storytelling does not require training sessions nor specialized training but rather deep listening to the storyteller. Leaders can hold space for and empower storytellers to “break their silence and share their ideas of the world as they have come to know it.”²⁹³

Effective leaders can also develop skills to midwife new stories by invoking creativity in the organization and by being attentive to the new story emerging, where the new story is

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 26.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 22.

²⁹² Ibid., 31.

²⁹³ Ibid., 31.

emerging, and by discerning when it is time for a new story. While the “old” story can have a tight hold on thoughts, behaviors, and actions, a “new” story holds the potential to give a “fuller sense of who we really are” thus clarifying individual and organizational identity.²⁹⁴ When leaders as myself encounter resistance to change it is often connected to a worldview that communicates stability is desirable. However, as Wheatley argues, “Life is in motion, constantly creating, exploring, discovering. Nothing alive, including us, resists these creative motions. But all of life resists control.”²⁹⁵ As leaders live into the new story, the organization can better understand themselves

How might a pastoral leader discern the time is ripe for new stories? Peter L. Steinke, leading congregational systems consultant asserts an opportune time to address stagnancy in an organization usually appears when: the community hits bottom; when real events open eyes and sharpen awareness; when a shattering experience occurs; or when the congregation is in a learning mode and someone excites their attention.²⁹⁶ Ultimately, however, “all change results from a change of meaning.”²⁹⁷ Systemically, people as all forms of life, “only change when something so disturbs them that they are forced to let go of their present beliefs. Nothing changes until we interpret things differently,” thus embracing and integrating new values, beliefs, attitudes.²⁹⁸ Change emerges in a living system, not through top-down leadership but rather “as local actions spring up simultaneously around the system. This identifies a challenge for congregations that operate from top-down leadership rather than valuing grassroot energies and

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁹⁶ Peter L. Steinke. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 74.

²⁹⁷ Margaret Wheatley, *Finding Our Way*, 104.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 104.

initiatives. If changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond the locale. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful influence at a more global or comprehensive level” thus leading to cultural organizational change and transformation.²⁹⁹

Transformation is at the heart of Robert E. Quinn’s *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It*. Quinn asserts organizations are productive, not because of “what they do,” but rather because of “who they are.”³⁰⁰ While management and leadership theory navigate toward techniques and tools, organizational excellence emerges when leaders invite others into a process of “building the bridge,” all the while being open to organizational and personal transformation. It is Quinn’s conviction that both individuals and organizations “develop a system of beliefs about how they can best cope” in the world.³⁰¹ Resultant, belief systems shape individual and organizational structure. Further, organizations develop “systems of belief about identity and coping.”³⁰² Resultant, is an organizational culture which tends to value stability. In a context of change when a road map is not provided and amidst liminality, effective leaders commit to doing what has never been done before.

Providing support for this bridge-building one-step-at-a-time journey, Quinn outlines an integrated model of leadership - “the fundamental state of leadership” – of eight practices:

1. Reflective Action: integrating action and reflection leads to new behaviours/transformation
2. Authentic Engagement: focus is on personal integrity and engagement
3. Appreciative Inquiry: bringing to the surface that which people care about the most which invites commitment, a release of energy, creativity, and hope
4. Grounded Vision: integrating the present with an image of a positive future. Vision must be grounded in what people really care about

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 178.

³⁰⁰ Robert E. Quinn. *Building the Bridge as You Walk On it: A Guide for Leading Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 4.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰² Ibid., 6.

5. Adaptive Confidence: a leader's ability to enter uncertain situations because they have a higher purpose and because a leader is confident, they can learn and adapt
6. Detached Interdependence: the capacity to transcend one's own need for control, and instead, hold space for others to discover and express their full capacities.
7. Responsible Freedom: refusing to live in victim mode (death of ego and rising to new life); liberated, one feels empowered
8. Tough Love: living within a creative tension, being simultaneously compassionate and assertive

Quinn's eight-practice model's trajectory guides leaders toward ever-increasing integrity and authenticity. Quinn's "fundamental state of leadership" is a psychological condition in which the leader is purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused, and externally open."³⁰³ It is a state of becoming less-comfort-centered and more purpose-centered, with a developed image or vision that articulates what one wants to create. For the leader committed to growth and transformation, the personal assessment section that accompanies each "practice" offers practical and wise reflective questions. Core to Quinn's thought is that leadership is far more than attaining leadership tools and skillsets. Rather, effective leaders who are leading change engage in a process of personal change transformation and invite others to the same. In this way, organizations are transformed when leaders transform themselves.

Narrative Leadership

Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating.
 More so, in fact, for while food makes us live,
 stories are what make our lives worth living.
 They are what make our condition *human*.³⁰⁴

Church leaders are facing the reality that the church they have been trained to lead has changed and continues to change with the pace of change escalating. According to David Fleming, director of Emerging Leaders Institute, "change requires leaders and organizations to embrace paradox and process, ambiguity and opportunity" to remain flexible and open to new

³⁰³ Ibid., for in-depth description and view Quinn's illustrations see 19-25.

³⁰⁴ Richard Kearney. *On Stories: Thinking in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

opportunities and possibilities.³⁰⁵ To capitalize on uncertainty and ambiguity Fleming argues leaders can nurture a change environment and utilize tools already present including humanity's oldest art form, storytelling.³⁰⁶

At the core of narrative leadership is the art of capitalizing on the resource and the power of stories. Through 'sensemaking' and 'sensegiving,'- a "process that involves calling into question an obsolete interpretive scheme, framing a new interpretive scheme in understandable and evocative terms, providing guidance for action toward the incipient change and exerting influence to accomplish it,"- leaders can draw upon the raw material of narratives to construct new 'organizational sense.'³⁰⁷ According to this definition leaders are both iconoclast – challenging the organization's cherished beliefs and paradigms – and prescriptive – providing insights and raw material necessary to reshape mindsets and practices "essential to the newly emerging opportunities."³⁰⁸

Stories are containers comprised of characters, scripts, plots, and more, therefore, they are an important interpretive tool "for discerning direction and creating meaning both personally and organizationally."³⁰⁹ Stories are also connected events that inspire a plot and create threads of unfolding experiences including phases of uncertainty (liminality), perhaps crisis, resolution, and new beginnings. A foundational "understanding of narrative leadership is based on the idea that more than one story can be told about any person or event."³¹⁰ Indeed, while congregants

³⁰⁵ David Fleming, "Narrative Leadership: Using the Power of Stories," *Strategy & Leadership* Jul/Aug 2001; 29, 4, 34-36, doi: 10.1108/sl.2001.26129dab.002.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹⁰ Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones. *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 45.

may hold to the story of decline or concern of aging demographics, to be sure, there is more than one story at play. While individuals and congregations construct narratives to make sense of their situation, according to Hester and Walker Jones, “other narrative possibilities exist and usually lie hidden from view.”³¹¹

Leadership Storytelling

Actress Nicole Kidman, in a red-carpet interview on January 7, 2018 prior to *the Golden Globe Awards* said, “We initiate change through the stories we tell and how we tell them.”³¹² Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre states, “stories are lived before they are told.”³¹³ Because people live into who they think they are, effective narrative leaders can risk to make “the story of who congregations think they are, a better and more faithful story for them to live out than the story of who they have been.”³¹⁴ When a group is given a powerful story, potential is ripe for conversation to leap forward to action, expanding knowing and meaning making. This leap to understanding and action is what Stephen Denning, a leading organizational consultant calls “the springboard effect.” Denning describes “springboard stories” as a that which enables “a leap in understanding so that the audience intuitively grasps what the change involves and why it might be desirable, as well as pointing to how an organization or community might change.”³¹⁵ Because stories pass on values and beliefs from one generation to the next, they provide continuity and convey where we have come from. Stories celebrate how previous generations

³¹¹ Ibid., 45.

³¹² *Golden Globe Awards*. “Interview with Nicole Kidman,” Aired January 7, 2018, on NBC.

³¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London, UK: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2981) 197.

³¹⁴ Goleman, Larry A. ed., *Finding our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 38.

³¹⁵ Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (England: Taylor & Frances, 2011), xvii, doi: org/10.4324/9780080517568.

have overcome struggles thus stretching humanity's capacity for empathy and to share experiences. As such, stories strengthen culture and can be used to change culture.

Stephen Denning is the author of several books on leadership, management, and leadership storytelling and a recognized contributor to the field of leadership storytelling through a vast collection of literature. The strength of Denning's thought as presented in *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* is the way he interconnects story and leadership. Rather than existing separately, Denning discusses how storytelling and leadership play a huge role in the world of organizations. Because pastoral leaders and congregants are deeply immersed in story - personal, family, communal, biblical – story is a readily available resource to enhance pastoral leadership capacity.

According to Denning, leadership storytelling is so important because it helps make sense of an organization. As a leadership tool, narratives provide a way for leaders to embody the change they seek, communicate who the organization is, and translate dry and abstract numbers and facts into a compelling picture of leader's goals. Storytelling leaders inspire people to act in unfamiliar and often unwelcome ways, and draw upon narratives to propel people forward into the future. Beyond transmitting values, they transform an organization through the power of imagination, enabling leaders to deal with an organization as a living organism. Finally, narratives help us make sense of the world, cope with a future that is evolving unpredictably, and let go of our urge to control.³¹⁶ The strength of Denning's work is the way he brings together organizational life (managers and leadership) and storytellers, rather than allowing them to inhabit two different worlds with their deeply held assumptions. Undergirding his thought is the

³¹⁶ Stephen Denning, "Why Leadership Storytelling is Important," *Forbes*, June 8, 2011, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/06/08/why-leadership-storytelling-is-important/?sh=7bf5200c780f>.

premise that “both worlds of storytelling and organization have been overlooked ... [and] how storytelling already plays a huge role in the world of organizations and business and politics today.”³¹⁷

Denning takes an interactive leadership approach “that swims in the richness and complexity of living and thrives on the connections between things.”³¹⁸ In this way, participants grasp the interrelatedness of things in the world thus are able to connect with the world in new ways.³¹⁹ An interactive leadership approach involves thinking, speaking, and acting on new capabilities and “engaging the world with a mind-set of active participation rather than detached observation.”³²⁰ Resultant, all within the organization are active participants.

Acknowledging that storytelling leadership is not for all, Denning stresses that a foundational value of interactive leadership is connection, active participation with and interaction, thus a collaborative process that begins with listening. This approach stands in contrast to top-down/controlling management style, as an interactive approach to leadership is modelled on the concept of conversation and dialogue. Effective leaders use storytelling to diagnose the current condition/context of the organization, help the organization make sense of its own story, and live into a new story.³²¹

Pastoral Life-story

Effective narrative pastoral leaders know how to unearth stories. They also seek to understand their own unique story within a complex network of stories and lead with it.

³¹⁷ Stephen Denning. *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 6

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

³²¹ David Fleming, “Narrative Leadership.”

According to Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones in their book *Know Your Story and Lead with it*, the pastoral leader's life-story can be an important source of influence in a congregation. The authors assert narrative leadership promotes a kind of social power that emerges from people's stories including "the often-unrecognized resources that reside in those stories."³²² When leaders effectively invite the sharing and telling of stories, the potential for social change is unleashed.

Humans live rich storied lives. Intuitively we know a good story when we hear it. It is often said: "Everyone loves a good story." When someone asks, "who are you?" we generally respond with a story. When a faith community is asked "who are you?" stories of both challenge and success emerge revealing identity markers. Research participants described their congregations in rich storied ways saying: "we pride ourselves as being pioneers but the reality is we are settlers;" or "we believe we are not enough." Stories both disclose and communicate communal identity and convey complex meanings across cultural and language barriers and communicate in ways that linguistic statements cannot.³²³ Stories also serve as a bridge-building resource between established congregations and new-Canadian or immigrant congregants, vital for relationship building as the church moves toward becoming intercultural.³²⁴

Stories as a Spiritual Process

Robert E. Quinn in his book *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* writes, "whether at the personal or the organization level," deep change is a "spiritual process."³²⁵

³²² Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It*, 6.

³²³ David J. Snowden, "Storytelling: an old skill in a new context," *Business Information Review* 16 (1) March 1999: 30-37, doi: 10.1177/0266382994237045.

³²⁴ Safwat Marzouk. *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019).

³²⁵ Robert E. Quinn. *Deep change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 78.

Explaining, Quinn suggests a loss of alignment can lead us to pursue the wrong end. Despite knowing “it is wrong... we rationalize our choice. We use the end to justify the means.”³²⁶ Ultimately, in time, “something inside us starts to wither,” a condition Quinn calls a “slow death.”³²⁷ Religious traditions have imagery and stories for understanding this reality that leads to not just resolution but resurrection “new life.” Quinn recommends leaders practice contemplation to address “the challenges we face from our defence mechanisms.”³²⁸ Such leads to necessary self-examination. Additionally, effective spiritual leaders willingly confront their own hypocrisy and cowardice, recognize the lies they tell themselves, acknowledge the presence of greed, insensitivity, and a lack of vision and courage. In doing so, one slowly gains clarity to engage in a course correction. While the pathway can be painful to journey, the paradoxical truth is revealed that change is hard but to stay the path of a “slow death” is also hard. As Quinn writes, “The difference is that the hell of deep change is the hero’s journey. It is the journey that puts us on “a path of exhilaration, growth, and progress.”³²⁹ Spiritual disciplines and practices guide both personal and congregational regeneration, growth, and progress.

Philosophy of Narratives

Narratives which are deeply embedded in organizational culture are formed around the challenges of life and life’s basic questions including the meaning of life. Humans “use stories to organize, explicate, construct, deconstruct, transfer, and transform meaning.”³³⁰ Recognizing the

³²⁶ Ibid., 78.

³²⁷ Ibid., 78

³²⁸ Ibid., 78

³²⁹ Quinn, *Deep Change*, 78.

³³⁰ Paul R. Yost, Michael P. Yoder, et al., “Narratives at Work: Story Arcs, Themes, Voice, and Lessons That Shape Organizational Life,” *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 2015, Vol. 67, No. 3, 163-188, doi: 10.1037/cpb0000043.

power and leadership resource of telling, re-telling, and re-storying to lead cultural organizational change is central to this research project.

According to philosopher Richard Kearney it is only when “haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made *memorable* over time, that we become full agents of our history.”³³¹ Kearney explains it in this way asserting humans interpret themselves in terms of where they have come from and where they are headed. In doing so, one gives a sense of oneself as a “*narrative identity*” that endures and coalesces over a lifetime.³³² Indeed as Kearney argues, “narrative provides us with one of our most viable forms of *identity* – individual and communal.”³³³ Kearney writes, “The magical power of narrative was not lost on its first hearers. And, as anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss and Mircea Eliade have shown, one of the earliest roles of the shaman or sage was to tell stories which provided symbolic solutions to contradictions which could not be solved empirically. In the process, reality itself would find itself miraculously transformed.”³³⁴

For Kearney, “narrative is world-*making* as well as a world-*disclosing* process.”³³⁵ It is an activity humans participate in as actors and something humans do as active agents.³³⁶

Kearney writes:

We are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own. Which is what makes each human existence a fabric stitched from stories heard and told. As storytellers and story-followers we are born into a certain intersubjective historicity which we inherit along with our language, ancestry and genetic code..... Moreover, it is because of our belonging to history as

³³¹ Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, 3.

³³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153,

storytellers and story-followers that we are *interested* by stories – in addition to being merely *informed by facts*.³³⁷

Given the multiple participants in any given story – author/actor/addressee – a storied outcome is never final but rather open-ended, even inviting response. The act of storytelling “invites us to become not just agents of our own lives, but narrators and readers as well. It shows us that the untold life is not worth living.”³³⁸

Storytelling in Organizations

Storytelling in organizations has been identified as an increasingly useful strategy for leading and managing change. Gabriel Yiannis in his 2000 book *Storytelling in Organizations* writes:

This storytelling perspective now permeates a large part of organizational studies, generating quite a formidable bibliography. Yet one searches in vain for massive volumes of organizational stories to match the painstaking labours of folklorists. A few collections of organizational stories have been published, mostly for the pedagogic rather than their research value. A few research texts report several stories, many include the odd ‘story’ or two, but several papers explicitly devoted to organizational storytelling fail to quote a single story.³³⁹

The gap of literature identified by Yiannis 20 years ago is being filled and developed as narrative leaders such as Stephen Denning recognize storytelling as a vital skill that can be utilized in organizations. A significant contributor to the field is David M. Boje who asserts, “in organizations, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders.”³⁴⁰ Accordingly, “people engage in a dynamic process of

³³⁷ Ibid., 153-4.

³³⁸ Ibid., 156.

³³⁹ Gabriel Yiannis. *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19.

³⁴⁰ David Boje, “The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36 (1991): 106-126, doi: 10.2307/2393432.

incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines.”³⁴¹ In the midst of decision-making, old stories are held alongside unfolding story lines. In this way organizations can steer away from repeating historically bad choices and invite repetition of past successes.³⁴² Thus a new story is co-created. According to Boje, “in just listening to stories, our personal experience mingles with what we hear and then see. As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience in response to cues.”³⁴³ How the story is engaged with affects subsequent dialogue, thus individual and organizational change.

Organizations also posit alternative stories including alternative motives and implications to common historical events. In this way the story “takes on more importance than mere objective facts.”³⁴⁴ While storytelling occurs mostly in conversations participants will begin to live vicariously through the episode or draw upon personal life experience. In this way personal experience mingles and listeners become co-producers with the storyteller. Stories serve as rich research texts capturing language, how participants interact, and subsequent dialogue. Because “stories are contextually embedded, their meaning unfolds through the storytelling performance event.”³⁴⁵

Knowledge Management

David Snowden, contributor to the field of Data Sciences is a primary contributor to the field of knowledge management which has “arisen in response to the growing understanding that

³⁴¹ Ibid., 106.

³⁴² Ibid., 106.

³⁴³ Ibid., 107.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 107.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.

intellectual capital is the core asset of organizations and of society itself.”³⁴⁶ Snowden argues that organizations have come to understand that stories are not an “optional extra” but rather are already existent and integral to defining an organization’s identity. Accordingly, managed and purposeful storytelling is not only a powerful mechanism useful for disclosing intellect or knowledge, storytelling “can also provide a non-intrusive, organic means of producing sustainable cultural change” convey values and transfer complex knowledge.³⁴⁷

All cultures and organizations have stories. Referencing the New Testament, Snowden draws upon Christianity’s founder Jesus the master storyteller, whose use of parables and metaphors disclosed the character, values, and the presence of the reign of God. The Christian church is rooted in the story of Jesus’ life and ministry, death, and resurrection. While theologians emerged later, Christianity as a movement began with a storyteller.

Having joined IBM in 1997, Snowden led several teams in a series of studies and pioneered knowledge management which includes but is not limited to knowledge disclosure techniques using anthropological principles and story telling. According to Snowden an *anecdote*, defined as a “narrative of detached incident” provides “a means by which an organization or a leader creates a common identity by providing models and examples of good and bad behavior.”³⁴⁸ Stories describe incidents in the history of an organization and powerfully convey values including preferred actions and the leader is often a character in an organizational story. Stories can be used to educate, provide purpose, and indirectly as a resource to understand something.

³⁴⁶ David Snowden, “Storytelling: an old skill in a new context,” 21.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

Storytelling for communication and knowledge disclosure is a vital management ability to convey complex and multi-layered ideas in a simple and memorable form to culturally diverse audiences.”³⁴⁹ Related to learning, parents tell children stories from their past, past family relations, including stories about hero and anti-hero figures of particular cultures. Furthermore, “many great religions have started with a person of high moral worth who tells stories that convey those values in a memorable and moving way and that also are capable of being understood at many levels.”³⁵⁰ Because stories communicate meaning, communal values, beliefs, and norms, leaders can tap into its power for many purposes including communication, eliciting knowledge, cultural change, and cross-cultural understanding.³⁵¹

What is the role of scripts? According to Snowden “a script is the official story of an organization,” the norm.³⁵² Organizational cultural change involves “introducing a new script into the communication stream of a community and being attentive to the anti-story that arises which may range from “initiative-weary cynicism to self-righteous indignation.”³⁵³ A new script can include word-pictures that capture the essence of the change process the organization is living into.

Metaphors

Further, Snowden asserts metaphors, as research participants demonstrated, help us to understand, communicate, and make meaning from our current context. Metaphors also serve as a powerful eliciting technique in that they provide a common reference point for a group which

³⁴⁹ David J. Snowden, “The art and science of story or ‘Are you sitting uncomfortably? Part 1: Gathering and harvesting the raw material,” *Business Information Review*, 2000-09, Vol. 17 (3): 147-156, doi: 10.1177/0266382004237665, 147.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 150.

can move them away from current concern and prejudices into a wider space, and additionally, provide language to sustain thinking within a group following an event.³⁵⁴ Metaphors “help to normalize what we are collectively experiencing” including “negative emotions such as “sadness, anger, fear, disappointment, frustration and uncertainty.”³⁵⁵

Story De-construction

Yost et al. of the Department of Industrial-Organizational Psychology Department of Seattle Pacific University identified sparse empirical research devoted to deconstructing storytelling elements. In their research they sought to identify common story arcs, common story themes, typical characteristic of the narrator’s voice, and the story-teller’s satisfaction with story outcomes. Their research has implications for both the individual and organizational level. Referencing the narrative theory by Gregg and McAdams it is suggested that “people tend to tell their own stories by drawing on the prevailing scripts in their culture.”³⁵⁶ This is of importance to note as cultures generally have master scripts which shape how people understand their own stories.³⁵⁷ Prevalent cultural stories can include: transformational stories, survival, success, tragedy, paradoxical, hero, or anti-hero stories. People draw upon cultural stories to make meaning and to expand their understanding as per the use of metaphors.

Further, Yost et al. also concluded individuals conceptualize their work experience in narrative form. Accordingly, a pastoral leader can utilize this information in their congregation to make sense of their situation. Stories provide a framework that can be utilized to help people

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 152.

³⁵⁵ Susan Nienaber, “Crisis Fatigue? Metaphors can help,” *Congregational Consulting Group*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/crisis-fatigue-metaphors-can-help>.

³⁵⁶ Paul R. Yost, Michael P. Yoder, et al., “Narratives at Work,” 165.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 165.

engage in unknown or unexpected situations such as liminality. Further, pastoral leaders can lead both the organization and individuals to draw on story-arc scripts that are held. Because stories are more memorable for individuals than data, they effectively articulate change over time and are therefore useful for navigating the current season of change and ambiguity.

Narrative Intelligence

Stephen Denning whose experience is rooted in knowledge sharing in the context of his position with the World Bank introduces the concept of narrative intelligence which he defines as the ability to “think narratively about the world” a concept he believes is central to leadership.³⁵⁸ Narrative intelligence is the ability to understand and act amidst multiple and interacting narratives. This is vital as humans think and dream in stories. They make decisions in the form of stories and make plans in stories. Hopes and fears reside in stories, thus central to leadership communication. According to Denning:

If it’s true that we think in stories, and make decisions in the form of stories, then what this means is that *all* forms of communication directed toward action - not just stories themselves but questions, metaphors, images, offers, challenges, conversations, whatever – are effective to the extent that they generate a new story in the mind of the listener.”³⁵⁹

Denning contends that leadership and change are driven by ordinary people who act and speak in different ways. Such leads to new identity and new roles.

Storytelling as a change process is accessible to pastoral leaders according to Denning’s four-stage story-telling process:

Tell the story of ‘what the change is’

Stories can be drawn upon to show an individual or organization what might occur

³⁵⁸Stephen Denning. *The Secret Language of Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 44.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

when an idea is developed. Stories can be personalized, highlighting the change process and what it will mean for those involved.

Tell the story of 'how will it work?'

The story will be linked to the present context of the organization, identifying the stakeholder's values, practicality, and underlying factors. The 'how will it work?' story is a future-oriented story, a story that tells how the future will unfold. The effectiveness of this stage resides with the listeners as they seek to understand how the change idea will unfold. An effective leader will seek to link the change idea with credible causal connections initiated in the previous step.

Tell the story 'how to get from here to there?'

A complex change process can feel overwhelming for individuals and organizations. Confusion and discouragement, instill anxiety and overwhelm or stall a process. Because from 'here to there' is relevant for a liminal season, it is imperative to clearly articulate next steps. Amidst liminality, it is possible to articulate a trajectory "from here to there" through simple stories. An effective leader will articulate where the organization is presently situated and then lay out a plan – "if we do 'A' and then 'B,' 'X' will occur. Then, we will do 'C' and then 'D.'" Dissecting a change process into small steps makes the process digestible for the organization. I would argue however, that not all change processes, most especially during liminality, can be articulated so clearly with causal effects nor be as predictable as Denning suggests. Alternatively, perhaps a more effective approach is achieved with extremely small steps that will result in positive outcomes and small successes.

Tell the story 'why it will work'

The distinctive difference between the story 'how it will work?' and the story 'why it

will work’ resides in that the former story is set in actual time and space in the future, whereas the latter story ‘why it will work’ tends to be a story set in imaginary time and space. The ‘why it will work?’ is most effective when it describes a stable pattern of causal effect. During an unsettled season, that is liminality, the ‘why it will work?’ may not be as clear.³⁶⁰

Narratives and Pastoral Leadership

Relevant for pastoral leadership The *Alban Institute* engaged in a Narrative Leadership project from 2005 to 2008 to explore “the power of story retrieval, reconstruction, and presentation as a framework for ministry, leadership, and congregational change.”³⁶¹ This study asserts narrative approaches to change have risen in a broad range of professions and academic fields in recent years including the fields of education, business, counselling, anthropology, history, theology, and ethics.³⁶²

Consultant and researcher Larry A. Golemon asserts narratives have an unconscious hold on congregational life. Accordingly, a vital pastoral leadership task is to “uncover narratives in order to understand the congregational culture, identity, and mission.”³⁶³ Golemon is the editor of three relevant resources: *Living our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture*; *Finding our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change*; *Teaching our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation*.³⁶⁴ A strength of this trilogy is the inclusion of chapters devoted to multiple fields of study including theology, cultural studies, change theory,

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 190-193.

³⁶¹ Larry A. Golemon, ed., *Living our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Culture* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 3.

³⁶² Ibid., 1.

³⁶³ Larry A. Golemon, ed., *Finding our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 5.

³⁶⁴ Larry A. Golemon, ed., *Teaching our Story: Narrative Leadership and Pastoral Formation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010).

psychotherapy, and leadership formation. Chapter contributors include, Diana Butler Bass, Gil Rendle, N. Graham Standish, Susan Beaumont, and more, respectively.

Narratives and Psychotherapy

Goleman's thought is grounded in the narrative therapy framework of Michael White and David Epsen who argue, "stories provide the framework that makes it possible for us to interpret our experience, and these acts of interpretation are achievements that we take an active part in."³⁶⁵ Rather than relying on a medical model of diagnosis and cure as per psychotherapy, White and Epsen offer an alternative, the development of a social model of retrieval, deconstruction, and reconstruction of basic narratives as developed by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a French philosopher and social theorist.

Narratives and Liminality

Additionally, White and Epsen draw upon the "rite of passage" ritual process first introduced by anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Viktor Turner. Accordingly, any crisis could be interpreted as relating to a 'rite of passage,' that is, a significant transition in a person's life according to separation stage, the liminal, betwixt and between phase, and the reincorporation phase which is characterized by a new status or stage.³⁶⁶ The rites of passage analogy invites exploration which invites a person to reflect upon "what the crisis might be telling them about what they could be separating from that was not viable for them.....; what clues the crisis gives about the new status and roles that could become available to them; and when and how under what circumstances might new roles and status might be realized."³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Larry A. Goleman, *Finding our Story*, 10.

³⁶⁶ Michael White and David Epsen. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 7.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

According to pastor and author N. Graham Standish, “Human beings think in story. We learn through story.... Our stories tell others what we think, what our values are, and what we believe is important in life.... Humans are living stories of experience. Our lives can be scripted like a narrative.”³⁶⁸ Further Standish states,

In fact, when we think of individual lives in this way, what we discover is that those who live what seem to be successful lives have a generally compelling life narrative of overcoming obstacles in order to achieve. Those who seem to have dysfunctional lives often have life stories that read like disconnected or stuck narratives in which the main character struggles to overcome obstacles. Instead of overcoming obstacles, these obstacles overwhelm her or his life.³⁶⁹

According to Standish, “Effective leaders creatively script their congregations’ stories by finding alternative plotlines that lead to resolving the crises in a way that steers people to experience redemption, reconciliation, and sometimes resurrection.”³⁷⁰ Amidst the current narrative of decline it can be a challenge for a congregation to engage with an alternative plotline, and yet this is vital congregational work at this unstable time. Given the focus of this study has been to examine and analyze predominant congregational stories to identify barriers and facilitators impacting congregational culture change, theorists confirm the power of stories as a cultural change agent. Stories as containers of meaning can move people beyond their fears toward hope, motivate movement beyond a remembered past into the present and future, and unlock potential moving a congregation beyond perceived limiting stories and barriers. Narrative leaders risk telling new stories that disrupt a congregation systemically. By telling and re-storying predominant stories, narrative leaders help a congregation’s identity evolve into a new form, as they embrace a freer and more faithful story.

³⁶⁸ N. Graham Standish, “Pastor as Narrative Leader,” in *Living our Story*, 68-9.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

Conclusion

Stories are shaped within a particular culture, context, and religious tradition.³⁷¹ The narratives we live by can become so “internalized that we may not see an alternative to them, especially when they become dysfunctional or unable to adapt to changing conditions.”³⁷²

God’s people across history have been formed and transformed by God’s ongoing story of salvation, restoration, and reconciliation. Christians locate themselves within God’s unfolding story of redeeming love, the forgiveness of sins, and Christ’s commission to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28: 16-20). The Anabaptist story is rooted within the 16th century Reformation story in which its founders bravely initiated a movement grounded in biblical teachings, adult baptism, separation from the world, and radical discipleship. From its fringe beginnings, the Anabaptist church of North America emerged as an established and settled body within Christendom. A marker however of post-Christendom is the shift of the church from the center of society to its margins, an adjustment due to changing culture. At a time in which a decline of master narratives within culture is noted, when institutional power is challenged, and when technical fixes are inadequate to address adaptive challenges, God continues to form God’s people leading them into God’s unfolding story.

The current liminal space in which God’s people are journeying, located on a threshold, between what was and what is yet to be creates a significant leadership challenge for pastors and congregations. Contemporary missiologists have begun to name this leadership challenge, arguing for the strengthening of “missional communities” committed to furthering God’s mission in the world. Holding to limiting narratives such as “build it and they will come” binds God’s

³⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

³⁷² Ibid., 11.

people to a past time at a time when God is doing something new (Isaiah 43:19). Shifting focus from organizational or institutional survival to a focus of living out God's mission in a changing cultural context requires new imagination, deconstruction of predominant narratives and the courage to live boldly into a new story.

Missional ecclesiology, liminality, John Dewey's learning theory, cultural organizational change theory, adaptive leadership theory, narratives and narrative leadership provide the theoretical basis for this narrative research study. As a researcher I am becoming increasingly aware that organizational re-structuring and the implementation of new programs and strategies to address congregational change, is tied to a time past, thus a limiting narrative. When the temptation can be to look toward the local neighbourhood or culture as a problem "to fix" or to approach adaptive challenges with "technical fixes" it is vital for pastoral leaders to identify their own blind spots and narrow vision and in response look inward, examining existing beliefs, values, and attitudes deeply embedded within their own predominant narratives. In the current unstable context in which leadership is shifting from a chaplaincy leadership model to an outward focus model, it is vital for pastoral leaders and congregations to shed entrenched ways of thinking, being, and doing, and embrace new values, beliefs, and habits in order to lead God's people in God's future. The current unstable season calls for an unravelling and dismantling of limiting narratives, identifying predominant narratives, bringing to consciousness the unconscious, and together with God write a new story, a redemptive story, a hope-filled story.

This narrative inquiry study listened to pastoral leaders from established MCEC congregations as well as first generation, new-Canadian, and immigrant pastoral leaders as they reflected upon their lived experience leading missionally. Their stories reveal the existence of liminality, the rich resource of relationships, and values including hope, revealing narratives are

a rich congregational resource, containers of meaning, identity, theology, and more.

Congregations are established communities with an abundance of stories to tell. Barriers and facilitators impacting culture change within congregations can be identified through a narrative exploration of the lived experiences of MCEC pastors.

The following chapter will explain the research methodology inquiry which was used for this study and its suitability for this area of research.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

Research Question

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore the lived experience of MCEC pastors, identifying barriers and facilitators as they lead culture change. Specifically, through the qualitative research methodology narrative inquiry, this study endeavoured to gain an understanding of each participant's experience as they told stories about their leadership journey. Five focus group interviews/conversations included 17 participants. The research participants / co-researchers were representative of MCEC's diversity including age, gender, ethnicity, educational training, leadership style, conflict style, and lived experience.

The following research question was explored: "What are MCEC pastors' lived experiences of the facilitators and barriers to congregational culture change: A Narrative Inquiry"

Research Design

This study was a narrative inquiry and involved five focus groups.³⁷³

Narrative Inquiry Methodology

Narrative inquiry is rooted in constructivism, a philosophical worldview in which "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of reviews rather than narrow the meanings into a few

³⁷³ D. Jean Clandinin & F. Michael Connelly. *Narrative inquiry: experience and story in qualitative research* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2000); D. Jean Clandinin, *Handbook of narrative inquiry mapping a methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc., 2007), doi: 10.4135/9781452226552.

categories or ideas.”³⁷⁴ Accordingly, the goal of the research “is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation.”³⁷⁵ Because subjective meanings “are negotiated both socially and historically” meanings “are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives.”³⁷⁶ Social constructivist researchers “focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants.”³⁷⁷ The researcher is also attentive to and understands his/her own background and how “interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences.”³⁷⁸

The narrative inquiry prompts researchers to think with stories rather than about stories. Accordingly, narrative inquiry is “a way to understand experience and a way to study experience.”³⁷⁹ The process begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experience.”³⁸⁰ As a research methodology, narrative inquiry is prevalent in the social sciences including health sciences, education, leadership, and business.

Narrative inquiry is “both a methodology and a way of understanding an experience narratively”³⁸¹ Renowned educator John Dewey’s understanding of experience philosophically, undergirds narrative inquiry. As previously stated, for Dewey there are two criteria for

³⁷⁴ John Cresswell and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc., 2018), 24.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁷⁹ D. Jean Clandinin. *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* (NY: Routledge, 2013), 15.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

experience, “interaction and continuity enacted in situations.”³⁸² Dewey’s criteria is grounded in the understanding that “experience is both personal and social” both, always being present.³⁸³ Accordingly, experience is always situated within a social context. Attending to Dewey’s criterion which claims experiences grow out of other experiences and lead to further experiences, Jean Clandinin, writes, “Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum – the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future.”³⁸⁴ Dewey’s two-fold criteria provide “the grounding through the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality.”³⁸⁵ To undertake narrative inquiry, the researcher cannot focus on one commonplace - temporality, sociality, and place – to the exclusion of others.”³⁸⁶

According to D. Jean Clandinin, seminal contributor to the field, “narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience.”³⁸⁷ As a methodology it “is inspired by a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially live storied lives.”³⁸⁸ In narrative inquiry, the inquirer comes into relation with participants. As such inquirers think narratively about ones’ own experience, about participant’s experiences, and “about those experiences that become visible as we live alongside, telling our stories, hearing one another’s stories, moving in and acting in the places – the context – in which our lives meet.”³⁸⁹

³⁸² Ibid., 12.

³⁸³ D. Jean Clandinin and F Michael Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry*, 2.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 12.

³⁸⁶ D. Jean Clandinin, Debbie Pushor and Anne Murray Orr, “Navigating Sites for narrative inquiry.” *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol 58, No. 1, January/February 2007, 23, doi: 10.1177/0022487106296218.

³⁸⁷ D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 13.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 13.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 23.

Narrative inquiry is relational in character, a “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.”³⁹⁰ Rather than a “set of procedures or linear steps to be followed” narrative inquiry relationally opens “to where the stories of participants’ experience take each researcher.”³⁹¹ Narrative inquiry generally begins with participants telling their stories to the researcher, both researcher and participants entering “the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories.”³⁹² Ultimately, “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told.”³⁹³

Core principles guide narrative inquiry including answering questions of justification: “So What?” and “Who Cares?”³⁹⁴ Justification assists the inquirer to respond clearly about the research puzzle. The research puzzle rather than research question is composed around a particular wondering or search.³⁹⁵ There is no expectation of an answer but rather the process is open-ended for purposes of continual reformulation and learning. Justification of the study is expressed in at least three ways: personally – why does this research matters to the inquirer - practically – what difference might this research make to ones’ practice, socially or theoretically – what difference might research make “to theoretical understanding or to making situation more socially just?”³⁹⁶

Narrative inquirers recognize that research participants are in the midst of their lives, shaped by past, present, and future, always unfolding socially, culturally, institutionally,

³⁹⁰ Clandinin & Connelly. *Narrative Inquiry*, 20.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁹² Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry* 2013, 63-4.

³⁹³ Clandinin & Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 20.

³⁹⁴ Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 35.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

linguistically, and through familial narratives.”³⁹⁷ Situated within the “living of stories” researchers go where participants take the researcher, meeting their family and/or friends and going to places that are important to the participants.³⁹⁸ This methodological approach enriches the “field” of listening to stories and living alongside participants as they both tell and live their stories.

The common starting point for narrative inquiry is storytelling, conversation, or interviews as conversation. As Clandinin asserts, “Conversations create a space for stories of both participants and researchers to be composed and heard. Conversations are not guided by “predetermined questions or with intentions or being therapeutic, resolving issues, or providing answers to questions.”³⁹⁹ Field texts rather than “data” are gathered by the researcher having “studied the experiences of the participants and inquirers in a narrative inquiry.”⁴⁰⁰ Field texts are composed and co-composed by researcher and participant with the knowledge that “there is ongoing interpretation of the stories lived and told.”⁴⁰¹ From field texts, interim research texts are created with attention to temporality, sociality, and place. From interim research texts a final research text is created as it relates to the initial research puzzle.

Clandinin and Connelly assert, “Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally. Participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants. Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience. It is people in relation studying with people in relation.”⁴⁰²

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰² Clandinin & Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry*, 189.

Important for me, the narrative inquiry methodology respects the relationship I have with fellow MCEC pastoral colleagues. Focus group conversations were interactive which invited the engaged sharing of stories of our common and unique experiences as pastoral leaders. The experience of focus group conversation became a rich learning and space of reflection for all. Accordingly, narrative inquiry was an effective methodology for this study. This methodology was chosen as a way for the researcher to listen, collect, describe, tell, and write narratives regarding each participant's unique experience.

Suitability of Narrative Approach

This study narratively engaged the lived experience of pastors in a focus group setting to identify barriers and facilitators as they lead congregational culture change. The narrative inquiry approach was optimal for this study for several reasons. As the researcher and pastorally, I appreciated the relational emphasis of narrative inquiry which acknowledges that the researcher also comes with a story and rich experience. Interactions between focus group participants deepened the conversation and enriched the shared experience of storytelling. As Clandinin asserts “conversations create a space for the stories of both participants and researcher to be composed and heard.”⁴⁰³ Indeed “when we situate our inquiries primarily in the living of stories, we go where participants take us.... and enter places that are important to participants.”⁴⁰⁴

Focus Groups

For this narrative inquiry study, research was conducted in the context of five focus groups. Focus groups, according to Lia Litoselliti “offer some advantages compared to other

⁴⁰³ Clandinin, *Engaging in narrative inquiry*, 45.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

methods of collecting qualitative data.”⁴⁰⁵ For example, a focus group can provide a more natural environment than one-on-one interviews provide because as Richard A. Krueger suggests, focus group participants “are influencing and influenced by others – just as they are in real life.”⁴⁰⁶ While one-on-one interviews focus on the individual experience, focus groups “aim to obtain multiple views and attitudes”... as part of “the ongoing-going interaction processes among participants.”⁴⁰⁷

To generate engaged discussion, Professor of Social Work Rosaline S. Barbour suggests “a focus group consisting of people in agreement about everything would make for a very dull conversation and data lacking in richness.”⁴⁰⁸ For this reason, differing perspectives, backgrounds, and a mixing together of people is preferable. Theorists suggest “there is no magic number” regarding focus group size although according to Barbour earlier focus group texts echoes the advice that the preferable size “of a group is 10-12 people.”⁴⁰⁹ Due to potential challenges of ensuring equal voice and perhaps the need to seek clarification or further exploration, “it is perfectly possible to hold a focus group discussion with three or four participants.”⁴¹⁰

Making use of qualitative data, the researcher serves several functions amidst the focus group including: “moderating, listening, observing, and eventually analyzing.”⁴¹¹ The focus

⁴⁰⁵ Lia Litoselliti. *Using Focus Groups in Research*. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 2.

⁴⁰⁶ Richard A. Krueger. *Focus Groups: a practical guide for applied research second edition* (Thousand Oaks: CA, SAGE Publications, Inc., 1994), 19.

⁴⁰⁷ Litoselliti, *Using focus groups in Research*, 2.

⁴⁰⁸ Rosaline S. Barbour. *Doing focus groups* Oaks: CA, Sage Publications, 2007), 59.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴¹¹ Richard A. Krueger. *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*, 19.

group facilitator guides the discussion using a number of predetermined and carefully developed open-ended questions.”⁴¹²

While focus groups are generally conducted in person, at times it is necessary to include participants on-line and/or through a web conferencing platform such as ZOOM. One advantage of utilizing technology is that participants living at a distance are not excluded from *the* research process and non-verbal communication and participant interactions can be observed.

Following a brief over-view of the general observations and emerging themes as reported in the MCEC Environmental Scan and referenced in the Introductory Chapter focus group participants were asked to share a story about their experience leading missionally (see Appendix “G”). Offering an open-ended question allowed me to listen as well as to discern how best to join the conversation so that it would be authentically co-constructed. I was attentive to ensure each participant actively participated in the conversation. The conversation also involved asking the participants to share a story about their lived experience adapting and responding to a changing ministry context. As the conversation flowed, I asked about specific ministry stories that may have been disruptive, challenging, or transformation and the resultant personal and congregational learnings. Exploring the lived experience of congregational predominant stories, I asked participants to identify values, assumptions, or beliefs embedded in their stories. Additionally, I asked participants if those stories were hope-filled or binding. Throughout the focus group conversation, I sought to be mindful of narrative inquiry commonplaces: past, present, and future; place; and personal and social conditions.⁴¹³

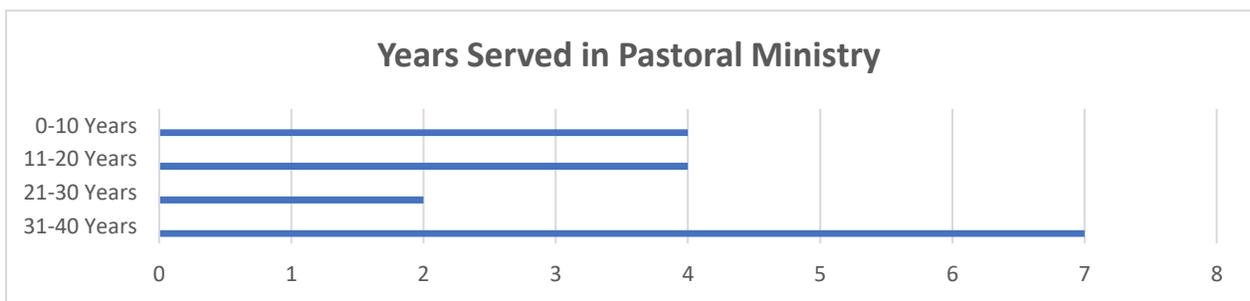
⁴¹² Litoselliti, *Using focus groups in research*, 5.

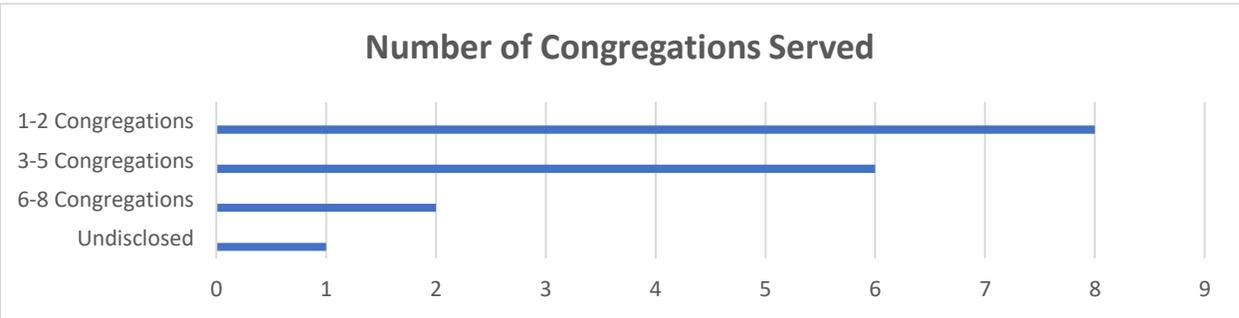
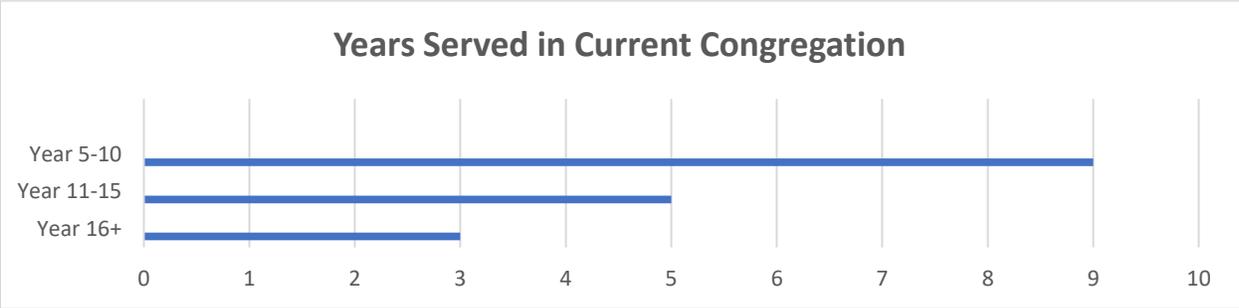
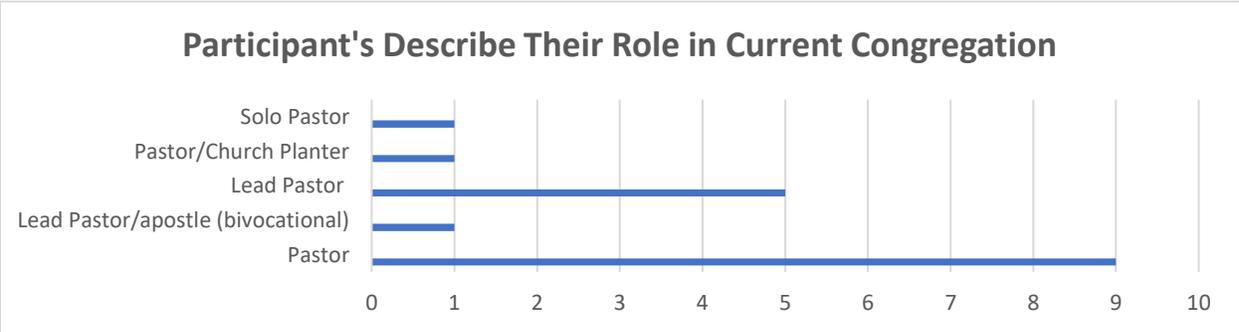
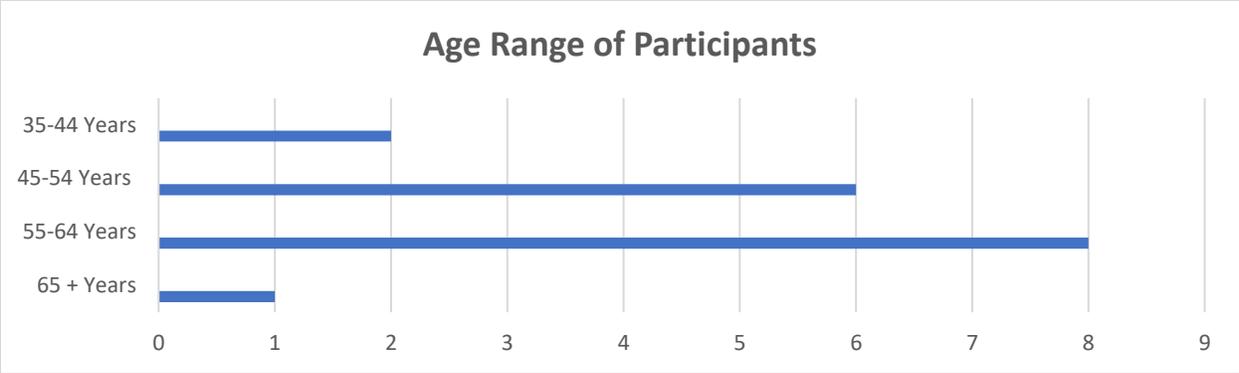
⁴¹³ D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 39-42.

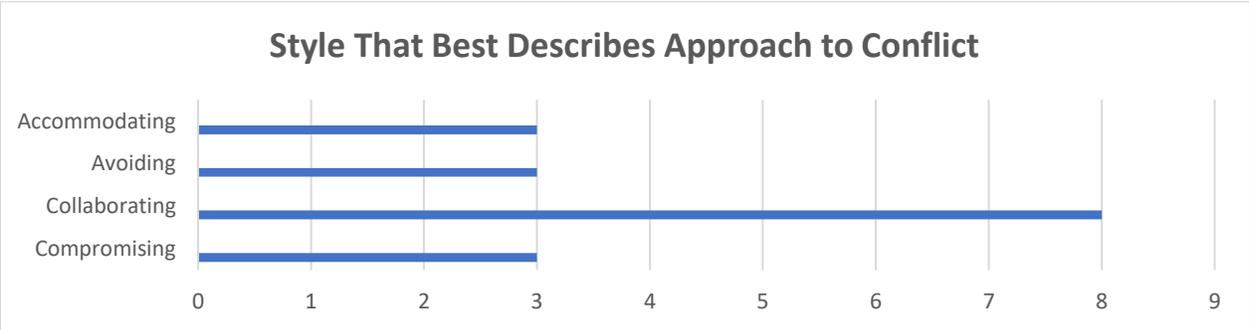
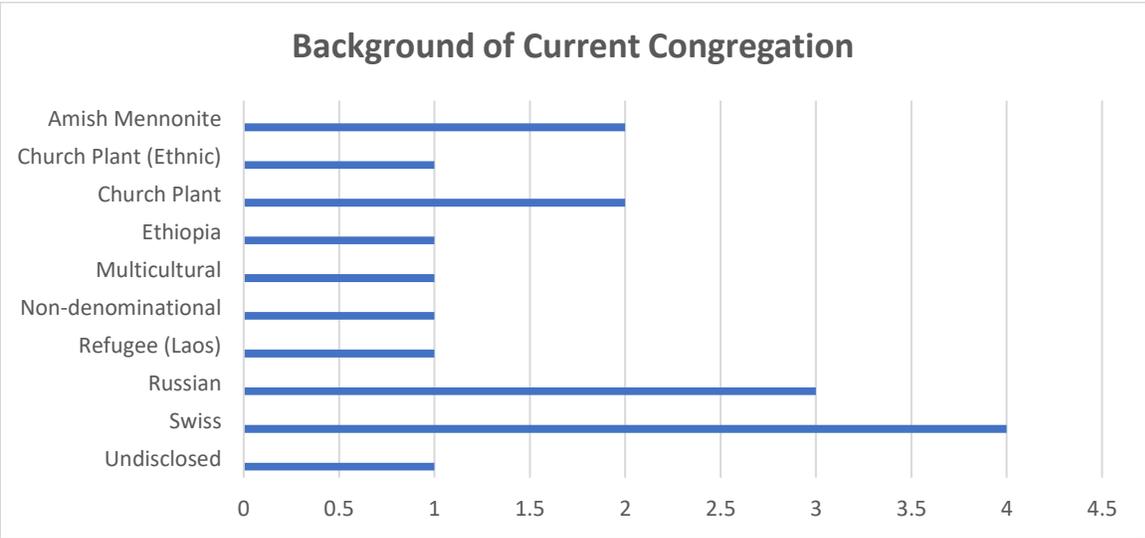
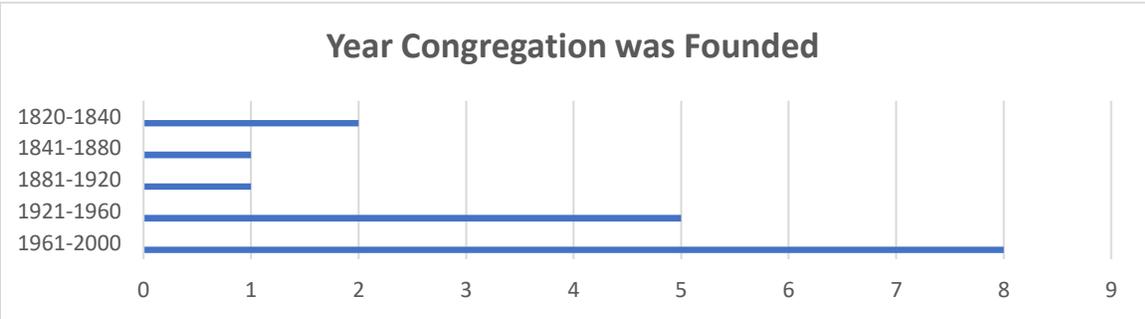
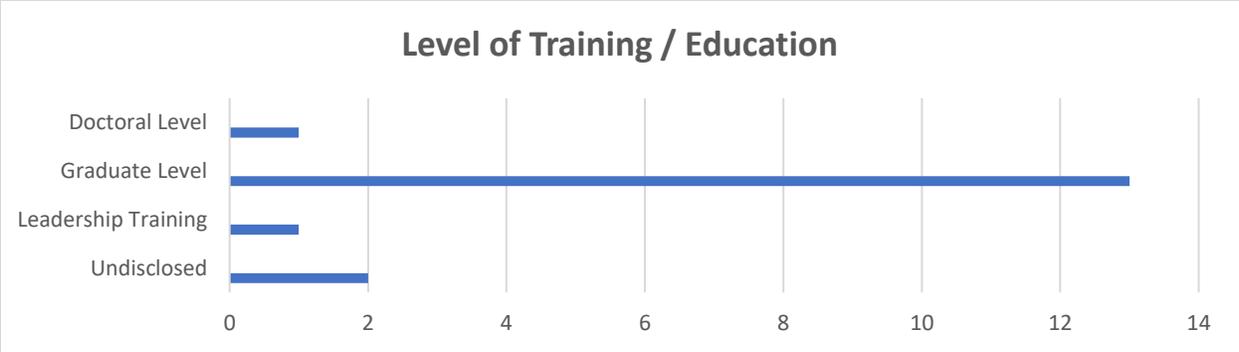
Participant / Co-researcher Demographics

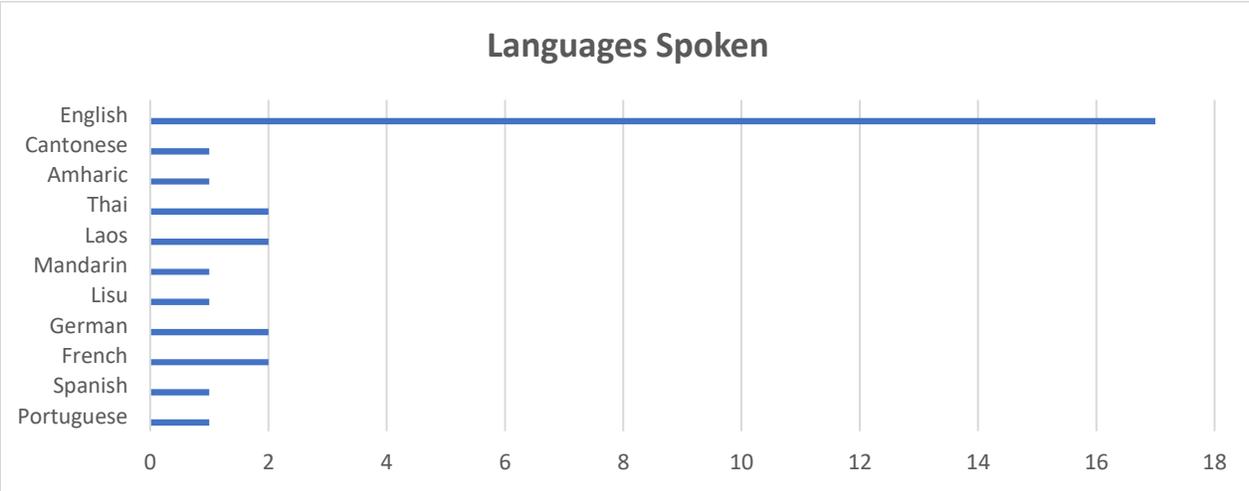
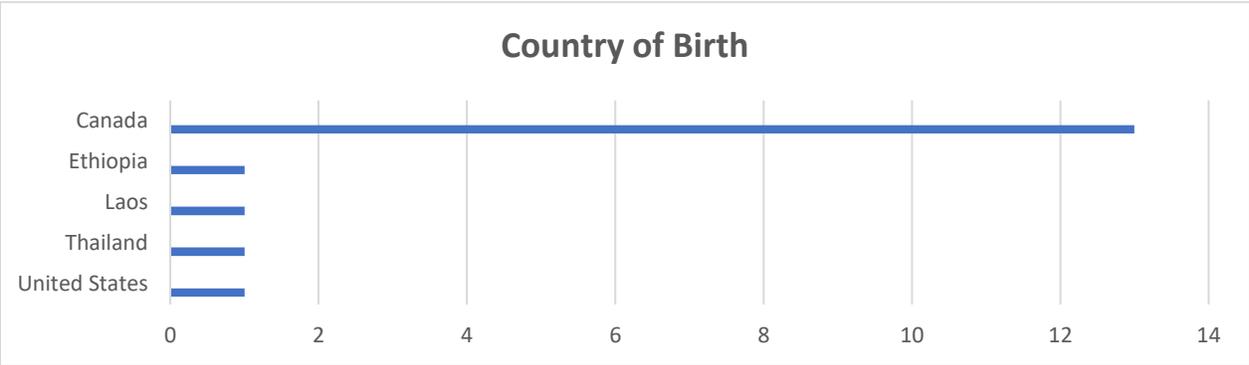
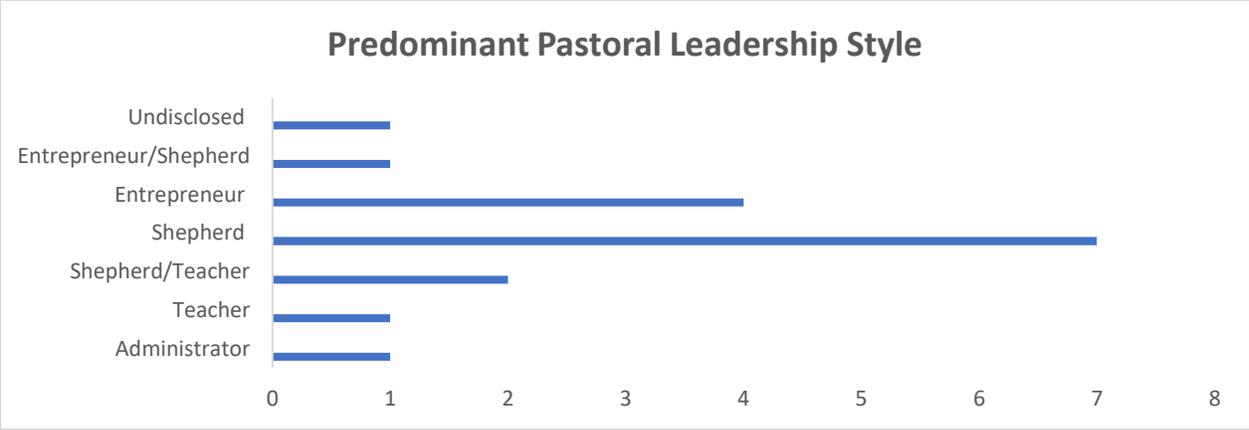
A potential pool of co-researchers was composed with input from David Martin, Executive Minister, MCEC with attention given to years of ministry experience in current context, age, gender, ethnic diversity, urban/rural context, congregational size, and geographic location. In all 21 pastors, representative of 21 MCEC congregations were invited to participate in the research study. Nineteen pastors responded to the invitation, 13 of which serve on a ministry team in either a lead or co-pastor role. Eight serve as solo pastor. Purposive sampling was used to identify 19 participants, 13 males and 6 females. All participants serve as MCEC pastors, their ministry contexts spanning geographically across Ontario and as far east as New Brunswick. 16 co-researchers were located across Ontario while 3 co-researchers are residents in a province east of Ontario.

Research participants are considered co-researchers/collaborators in that narrative inquiry is a collaborative process. Each participant reviewed a narrative account of the focus group conversation/interview and were invited to review the field text and respond by email. Demographic information was provided by the participants/co-researchers. (See Appendix D).









Procedure

With approval from the Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University (Project #6136), potential participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview of no longer

than 90 minutes. Each focus group consisted of two to five participants and included open-ended questions, in-person, or video-conference conversation.

Potential participants received a written invitation (see Appendix “B”), by email from the office of David Martin, MCEC Executive Minister along with an Information Letter and informed consent form (see Appendix “C”), and finally, a demographic survey (see Appendix “D”). While denominational focus has been invested in missional theology and practice, there was no expectation by the researcher that co-researchers see the need for culture change. Potential participants were asked to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study and return the signed the consent and completed demographic forms by email. Focus group interviews were arranged by email. Interviews were held in a quiet and private space in a church building. The informed consent forms and demographic forms were reviewed. No payment was given to participants. Each participant received an email “thank you” following the focus group interview.

Focus Group size and gender demographics as follows:

Focus Group One: 4 participants; all male

Focus Group Two: 4 participants: 3 males, 1 female (2 participants not audio recorded)

Focus Group Three: 2 participants; 2 males

Focus Group Four: 5 participants; 3 males, 2 females

Focus Group Five: 4 participants; 1 male, 3 females

Data Collection and Transcription

One focus group was digitally audio-recorded while four focus groups were audio and visually recorded using the web conferencing platform ZOOM. Unfortunately, two research participants from “Focus Group number two” were neither audio nor visually recorded due to a technological malfunction. I reported the malfunction to the two participants, notifying them that because I was engaged in the process of the conversation, I had not taken field notes and

therefore their contributions could not be included as data. I apologized and thanked them for their participation. I also reported the malfunction to my Academic Adviser who consulted with the REB. In response, the REB reported to the researcher that there was no ethical concern using the focus group data collected from the remainder of focus group participants. Each of the five focus group conversations were transcribed verbatim by the researcher using a computer. While the process of transcription was exceedingly time consuming, it was invaluable to listen to each participants' voice and stories repeatedly in order to deeply enter the conversation.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to narrative inquiry, field notes are composed from transcripts of the interview/conversation. For this study, a draft narrative account of the focus group interview/conversation was emailed to each co-researcher to review. Co-researchers were invited to suggest changes and confirm quotations. The co-researchers were also asked "if there was anything else" they "wanted to have added" to the co-created narrative account.⁴¹⁴ Revised narrative accounts were emailed to participants for review before the narrative account was considered complete for the purposes of this study. Some details were revised to protect the identity of participants and their ministry context and in some cases, participants clarified quotations.

A second level of analysis looked across all five focus group narrative accounts "to inquire into resonate threads or patterns."⁴¹⁵ This level of engagement with the narrative accounts provided a "deeper and broader awareness of the experiences" of the research participants and opened up new wonderings and questions.⁴¹⁶ The researcher's task was to focus on these threads

⁴¹⁴ Clandinin, *Engaging in narrative inquiry*, 131.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

and follow them as they were woven across research participants and throughout all five focus groups narrative accounts. Focus group accounts were laid metaphorically side by side to search for resonate threads or patterns common to the narrative accounts. To this end, each full transcript was carefully reviewed to identify themes that had emerged from the lived experience of the co-researchers. Full narrative transcripts were clipped and sorted according to emergent themes and subthemes. Meaningful quotations and stories were sorted and assigned a theme heading. Because narrative inquiry is a deeply relational practice, threads and resonances revealed lives lived in relation.⁴¹⁷

Benefits of the Study/ Significance of the findings

It was hoped that the opportunity to reflect with colleagues about their lived experience of leadership would lead to new learnings, insights, wonderings, questions, and professional resourcing. Narrative inquiry occurs in the midst of the “unfolding lives of participants” and is therefore “about attending to lives, the living of those lives in process and in the making.”⁴¹⁸ Due to narrative inquiry’s deeply relational practice, research occurs in the “unfolding of lives in relation.”⁴¹⁹ Clandinin’s point of reference for looking across the narrative accounts is an experience of “entering and living within borderland spaces.”⁴²⁰ Due to multiplicity of borderland possibilities, whether it be borderlands between disciplines, researchers, between researchers and participants, different understanding of research ethics, or lives in relation, narrative inquiry does not allow researcher or co-researchers “to walk away unchanged from our

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 139.

experiences along each other and alongside our participants.”⁴²¹ Attending to one another within these borderlands, we honor experience and multiple lives lived in relation.

As the researcher in relationship with the research participants, I sought to bracket my own answers to the research questions, in order to listen attentively and deeply to the lived experience of each storyteller. I did not note that early focus group conversations influenced the later focus groups. Each focus group held space for conversation between participants with storytelling emerging freely and openly from each other’s shared experiences. While some participants knew each other, I am not aware that the relationship between research participants influenced stories shared or not shared.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the intent of the researcher to enter into relationship and engage collaboratively with participants as co-researchers, the researcher must be attentive to short-term and long-term relational ethical responsibilities.⁴²² According to Clandinin, “relational ethics pervade the whole of narrative inquiry.”⁴²³ Ethical considerations span the research process beginning with narrative writings that shape the research puzzle, to considering “so what?” and “who cares?” questions, to being engaged in the field and composing field texts, interim texts, and final research texts, and following through to the writing and publishing of the final research texts.⁴²⁴ Accordingly, narrative inquirers are encouraged “to move beyond the institutional narrative of ‘do no harm’ to learn an attitude of empathic listening, of not being judgemental and of suspending their disbelief as they attend to participants stories.”⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Ibid., 142.

⁴²² Ibid., 51.

⁴²³ Ibid., 198.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 198.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 199.

Ethical considerations included interacting graciously, openly, and honestly with co-researchers throughout the research process beginning with correspondence that was emailed, inviting their participation and while we co-composed interim research texts. Working together on research texts involved “issues of anonymity and confidentiality,” issues that took on added complexity as their lived experience was made visible in narrative accounts.⁴²⁶ Additionally, pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information in written work ensured confidentiality. Focus group conversations were digitally and/or video-recorded using ZOOM and transcribed by myself. Only the researcher had access to the raw data and focus group participants had access to their narrative account. While the digital recordings will be destroyed following the defence of the dissertations, the transcriptions with identifying information removed will remain locked in the researcher’s home office filing cabinet for the purpose of potential future search. Participants signed an informed consent which included risks and benefits and possible further published material.

Narrative inquiry researchers understand “that a persons lived and told stories are who they are, and who they are becoming, and that a person’s stories sustain them.”⁴²⁷ As such co-researchers were treated with respect and gentleness as their stories were ethically crafted and presented as research texts.

Chapter four explores the findings of this study and includes an analysis of the seven “resonant threads” / themes and the barriers and facilitators identified.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 200.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 200.

Chapter 4 – Findings

Each co-researcher in this study is living fully into his or her own unique story.

For this study I explored the lived experience of 17 MCEC pastoral leaders to answer the research question: What are MCEC pastors lived experience of the facilitators and barriers to congregational culture change?

This chapter outlines the demographic makeup of the co-researcher sample and includes themes/resonant threads that emerged when focus group participants' stories were analyzed side by side. Within each theme, I have identified key barriers and facilitators and their impact on culture change which is of crucial importance to pastoral leadership.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of seventeen co-researchers. Detailed information regarding focus group participants is included in Chapter 3. Participants average 24.8 years of pastoral ministry experience. While 13 participants were born in Canada of those, two lived abroad in either South America or Europe for a minimum of 5 years. Four participants were born outside Canada: Ethiopia, Laos, United States, and Thailand. All co-researchers are English-speakers and an additional 10 languages are spoken fluently.

Narratives

Before reading further the reader is invited to get acquainted with each of the five-focus group co-researchers including their participation (See Appendix F). The focus group conversations have been compiled narratively which assisted with gathering themes and analysis. Participants engaged with fellow researchers with vulnerability and authenticity which enriched group learnings, discussion, and the data.

Themes/ Resonant Threads

This chapter reveals what participants shared about responding and adapting to a changing ministry context.

1. Identity
 - a. Origin Stories
 - b. Identity Under-Construction
 - c. Culture, Ethnicity, and Language: the immigrant and refugee story
 - d. Identity & Values
2. Metaphors and Images
3. Buildings and Properties: protectionism, re-imagining, and re-purposing
4. Leading in Liminal Space
5. Living the Story
 - a. Experimentation
 - b. Organizational Decision-making
 - c. Professional Development
 - d. Relationships: formal, informal, collaboration, neighbourhood
6. Integrating Theological Frameworks
 - a. Biblical
 - b. Missional
 - c. Anabaptist Tradition
 - d. Discipleship
7. Hope: Stories of Transformation

1. Identity

Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. When Jesus rose from the water the heavens tore apart and the Spirit descended like a dove. A voice from heaven was heard, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1: 10-11). Identity informs and gives shape to how we live our lives, communally and individually. Identity is expressed through stories, rooted in and shaped by lived experience, values, relationships, and more. Identity can be fluid, re-defined, and transformed. Incongruencies and tensions can be identified between the story a congregation tells about itself and its present lived experience.

Identity is an intangible resource in an organizational culture, strongly influenced by the congregation's founders. While some research participants discussed congregational identity based upon their founding others offered concrete examples of congregational identity tied to the congregation's mission. During times of uncertainty, change, and liminality, it is vital for an organization to be clear about its identity. Identity grounds a community amidst chaos and reminds God's people who they are as God's beloved. Resilient and intuitive pastoral leaders recognize when the congregation is living into an "old" identity and on the cusp of needing to claim a "new" identity for itself. For new Canadian and 1st generation pastors, language is a significant identity marker. When diverse languages are honoured within a congregation, a rich cultural mosaic identity is honoured and fashioned.

Each participant in some way had something to say about identity. Whether reflecting upon congregational roots and beginnings, present congregational ministry context, or current cultural organizational change, participants made statements or posed questions related to identity. Participants discussed and shared stories about foundational experiences that have

shaped congregational identity, experiences that are currently challenging identity, and how identity has been or is in process of being re-shaped. In some instances, the open-ended question “who are we now?” stood starkly on its own as a query for further exploration and discovery.

a. Origin Stories

Thomas, Ruth, and Anna each referenced congregational origins and the impact of beginnings on congregational identity, ministry, leadership roles, and community engagement. Thomas’ congregation “started as a city mission and city mission identity was determinative of the beginning of the Dundas Street Mennonite Church’s story.”⁴²⁸ “City mission” identity is so formative, it “has been imprinted on Dundas Street Mennonite.” The congregation was established by Mennonites from two areas in response to the needs of the poor of the city and denomination support funded an outreach worker in its early years. When funding ended and the paid staff position was discontinued the congregation wrestled with the question: “what are we now?”

Ruth’s congregation, Forest Street Mennonite Church is unique in that they “have a staff person who is designated to do missional work.” Accordingly, being missional is “part of Forest Street’s DNA” and “comes fairly easily or naturally” for the congregation. For Ruth, congregational identity is rooted in two primary historical events. In the “1940’s or 1950’s” one of the congregation’s houses became the first area Thrift Store. This ministry emerged when a congregant “had the idea that we should offer a place where people could come for good used clothing.” Another historical event which has shaped congregational identity occurred in 1924 when a group of people left the neighbouring Mennonite congregation over a dress code issue.

⁴²⁸ Pseudonyms have been used for all pastoral participants and congregations.

Influenced by historical roots, “the embedded consciousness is that Forest Street is this radical discipleship kind of place” paying attention to all kinds of issues. Due to its “radical” progressive identity, the congregation has a fairly significant self-identified group of people, “recovering evangelicals.” Ruth describes “recovering evangelicals” as ones “who have been harmed in past congregations because of strong evangelicalism” and more conservative theology. Looking for a place that feels freer, they are wrestling with questions about “theological and biblical identity.”

Sprucedale Mennonite Church was founded as a mission in 1952, its primary focus “addressing times of change” and a “changing ministry context.” Anna suggests a changing ministry context continues to be part of “the DNA” of the congregation. Sprucedale was founded by people “coming and going and moving to the city” which Anna noted stands in contrast to her childhood congregation which is rooted in the “monolithic immigration story.” A local ministry partner *Gather at the Table*, has been a huge part of Sprucedale’s identity” even shaping “how they minister to the city of Sprucedale.” Following the closure of *Gather at the Table* 10 years ago, Sprucedale has been left “with a bit of a gap in terms of identity.” The congregation is asking “what is our story in terms of how and who we are now in the community?”

Origin stories disclosed how formative congregational founding is for congregational identity. Amidst a changing context, identity grounds a congregation thus facilitating a sense of belonging, security, and steadiness. While “a gap in terms of identity” can create a barrier to culture change, by telling and re-telling the congregation’s story, pastoral leaders can facilitate an environment of exploration and the testing of a new identity congruent with the current context. It is crucial amidst a changing ministry and cultural context for a congregation to be clear about their identity, its fluid nature, and its grounding nature.

b. Identity under construction

As participants exhibited in their storytelling, identity is not static. Rather, identity is fluid in response to change, lived experience, shifting demographics, and more.

Thomas noted that city mission is an “old identity” for Dundas Street Mennonite. This truth came to light during a congregational visioning process approximately 15 years previous when the congregation learned something new about itself. The congregation was able to name that their current culture is shaped by volunteerism, that is, through personal experience volunteering both nationally and internationally. Viewing themselves in a new light, they “adapted differently” by providing volunteer opportunities for young people from across North America and Europe to serve locally. Engagement in the world has “emerged as a very significant piece of Dundas’ identity.”

A very painful story from Dundas Mennonite’s history recently re-surfaced, rattling communal identity. According to Thomas, Dundas Street viewed itself “as a place where there is grace for people.” With emergence of a painful history in light of the #metoo movement, Thomas lamented, “we are a silenced congregation.....we tried to be a healing congregation.... now our narrative is such that we need to find an identity.” Recently when Thomas was in discussion with a congregant in relation to the present season of disorientation, the image of “Arabian desert” emerged spurring Thomas’ question: “who are we in the desert?” The question honours the reality that identity, so formational to the congregation is shifting and needs to be explored and articulated anew.

The experience of an identity crisis that asks, “Who are we?” can catapult a congregation into the work of storytelling in order to revisit its strength and struggle, its resilience and courage, its faithfulness and persistence, its brokenness and restoration, its challenges and

renewal. Through the telling and re-telling of the congregational story, barriers impacting identity can be named and examined leading to the facilitation of new stories that more authentically align with the congregation's current context. Drawing upon spiritual resources of preaching and teaching, effective narrative pastoral leaders can facilitate a process of listening for God and invite the congregation to prayerfully ponder: "Who does God say that we are?" "Who is God calling us to be?" "Who are we becoming?"

Ken and Peter shared stories that give evidence to shifting and evolving identities in their congregations. Ken's congregation prides itself on being innovative and risk-takers, having made the decision from the "get go" that "they would sit as families" rather than men sitting on one side of the sanctuary and women on the other. Ken repeatedly referred to the congregation as "pioneers" adding, "but the thing is, pioneers become settlers when they get tired of being pioneers." While Elmwood Mennonite Church's self-perception is that of "pioneering community" Ken suggests the congregation is "tired of change ... and now the change that's being thrust upon us is rather arduous and we're not sure we like it." Ken acknowledged the tension between "self-perception" and "what life is actually demanding" of the congregation. While not specific about the nature of change "being thrust" upon the congregation nor "what life is actually demanding," Ken alluded to resistance from the "pioneers" who prefer a "settler" identity.

A barrier is present when congregational self-perception and present reality do not align. Pioneers and settlers live into different values, assumptions, and beliefs. Clinging to an "old" identity impacts culture change. This barrier is removed by telling and re-telling founding stories and bringing to light the inner resources of the "pioneers" and "settlers" reminding God's people of their capacities for risk-taking, adventure, new discoveries, and change. Telling and re-telling

stories can also uncover congregational resistance to risk-taking, adventure, new discoveries, and change can also lead to the writing of a new story. Founding stories contain vital clues about pioneering inner resources. By tapping into these resources, pastoral leaders can facilitate the emergence of a new story and an identity congruent with current context.

Beyond pioneering and settler identity, Elmwood is also experiencing demographic shifts and its subsequent impact on identity. Geographically and demographically Ken's congregation "is located on the dividing line between urban and rural." Fifteen to 20 years previous the congregation had a significant number of farmers. However, upon retirement farmers relocated to local village communities. Amidst congregational life-stage change, the congregation is "trying to figure out what it means to be Elmwood Mennonite Church because it's shifting." Not only is the congregation shifting vocationally, founding members are primarily the ones "who are being buried these days." Ken acknowledged that amidst so "many shifts it can be hard to identify the overlaps to our community because we're not even sure how we overlap history and experience." Elmwood's "identity crisis" is multi-layered, impacted by life-stage changes, shifting congregational demographics, and a lack of clarity regarding vision and call amidst its current life-stage. Holding fast to a narrative of decline incites fear and uncertainty for a faith community. This barrier is addressed when the pastor calls attention to new initiatives, joy, and concrete examples of ministry fruitfulness.

Grant shared that from its beginnings, South Lawn Mennonite Church "really wanted to be a strong lay led congregation." As such the congregation likes to "process, debate, and discuss things at end." However, for those who are newer to the congregation there is a desire for more professionalized leadership. Another disconnect that is noted between the founding members and more recent participants concerns the building itself. The founding members "have great

satisfaction that they built this building” including personally contributing to a central archeological feature. While those who were part of the beginnings hold a strong connection to congregational roots those who came later do not. Grant names the congregational identity challenge of a body divided regarding diverse leadership style preferences and the storied and experiential past of founding congregants which is not held by more recent congregational members. Addressing demographic shifts, diverse leadership style preferences, and a divide between founding and newer members such as both Ken and Grant are facing is an adaptive challenge rather than a technical problem in need of fixing. Adaptive challenges require valuing observations and facilitating new ways of encouraging relating, collaborating, and community building, all in light of the congregation’s vision and mission.

c. Culture, ethnicity, language: the immigrant and refugee story

Culture, ethnicity, and language are significant identity markers. Yang, Kale, Eshe, all 1st generation pastors, and Li a son of immigrants shared stories that demonstrate how identity is deeply rooted in the refugee and immigrant experience. According to Li, pastor of Crosstown Mennonite Church, the congregation began with one language in worship, Cantonese. As young people matured, translation was needed and eventually an English-speaking congregation was birthed. Additionally, Cantonese speakers from the congregation “decided to do an outreach to the Mandarins” thus a third congregation under the Crosstown umbrella was formed. Li stated that the three congregations run parallel. When they meet for joint worship services about six times per year “it’s like the UN assembly.” Li added, “We have to carefully balance which is the priority language.” A shift from common cultural identity, Li noted that families are now more mixed ethnically due to inter-marriage.

Kale's congregation traces its roots to Laotian immigration from the late 1970's and early 1980's. The congregation began as Laotian speaking and over the course of many years has evolved into "many languages" as people from diverse backgrounds have come to call the congregation home, including people originating from the Congo, Thailand, Viet Nam, and China. Kale describes an evolving identity. The congregation presently includes both 1st and 2nd-generation participants. Each language group is invited to read the bible in their mother tongue in worship. Currently Kale's congregational worship includes four languages each Sunday including Mandarin, Thai, Lao, and English. Kale communicates a Canadian congregational cultural identity when he invites guest preachers. He said, "I tell them they have maximum 30 minutes... if you go more, people will go to sleep." Some guest preachers have pushed back saying in Thailand they preached four hours to which Kale replied, "That's Thailand. This is Canada." These wise pastors understand that holding fast to ones' mother tongue can be a barrier for some congregants. This barrier is overcome when multiple languages are honoured and shared aloud in worship.

Eshe was born in East Africa. He and Thomas have a close collegial relationship thus Thomas helped reframe questions for focus group discussion, ensuring Eshe's full participation. Eshe's congregations are Ethiopian and Oromo background. While both cultures emerge from East Africa, cultural identities are distinctly different although Eshe did not elaborate on those differences. Congregants travel from many communities to belong to an ethnic congregation. What began as one congregation has blossomed into seven congregations, located in communities beyond the large urban center of its beginnings. Recently a sister Eritrean church purchased a neighbourhood church building. Thomas followed up by directing a question to the wider focus group asking "what does this mean for the identity of the Ethiopian congregation

when an Eritrean church moves here? It has big implications, huge implications because now they will be the established church in the neighbourhood.” Thomas added, “it is a developing narrative.”

Yang’s congregational beginnings are also rooted in the Laotian refugee experience. The congregation began as an ethnic group comprised of Laotian people with small families. Since its early beginnings, the congregation has evolved into a 2nd and 3rd generation congregation as members have married, including inter-marriage with English speakers, a change that is impacting Mercy Mennonite Church’s identity. The primary focus of Yang’s congregation continues to be Laotian people due to the “limitation of language.” Yang notes that it is an ongoing challenge to navigate different cultures including South-East Asian and Western cultures, south-western Ontario and Laotian culture, established south-western Ontario Mennonite congregations and a self-identity as a “baby” congregation despite its 1985 establishment as a congregation within MCEC. Yang added “we are not like this church, this church, this church” in comparison to 100 and 200-year-old congregations. “Even though 40 years have passed” Yang added that the congregation is composed of “new Christians” having converted from Buddhism.” Regarding “theology, they are a baby, that’s how we define our self.” Yang added that when they consider what the church will look like in 20 years, they think mainly about language. The congregation has a growing English-speaking population, yet not everyone is “100% English” speaking. Directed to focus group participants Yang affirmed that many of his colleagues have experienced transitioning from German to English speaking congregations. Beyond language, Yang’s congregation continues to navigate the shift from Asian culture to western culture. Refugee beginnings, ethnic traditions, cultural markers such as language, dress, rituals, and food, has contributed to Mercy Mennonite’s rich and multi-faceted

identity. Barriers in ministry can emerge when a congregation believes they are the only ones who have ever encountered a specific challenge. This barrier is overcome when long-established congregational pastors and new Canadian pastors glean one another's wisdom.

Contributing to the discussion immigration and ethnicity and its influence on congregational identity Marcie noted that Loewen Mennonite Church, primarily Russian background, as it is for Yang's congregation values gathering around a common cultural identity. Many Russian Mennonite's immigrated to Canada in the 1920's and share stories of persecution, fleeing violence, displacement, and resettlement.

Ethnicity, cultural traditions, language, and shared Christian faith is the glue that facilitates strong bonds for 1st and 2nd generation congregations. Drawn together by common ethnicity or language, communally these congregations are navigating multiple cultural contexts simultaneously which impacts identity. Congregations with now 3rd generation members recognize that holding to mother tongue in worship has become a barrier, impacting moving forward. Some 1st and 2nd generation pastors are looking to pastors from long-established congregation to glean wisdom. How did they transition from German and Russian-speaking congregations to English? Such sharing of wisdom facilitates the growth of collegial relationships and the mutual sharing of lived experience.

While experiencing a multiplicity of languages and cultural distinctions within MCEC may appear to be a barrier to overcome, when God's people honour one another's gifts and distinctiveness, such facilitates the emergence of an intercultural church in which every tribe, nation, language is welcome and encouraged to fully participate as siblings in Christ.

d. Identity and values

South Lawn's identity is strongly connected to the value of community. Recognizing the need to connect with the neighbourhood community more intentionally, paradoxically, the congregation does not want to "disrupt the harmony in its conformity." Grant's reflection highlights awareness that the congregation as a "community" would be changed and transformed with the addition of newcomers. This appears to be considered a negative rather than positive for the congregation, thus a barrier to cultural change.

Marcel articulated two communal identity markers for his urban congregation, flexibility regarding worship times and unconventional worship space set-up. Whether worship is held on Friday night or Sunday afternoon, "it's just our way of doing church, an expression of our faith together." Marcel expressed the foundational practice, belief, and ethos that undergirds New Life's communal life and identity as this: "there is no them and us. We never say Christian and non-Christian. It's always us."

Having invested considerable energy in refugee resettlement at a critical time, Marcel's congregational leadership regrouped and clarified that their "actual mission and vision is for the people of the neighbourhood." When many community needs have called for attention, Marcel values the importance of claiming the congregation's primary identity and mission which is, supporting the neighbourhood. Naming his propensity to lead his congregation beyond their comfort zone Marcel self-identifies as "an innovator," someone who "thinks outside the box." This is who Marcel is at the core of his being and identity. Indeed, so accustomed to thinking outside the box he acknowledges that he has "lost sight of the box." As an out-side-the box" leader, Marcel's identity is not defined by conformity nor "one-size-fits-all." Rather, Marcel's identity is revealed as innovative, risk-taking, and self-starter.

Peter identified a paradox in his congregation. On one hand the congregation is thriving “in terms of mature Christian faith.” On the other hand, the congregation asserts they have “been in decline for decades.” In terms of theology, the community in which the congregation is located “is more theologically conservative than the church” which Peter leads. During summer months the church parking lot is a pick-up site for community children enrolled in a day camp program. Peter said, “I remember one child yelling at another: ‘Jesus wouldn’t want you to do that!’” adding, “that’s a little bit part of the community and something you would shout out across the parking lot.” Marcel with laughter suggested that in his urban ministry context, “probably Jesus would be in the sentence but not that way.” Peter’s reflections insightfully discloses that the congregation’s theological identity is more liberal than its community’s neighbourhood and the surrounding area.

Regarding welcome and hospitality and its relation to identity, Peter shared a story from a previous ministry context saying, “when new people moved to town congregational leadership considered how best to open the doors.” Overwhelmingly the stance was this: “if they want to be like us, we’d love them to come.” While his current congregation may not say that, according to Peter, “our actions would probably push in that direction.” He added, “we don’t realize what demand we are making on others to fit into our space.”

Stan and Dan lead congregations with deep roots and family connections that can be traced back to 19th century beginnings. Stan notes a shift of identity for the church which he believes has evolved over 60 to 70 years. When Stan began ministry, he sensed a post “1950, 1960, expectation among some people that church is a good place to go.” According to that culture, offering programs and extending welcome cultivated the ground to make connections. Resultant, some people “would connect or re-connect with the church.” Stan noted “that has

shifted tremendously over the years to the church being one of many options and now being looked at by many as being irrelevant or even harmful.” Stan noted that historically, cultural norms resulting in congregational growth and positive engagement, contributed to a congregational “success story” identity. With the decline attendance and active engagement, cultural irrelevancy as noted, and sadly, suspicion, the institutional church’s identity has experienced the loss of positive cultural status and identity.

Dan’s nearly 180-year-old congregation, Weston Mennonite Church, boasts a rich heritage and deep roots as evidenced in the attached cemetery where “90 percent of the tomb stones are ‘Weston.’” Beyond familial identity, a communal identity named as “not enough” emerged in 2018 during a Lenten worship service when congregants were invited to write a word or phrase on a sticky label answering the question ‘how do others label you?’ Dan estimates that 95% responses identified: “I don’t feel like I am enough, something... not good enough, not fast enough, not smart enough, attractive enough. Something isn’t enough in our lives.” Pondering “why don’t we feel like we’re enough?” Dan added, “I think the theology back a way talked about being the church without spot or wrinkle and oh boy, you can find some spots on me.” He added, “we really bought into tent crusades and the crap that went down in “beating people up.” The presence of shame stories and the historical experience of harsh theology not only shapes and influences communal identity. Such points to unhealthy and limiting congregational identity and the need to reclaim and communicate a redeemed and whole identity.

Making a connection to both Dan and Stan’s stories Marcie said, “What will people think is part of the Mennonite DNA.” She added, “it’s this false idea ... or maybe it’s not false that everyone is watching.” Reflectively Marci named a significant shifting identity marker saying,

“there are a lot of people who think they know the church” however “they are referring to a church that they used to know.” Such inhibits speaking “into what the church is at present.”

“Hospitable” is one-way Sprucedale Mennonite talks about itself. Having an “open door notion” has been part of Sprucedale’s ethos and identity. Hospitality according to Anna, in part is lived out in this way: “here we are, and we’ll welcome you as soon as you come.....we know we can’t wait for new people to walk through our door but we don’t want to presume to go out and invite anybody in.” In essence, Sprucedale Mennonite’s identity is expressed through “we-ness.” “We” presume the community will come to us and that the community will be the risk-takers. Lacking active participation, the congregation maintains its identity, lived out through its assumptions and beliefs.

Wanda is a member of multi-person ministry team at a village church which dates to 1844. Describing the congregation, she said, “we think of ourselves as welcoming, but I’d say that the largest underlying story of identity of Avalon Mennonite Church that gets told “occurs at funerals when people are giving their tributes.” It is expressed in this this way: “they lived their faith. They didn’t talk about their faith much. They lived it.” In this way, identity is quietly embodied and expressed through faithful living.

Ted’s, congregation, Cranbrook Mennonite Church will soon celebrate its 100th anniversary. Ted describes Cranbrook as an aging congregation with shrinking attendance, this reality at a time when the community of Cranbrook is growing due to significant housing development. Ted describes the community’s culture as “not pro-church attendance” in contrast to a previous ministry cultural context which he described as “pro church.”

An identifier that emerged from Ruby’s narrative emerged as she compared her current ministry context to the church she grew up in. In her home church Mennonites were,

Separate from the world. The church is in the world but not of the world. It is huge in our theology. We don't partner with.... It's one thing to work with our neighbours. Its another thing to get funding from our neighbours to fund programs for and with our community. That's a huge shift.

Anabaptists place a high value on community. Expressions of faith and spirituality are lived out and nurtured within and through communal life. Hospitality and welcome are also core values for Anabaptists and yet as it is for Anna's congregation, reluctance to extend welcome is expressed. Another barrier is noted in that congregation's affirm community engagement and yet as Grant's congregation, concern is expressed that the harmony experienced in conformity will be disrupted.

The theological value of "separateness from the world" (Romans 12:3) is grounded experientially and biblically for Anabaptists, emerging from its founding during the 16th century Radical Reformation. Separateness emerged as an identity marker amidst a hostile culture, at a time when Anabaptists were in survival mode. Evidenced in the research, survival mode and the separateness story has had staying power over centuries. Further, pastoral leaders have named "separate from the world" theology is currently working against the church, a barrier that is impacting neighbourhood engagement.

Practicing radical hospitality, a core value of Marcel's faith community facilitates the breaking down of barriers between people and draws the circle of inclusion and diversity wide. Because Anabaptists value community and belonging, this is a strength than can be built upon in way that facilitates community engagement. However, shifting values will involve loss for a congregation. While grief work was not named in the research, attending to congregational loss and grief facilitates healing, hope, and the potential for new beginnings.

In a changing context, the church will benefit from challenging the barrier of limiting stories and theology including “separateness from the world.” Pastoral leaders can encourage this through a process of de-construction and re-construction and by nurturing space that holds potential for the writing of a more life-giving story.

2. Metaphors and Images

Jesus routinely drew upon the ordinary and mundane from his surroundings to teach rich spiritual truths. Metaphors contrast two concepts that at first glance appear to be unrelated. However, upon closer examination the difficult to understand emerges as a simple well-understood thought or idea. Jesus used metaphors to describe the Kingdom of God saying the Kingdom is like a mustard seed, a farmer who sowed some seed, like a person who had a treasure hidden in a field. The author of the Book of Acts likened the early church to “living stones” to communicate that the presence of God was no longer contained within the temple in Jerusalem, a central locale, but rather amongst and within the community of Jesus followers.

The major storyline of the Old Testament as told in the book of Exodus involves the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Extending 40 years, the wilderness wanderers journeyed from bondage to the promised land and, “the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light” (Exodus 13:21). During the exodus, leadership emerged and evolved, the law was given, God’s people were formed and transformed, and God’s provision and care remained faithful.

Metaphors ripe with imagery emerged in a vital way as pastors described their lived experience. Metaphors provide language and a visual framework to understand, make-sense, and make meaning of a complex and changing context. Metaphors as a spiritual resource can be used to facilitate the imaginative work of journeying an uncertain time. Metaphors accessed in this

way enable the congregation to make connections between the biblical story and their communal and individual stories.

Several co-researchers described their congregational or leadership “journey” metaphorically. Describing a painful episode in Thomas’s congregational history Thomas asked, “Who are we in the desert?” in response to a congregant’s query that perhaps the congregation is currently in the “Arabian desert.” Thomas’ use of metaphor holds rich biblical and theological imagery. This metaphor is helpful in that the congregation locates itself within God’s story and can experientially identify with God’s people in a liminal moment across time and place. Journeying the wilderness is not new but rather a recurring biblical theme in which the provision of God and the faithful presence of the Divine is revealed.

Ken also drew upon the biblical story and expanded upon the exodus and wilderness wandering saying, “when you first hit the wilderness, it’s faster and easier to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt than it is to wait the 40 years and get to the promised land.” Further he added, “if you’re going to head into the wilderness you need to be prepared for 40 years and make sure there’s manna and water and everything they’re going to need because otherwise the easiest change is just to go back to the way it was even if that’s not sustainable.”

Stan related “40 years in the wilderness” to his congregation’s nearly 40-year building project process. He stated that interestingly after years of planning, preparation, and anticipation, ground-breaking for the building addition occurred right at a time when attendance began to wane and when younger people were saying they are not “really into an institutional church model and are wanting to give money to the poor not to buildings and budgets and stuff.” Subsequently, the “Promised Land” looked quite different from what was expected.

Journeying the wilderness, taking pathways or unknown routes is a rich metaphor for these pastoral leaders. Ken likened leadership amidst a changing context to “hiking at night with no flashlight.” He said he just happens “to be going first and stepping over things first.” He added he “can’t see any better than anyone else can.” Rather he just happens to be out front.”

Images beautifully articulate lived experience. Dan described his congregation’s experience of stewarding a sizeable bequest as “spiritual growth with our feet to the fire.” While painful, he acknowledged congregational spiritual growth has been rich. Naming the tension of holding Christology alongside discipleship Marci suggested some “threw out the baby with the bath water” suggesting discipleship or “works-based faith,” has become more important for some than knowing Jesus. Ted suggested his congregation’s experience of community “is a doubled edged sword.” On one hand “community is at the heart of the church.” On the other hand, “how do we open up that community and how do we welcome new people?”

Peter, reflecting upon how far one can “stretch a congregation” stated, “change is incremental. It’s like cutting the dogs’ tail off one inch at a time. And it’s painful every step of the way. But if you do it all at once, it’s too much. It has to be paced.” Ken drew upon the lowly “inch worm” to illustrate the tension that exists in his congregation between the “leading edge people who will always buy the latest technology” and the people “who are still lamenting the fact that we have touch tone phones and they miss their old rotary.” Relating the inch worm metaphor to leadership Ken said, “you have to be careful that when the inch worms’ front end goes forward if it goes forward and forward and forward and never lets the back end catch up it eventually gets torn apart.” In the same way, “if you don’t put the brakes on the people who are rushing forward to change at the right time and allow the catch up to happen, when the brakes are on the front you have to be pushing on the back because otherwise that stalls.”

As the co-researchers exhibited, metaphors and images serve an important role to illustrate and describe the “journey” of leadership and change. Metaphors effectively articulate imagination and facilitate the use of helpful language as leaders make the road while walking it.

3. Church Buildings and Properties: protectionism, re-imagining, and re-purposing

At the time of this writing, the church has experienced being thrown out of their buildings due to the global pandemic. During the current Covid-19 crisis, for periods of time, sanctuaries have sat empty and congregations have been scattered, worshipping from home, perhaps accessing a pre-recorded service, a video-conference platform such as ZOOM, or a live-stream service. When all in-person programming and gathering were put on hold during the pandemic, social media became a vital tool to remain connected as the Body of Christ. Jesus said, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18: 20).

At the present time of disruption, loss, and disorientation, the church has been unleashed and unbound from its four walls to be the church in the local neighbourhood and the world. Recognizing that language can create a barrier to culture change, a reckoning is underway including exposing the use and misuse of the word *church*. “Going to church” is a common phrase, meaning, going to a building, attending a program or social gathering. Something that the pandemic has exposed is that what happens *within* the four walls of the church building is an insufficient definition of church. The church is not the building but rather the people of God, commissioned by the resurrected Christ to further God’s mission in the world (Matthew 28: 16 - 20).

While the pandemic has exposed a barrier of limiting language, co-researchers evidenced ways their congregations are re-imagining a rich resource: church properties and buildings.

Congregational discernment facilitates a space to dream, to listen, and to consider current needs.

Holding tightly to buildings that may no longer meet congregational needs can create a barrier amidst the reality of declining active participation and attendance.

Awareness of shifting ministry context can facilitate the emergence of a new vision for buildings and properties. Ted shared a story from a previous ministry context saying:

I remember when we were considering building a new sanctuary. The culture in that community was very pro-church and people went to church and the word that we sometimes heard was ‘if you build it they will come.’ And we built and they came and the church in those years experienced growth. I come to Cranbrook. In this context the culture is not pro-church.

In contrast to his mid-1990’s experience in which an expanded and updated building led to increased attendance, Ted recognizes the church, that is, the people of God exist in a different culture and time. Currently at Cranbrook Mennonite Church there is “some talk about what it would mean to tear down our 100-year-old building and put up something that would be multi-purpose, responding to the needs of our community.” Rather than focusing primarily upon congregant needs or drawing the community in to increase attendance, conversation has turned toward community needs, including recreational and affordable housing needs.

Three research participants’ congregations own “church houses”⁴²⁹ which serve vital ministry purposes within their communities. Marcie’s congregation, Loewen Mennonite Church runs “a program to support women who have been victimized by human trafficking” out of their church house. Additionally, for 30 years the building has also been shared with a denominational immigration center. For Loewen Mennonite, not letting their building sit “in the middle of the city” and not serve any useful purpose during the week is “part of the missional piece.”

⁴²⁹ “Church Houses are not parsonages but rather church owned dwellings/facilities. In some instances, congregation runs a program from the house. In other instances, a congregation may rent their space to a community partner for a specific ministry.

Ruth's congregation owns five church houses. Two are "refugee houses and three are used as transition houses for men transitioning back into the community following a time in rehabilitation." Ruth clarified the congregation provides "the house" and "community partners rent the homes and do the programming."

Wanda shared Avalon Mennonite has looked for ways "to make the best use of their building, facilities, and outdoor space." Avalon owns a church house as well as a lot with green space. The congregation provides space in their church building for programs including an after-school program which is run by the local day care, and a Low-German speaking program which is run by local government-funded resource centre. The church house is leased to a denominational non-profit charitable organization which provides affordable housing to low-income households. Avalon is "dreaming or thinking about creating a public park," a gathering space in the community on its green space.

Avalon's last building addition was connected to needs of the church-sponsored refugee community. Decades previous, sponsored refugees "were starting to worship in our building with us and needed the extra space." Wanda also added that during her tenure at Avalon, the congregation engaged in a discernment process to determine whether to build a gymnasium and discussed how that might serve the community. Ultimately the decision was made to not build. According to Wanda, "the group within the congregation who was most interested in it would have been parents who were worried their children were drifting away and thought a gym would help keep the children." Thus, is evidence that 1990 ethos continues to exist in that "if you build it they will come" or in this case "if you build it they will stay."

Ruby's congregation as Ted and Wanda's, is engaged in conversation about re-purposing the church property and building. Such has emerged in response to a recent experience. Just over

a year ago, a homeless man decided to make the church parking lot his home. Having a homeless person live in the parking lot has raised contextual awareness related to poverty and the need for affordable housing in the community. Ruby said “we’ve got a lot of property here on our church yard. What could we be doing to set ourselves up so that in 10 years we’re meeting the needs of the homeless?” Intentional about not creating a ghetto, Ruby wonders about the possibility of building affordable housing. She added, “I think we have to think differently.”

While conversations have facilitated imagining and re-purposing buildings and properties, research participants also shared stories that disclose barriers, that is, constraints and the “messiness” of opening church buildings to the local community. While the church is not the building, buildings and properties are a significant focus for the co-researchers and their congregations.

Recognizing the rich resource of buildings and properties, both Wanda and Grant noted resistance related to building use, a barrier to culture change. Wanda named resistance as a “hurdle” noting in her context there “is this high level of perfectionism around care for the building.” Explaining she added, “people who have been caring for the building for decades and decades and decades have maintained the building.... so there’s fear around what will happen if we open the doors too much. Things will get messy.” Asked whether this exhibits perfectionism or protectionism, Wanda did not commit one way or the other. Rather, she thoughtfully said, “probably” which could assume both.

Grant’s experience with resistance is similar. He “once served at a church that had a gymnasium.” When he launched an open floor hockey ministry, he heard the concern: “it’s scuffing the floor.” When he “brought artists in once a month” he heard: “they’re making a mess. They’re not cleaning up.” He questioned, if not for community use “what is this building for?”

Ken added to Grant's remarks saying "If people can't see a purpose to our program, like floor hockey, the littlest thing becomes an issue. Someone left the door unlocked or there was a pair of runners left in the corner..... if we're getting tripped up on a scuff mark on a gym floor, we're not clear on our why."

Amidst protectionism of buildings and properties, pastoral leaders can facilitate an expanded story by exploring questions about ownership with the congregation. How a congregation answers the question "who owns the building?" is vital for missional congregations to wrestle with. If the congregation identifies as the building/property owner, the congregation are landowners; if the community are the building/property owner, the congregation are hosts; and if God owns the building and property, the congregation are stewards. How the church responds to the ownership question informs missional understanding, practice, hospitality, and stewardship. When the church gets tripped up about scuff marks on the floor, the church is unclear about the "why" of ministry, including the church's true calling and purpose.

Owning a gathering space for worship, programming, and more has been vital for Kale and Eshe, both new Canadian pastors. Kale's 1st-generation congregation struggled to purchase a building in its urban city neighbourhood. Rather than succumbing to the barrier of closed doors they "fought the city for some time to get a permit." Rental spaces were pursued including school space and community library space. Unfortunately, landlords and the city "want big money and they don't want to rent to a church." Despite denominational caution regarding debt load, Kale and his congregation persisted on their quest for space and eventually purchased a commercial unit. Eshe's new Canadian congregation recently purchased the neighbourhood United Church property for 3 million dollars. Li, familiar with the neighbourhood added, "It's a deal. But it's a lot of money."

Building ownership facilitates security and stability for a congregation. Both Li and Marcel recognize the value of their building/property for the community. Li's 3-congregation faith community hosts two community church plants as well as a local senior drop-in ministry and a nursery school. Outdoor space includes "community gardens" and an anticipated "pollinator garden." Li notes that due to outdoor presence the congregation is connecting more with the neighbourhood. When congregational leadership asked how this "translates into number of people?" presumably attending Sunday worship, Li was quick to add "probably zero." His response was a shock for leaders who asked: "so why are you doing this?" Explaining that what has been happening translates into community connection, congregational leadership was satisfied.

Marcel's congregation exhibits adaptability amidst local needs. New Life Church is located in "the hood," an under-resourced neighbourhood in a large urban center. One January night when the overnight temperature was expected to drop to -20 Celsius, Marcel asked church leaders what they thought about opening "the building to people who have no place to stay for the night." During worship he inquired whether anyone present had no place. If so, they could speak to him. Three men indicated they would be sleeping outside that night, so the building was opened. Emerging from that experience, the building is now open over-night from November 15 to April 15. The congregation hosts 40 to 50 persons who are homeless every night. Ministry to homeless neighbours led to the formation of a non-profit with the city focused on the needs of persons who are homeless. Due to some building issues including mould, a renovation project ensued. Marcel said, "we decided we can't lose this building. This is well-placed."

The paradox of open-door radical welcome and closed-door protectionism and perfectionism emerged in participant storytelling about church buildings and properties. As the

pandemic continues, congregants have opportunity to be the church beyond their buildings and properties in ways that pre-pandemic was not imagined.

Research participants expressed both hopeful possibilities for the future as they consider re-purposing church property and/or church buildings and named the barrier of resistance and protectionism. Declining attendance has resulted in facilities not being occupied at full capacity. Additionally, aging buildings require significant financial resources for maintenance. As participants revealed, building and properties are not necessarily effectively meeting current needs. Accordingly, pastoral leaders recognize that changing demographics call for a creative and bold response to facilitate culture change.

Focusing upon community needs including the urgent and long-term need for affordable housing as well as the need for recreational space is at the forefront of thought for many pastoral leaders. Renovating and openness to work collaboratively with community partners to address local social needs facilitates the emergence for something new to take root. Releasing some control of buildings facilitates relationship building between a congregation and their neighbours. Pews not anchored to the floor facilitates flexibility. Re-purposing outside space to include a prayer labyrinth or possible on-site healing lodge facilitates accessibility of spiritual resources for the faith community and the neighbourhood. Holding tightly to control of a building/property is a barrier to culture change whereas loosening a tight grip facilitates potential and new possibilities.

4. Leading in Liminal Space

There is deep awareness amongst the co-researchers that the church is in a liminal season and that a far-reaching transformation is underway. Neither here nor there, one foot is planted in something that is not yet fully over while the other foot is planted in a place that is not yet fully

defined. Research participants shared stories that demonstrate an awareness that the church is situated at a threshold, betwixt and between, what was and what is yet to be.

While the word liminality was not specifically used, pastoral leaders shared stories revealing its presence and the impact on ministry. Marci stated, “a lot of people who think they know the church are referring to a church that they used to know. It’s hard to speak into what the church is at present.” Ken said, “I live with profound awareness that over the next 30 years I will be trained to do the job I am doing today very well.” Referring to teaching and training disciples Ken said “I know what teaching looks like in the church, because we’ve done it for 2000 years. I don’t know what training looks like and I expect some aspect of that is going to have to shift if we’re going to figure out what church looks like in 50 or 100 years.”

Yang’s 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation congregation experiences liminality that bridges cultures. He said, “Asian culture and western culture is something that we assimilate.” Yang’s congregation continues to worship in its mother tongue as not all congregants are fluent in the English language. Yang is attentive to the liminal space of language, recognizing there will come a time when it becomes necessary for the congregation to transition to English-only worship to accommodate 2nd, 3rd, and 4th generation congregants. Yang expressed readiness to learn from pastoral colleagues from long-established congregations who have made the transition from German or Russian worship to English. Additionally, having one foot in Asian culture and the other in western culture is a unique threshold on which to be situated, one that is re-shaping both personal and communal identity.

Liminality related to a challenging pastoral care experience Dan said, “everyone at Weston Mennonite expects the pastor to make a visit, annually.” He added, “there’s some of this old mythology about what the church is supposed to do for us that is no longer feasible, or I

would think even consistent with the good news.” Assumptions regarding the pastor’s role can create a significant barrier. Dan discloses a tension of ministering in the “betwixt and between” of congregational and pastoral expectations, not a new phenomenon, but one that reveals liminality as a permanent condition.

Ruth is attentive to the spiritual needs of “recovering evangelicals” in her congregation, those “who have been harmed in past congregations because of strong evangelicalism and a more conservative theology.” These congregants are seeking a place that feels different and freer. Ruth sees the challenge “of finding words, or different ways of talking about faith, different ways of loving the bible, and embracing the bible, the biblical story that doesn’t sound like the old. That sounds fresh and new.” Seeking a richer experience with God, involves a reorientation and stripping away restrictive stories and experiences.

Ruth also noted that current congregational structure is “posing a challenge” in this liminal space:

The structure has been part of the church for 100 years. All kind of committees. That’s not working for us as well anymore because peoples’ lives are busy. People just aren’t here regularly. Once a month, twice is regular attendance. That is just the new reality. And so what we’re finding is that people who serve on committees, because they are not here all the time... there’s no continuity of history or knowledge.... One example of that I remember last January the Music and Worship got together in January and we were reflecting on the services in Advent. And nobody except the pastoral staff had been to the services in Advent. Nobody could reflect except for the staff. The structure was an avenue to live into the vision. It no longer functions as a helpful avenue. I think of say the deacons, whose job, whose responsibility was to pay attention to the people in the congregation, spiritual health, emotional and physical wellbeing. We are a revolving door in the core here. People coming and coming. And the deacons no longer know who the people are in the pews so they don’t know how to care for them because they don’t know who they are. So it’s really an interesting shift.

Liminality has exposed the limitations and the potential barriers created by current committee structure and congregational organization, at a time when a new vision of

organizational structure is not yet clear. Navigating this tenuous threshold invites leadership and congregations to be creative, innovative, and seek out new models of organization, reflecting upon their learnings each new step along the way. Such facilitates and cultivates a space for new opportunities and possibilities to take root.

Several research participants drew upon congregational demographic shifts specifically related to children, highlighting that liminal space begins with an ending. Thomas and Li provided a story to illustrate how they navigated an ending and a bridge which facilitated a new beginning involving Vacation Bible School. Tom noted that “children faded away” in his congregation’s demographic. This decline occurred at a time when Dundas Street Mennonite was the hub of Bible School with Li’s congregation supporting through finances, volunteers, and children. Thomas said, “eventually we decided we would have to shift the hub over to the Crosstown.” Currently Crosstown is the hub, hosting this ministry and in 2019 a Presbyterian church plant joined the Vacation Bible School ministry.

A common theme related to decline of children emerged with Ken who said, “back in the 80’s all of a sudden we noticed that there were very few children being born in the congregation.” In response, the head of the Sunday School “stood up in front of the church and said, ‘look, if we don’t get some more children, we won’t have a Sunday School. So, all of you need to do is have babies.’” A baby boom followed! Ken said, “two years ago we noticed that there was a big demographic hole opening up and we realized that in two years we would have no kids grade 8 or younger.....and everyone is joking, it’s time for ‘Mabel’ to get up there and make another announcement.” Reflectively Ken said, “when you’re having these kinds of changes, your old solutions don’t work anymore.” Indeed, old solutions can become a barrier, impacting forward movement for a congregation. Choosing to turn a “weakness into a strength,

facilitated the new beginning of intergenerational Sunday School. Acknowledging there have been “some rough patches” Ken added, “if we had children all the way through, it might not have been the same good idea.” The current change “is not something you can just innovate or pioneer your way out of.”

Ruby’s assessment of her congregation’s status highlights the liminal state of the church. She said, “I feel like the church is at a transition place.” Related to social issues in the community, “I think we have to think differently about that.” Naming evidence of liminality she said, “people don’t have the answers anymore.” Interestingly, a congregant told Ruby, “one of the things we need from the pastor is that you tell us what you see..... help the congregation be aware of the tensions you are living with and facing.” Sharing information facilitates bridge building for the pastor and her congregation as together they journey forward.

Anna’s congregation is currently living in a liminal space. Several ministries have been released for various reasons and the congregation is waiting for “some new calling” to emerge. It is an in-between space as they await what they are called to do or become. While Anna was not specific about how the congregation is discerning what is next, she was clear that whatever new ministry arises, it will look different. This is in part because the congregation lives geographically distanced across several communities rather than local to the church as in years past.

In response to the emergence of a painful historical congregational experience a question that has risen to the surface for Thomas is: “who are we” now? The congregation clearly understood themselves as a place of healing and welcome. Amidst the present context of disorientation, congregational identity has been challenged and a new identity and congregational story waits to be written. Thomas reflects deep awareness that emotionally, the

congregation is not where it had been. There is uncertainty about the healing and reconciling work that lies ahead. It is a unique liminal space for Dundas Street and their leadership.

To exist on both sides of a threshold, old governance models including committee structures are revealed as no longer sufficient, creating a potential organizational barrier. Solutions and strategies effective in the past no longer bring about the same results. In liminal space, leaders are naming gaps, dwelling in the ambiguity and uncertainty, attentive to rising anxiety, and responding to needs as they are presented. Pastoral leaders can facilitate normalization of liminality including drawing upon biblical stories that bears witness to God's provision in the wilderness. Pastoral leaders can also facilitate the building of bridges to new beginnings, encouraging openness unknowing, uncertainty, and transformation, all gifts of liminality. Spiritual resources such as grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, joy, and gratitude are sustaining pastoral leaders and congregations as they live in this liminal time.

5. Living the Story

Telling experiential stories about leadership amidst cultural change, congregational demographic and organizational shifts, co-researchers discussed experimentation, organizational structure and decision-making, professional development, and relationships. Each topic offers glimpses into the unfolding story and experiences of leadership for the co-researchers.

a. Experimentation

Excitement, joyfulness, playfulness, and new opportunities are beautiful outcomes when there is openness amongst leaders and congregants to experiment. Experimentation emerged as a significant leadership tool during the current unsettled season for the church.

Li shared that the Crosstown English-speaking congregation has “gone through coffee houses and evangelistic meetings.” Recognizing “that story has not worked” has led to “experimenting with different things that connect with community and one of them has been our community garden.” What began as a one-year experiment, was recently extended a second year. The congregation has committed to continue to support this project financially. Also emerging from this experiment, has been “an application for a pollinator garden.” Li was quick to add that he is “not the expert here” when it comes to pollination. Therefore, resources and support from a city foundation including experts in the field have been sought out. While Li’s congregational leadership has questioned whether the community garden has translated into increased congregational growth, Li’s motivation has been rooted in community connections rather than filling the pews.

Eshe’s new Canadian congregations are growing. The development of Sunday School programming for children is new for 1st-generation families. Families are inviting friends and expansive growth is being experienced. It is helpful to recall that at one time for traditional MCEC congregations, Sunday School was also an experiment.

Grant said he likes “trying different things, experimenting. The South Lawn congregation is experimenting with several new initiatives. During worship, puzzles are set up and congregants are invited to make use of knitting needles, wool, and patterns. There is energy in re-imagining property including building a labyrinth, tearing down an out-building, and exploring the option of building a healing lodge. Grant acknowledges these projects will take years to process. Referencing two non-traditional emerging congregations within MCEC, Grant noted experimentation is happening denominationally.

Ruby said “there’s a lot of joy in the church when we try something new or different and it works. We’re getting better at trying something and if it doesn’t work, we can laugh at ourselves. There’s a real willingness to experiment. We just call them experiments.” While Ruby did not articulate what “works” looks like, she exudes a leadership stance of joyfulness, openness to try, as she practices ongoing reflection. A gift of experiments is that they invite evaluation and are therefore generally non-threatening. Light-heartedly Ruby said, “We’ll never have another grade 7 and 8 boys’ summer camp! That is not a good idea.” Related to expanded community use of the building Ruby has witnessed pews moved in the sanctuary, tables set up, food placed everywhere “and no one freaked out about it.” She hinted that openness to using the sanctuary as a multi-purpose space, years previous would not have been as well received by the congregation. In response to decreased worship attendance, a congregational decision was made to unbolt pews from their stationary position in favour of flexible worship space. Such appears to have shifted the congregation’s mental model related to sanctuary space as a sacred “worship only” space.

An experiment for Stan is connected to a “missional emphasis” which has been a congregational focus for over 5 years. Stan strives to “embed, plant new stories” in the congregational system with recent inclusion of story-sharing during Sunday worship. Evaluating the experiment, he added “we’re starting to get it. We’re here to connect with people where they are.”

Rather than approaching uncertainty and change with resistance or fear, barriers to culture change, the research shows that experimentation has been widely embraced. The research revealed congregations exhibit an openness to experimentation amidst the current unsettled time in ways it may not have been embraced during a more stable season. Experimentation facilitates curiosity, open-endedness, evaluation, and generally does not stir anxiety nor resistance within

the system. Additionally, experimentation facilitates new learnings and lived experiences which can be built upon. As evidenced in the research, experimentation has led to unexpected opportunities, excitement, joy, surprise, and collaborative community partnerships. Experimentation also facilitates the development of congregational resilience, flexibility, and adaptive capacity.

b. Organizational Decision-Making

Research participants navigate diverse expressions of congregational culture related to the decision-making process. Grant's congregation "likes to process things, debate, and discuss things at end." Grant suggests this may have arisen "from their beginning when they really wanted to be a strong lay led church." Process has "served the church well."

In contrast, Peter described informal congregational decision making saying, "At Elders' and Council meetings there's three people. And we sit around a table, and we talk. And at the end somebody says 'well, what will we put in the minutes about this?'" He shared a story illustrating congregational decision-making process related to refugee sponsorship:

The fall I came here to Pleasant Hill Mennonite Church was when the refugee crisis was beginning..... one Sunday morning one of the mission people comes and says, 'I think maybe you should talk to us if you have any thoughts on that.' A couple of weeks later ... nobody said anything against it so I think 'we'll have a meeting with the neighbourhood and see if anything comes of that.' Then about a month later, 'well how much money can we raise? Here's a little form. Put down how much money you can give and then we will know what's next.' And then they said, 'I think we have enough money for a family, and we are starting a process of application.' So, there was no congregational meeting. There was no motion. There was no vote. There was nobody saying this was going to cost too much. It just kind of happened. And that is a startling contrast from some kinds of situations I've been in. So, the process is really really lovely.

Marcel has learned with experience that process is important. Related to a specific community opportunity, he noted that previously he would have gone ahead and initiated change

without first consulting with leadership. Related to painting a radical welcome statement on the outside wall of the church building he added, “I have to let them process all this.” Further he said, “change must be brought in a way that the people feel respect and part of the process.”

Marci shared a light-hearted story that highlights her congregation’s structure. She said, “I was typing up a description of our church and it was supposed to say we are a group of committed Christians and I accidentally typed ‘we are a group of committeed Christians!’” According to Marci “committees are for all practical purposes groups where people connect with each other” which stands in contrast to being decision-making bodies in the congregation.

Anna offered quite a different perspective regarding structure and decision-making process. Sprucedale has released several larger projects and partnerships in the past few years. Releasing and holding open space, leadership is “trusting something new can emerge.”

The culture of a congregation impacts organizational and decision-making process. The research clearly revealed the absence of one-size-fits-all decision-making process. Rather, “out-of-the box” and “in-the-box” pastors with their unique gifts and experiences need one another and can learn from one another, facilitating shared wisdom and lived experience.

c. Professional Development

Life-long learning equips pastors for a changing ministry context. Self and contextual awareness facilitates both personal and professional development. Ruth named she “does not have the answers” while Ruby acknowledged the church which she “trained to lead no longer exists.” Ken stated, “I know what I can do and what I cannot do.” Pastoral humility serves both pastors and congregations well. Additionally, scholarly writing, leadership theory, a collegial learning cohort, and contextual awareness facilitates ongoing professional development.

Ken referenced “J Curve Theory” saying, “when change happens things get worse.” Ken acknowledged there is a strong urge amidst disorientation to return to what was and the familiar rather than keeping the course, living into unknowing.

Ruby named the vital role a collegial learning cohort has had for her formation and development as a missional leader. Joining colleagues focused missional theology and leading one’s congregation through change has been rich. “Working for change” she said, “is something that has to be intentional.” The leadership cohort which is made up of four other MCEC colleagues meets quarterly. Goal setting, working intentionally on adaptive challenges, and “holding each other accountable has really helped change things for me.”

While Marci has been nourished by Mary Jo Leddy’s book “*Radical Gratitude*” Peter is drawn to CBC broadcasts and various authors. Peter has specialized transitional leadership training. Reflecting upon the ministry of presence he acknowledged pastors often “don’t know what presence has meant to people. We don’t know what the Holy Spirit has done.”

The interaction between Peter and Marcel was honest and revealed diverse leadership styles and personality types. Initially taken aback by Marcel’s self-described innovator leadership style, suggesting Marcel is a “loose canon” Peter reflectively later added, “in my opinion it’s people like you who need to be part of MCEC... your contribution is valuable and may be a little bit hard to come by.” For Marcel, “so used to thinking outside the box” that he has “lost sight of the box” acknowledged that he needs to talk to people like Peter “who are working in this box and trying to do the best they can in this reality.” Reflecting on his out-of-the box approach, with insight Marcel added “there is another reality than just being out of the box.”

Pastoral leaders experientially are strengthening their capacity to embrace paradox and hold unknowns lightly; balance innovative thinking and the reality that the institution is slow to

change; thriving and declining; and spiritual maturity and congregational sustainability. Action-reflection facilitates pastoral self-awareness including one's leadership and conflict style.

Nearly 50% of research participants indicated their primary leadership style is "Shepherd." Reflecting on leadership style strengths and limitations is vital work for pastors providing leadership amidst an unsettled season. Such facilitates thoughtfulness to determine whether ones' current leadership style is best serving the church in an unsettled time.

Related to conflict style, 7 of 17 research participants identified "collaborating" as their predominant conflict style. Collaboration is a vital leadership skill when navigating relational tensions and change. With collaborative skill, pastor and congregation face adaptive challenges and integrate new learnings.

Finally, self and contextual awareness, specialized training, reading, life-long learning, collegial support, and honest open collegial interactions facilitates ongoing leadership growth and development in a changing context.

d. Relationships: formal, informal, collaborative, neighbourhood

At the heart of God as Trinity is relationship. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we connect with God and with one another. Relationality emerged amongst many research participants. Focus Group discussions revealed that new Canadian pastors and pastors from established congregations are learning from one another. Storytelling breaks through barriers of language, culture, and ethnicity, in a way that facilitates an intercultural church culture.

Historically for MCEC congregations, when established congregations have been closely connected and involved in supporting new Canadian congregations, relational roots go deep, are strong, and long-lasting.

Amidst the reality of church decline and shifting cultural context, the research revealed growing awareness amongst pastoral leaders that the church needs its neighbours. The mental model of self-sufficiency is a relational barrier. Unpacking and re-storying the narrative of self-sufficiency facilitates discussion and the building of collaborative relationships with community partners and neighbours. Another relational barrier is the lack of consideration for ecumenical relationships. At a time when many Christian denominations are facing similar challenges and issues there is a need to work together rather than remain in denominational isolated silos.

Li delights in that the congregation's community garden project "is bringing people together." He noted that a sense of energy and collaboration has emerged saying, "we are connecting outside more." While the garden project is not translating into increased Sunday worship attendance, there is growing awareness that there is value in connecting locally. The church's neighbours have become invested in the garden project which has led to informal conversations and connection for Li and his congregation, something which had not organically occurred previously.

Ruby is "investing in relationships" including within her home neighbourhood. Connecting her experience with the congregation she said, "we are really just trying to figure out what it means to walk with people in our community and not fix them, just love them and welcome them in our homes." She has learned from her own lived experience that there are some issues, for example difficult family life situations, that cannot be fixed with money. This truth has been difficult for Ruby. In the community, Ruby is building relationships with the mayor and various community partners including the United Way, mental health agency, ecumenical ministerial colleagues, and more in response to social issues in Lakeside. Ruby deeply values

accountability in relationships which she experiences in the context of a missional leadership learning cohort.

A long-standing relationship with a community ministry partner has shaped the Sprucedale Mennonite congregation including its presence in the city. Intergenerational relationships and “shared leadership or multiplicity of voices” facilitates the nurture of intergenerational relationships. For example, at Sprucedale there is congregational support for the young person who has preached their first sermon whether it has gone well or perhaps not. Anna is intentional about personal connections with young adults. She often schedules coffee with those “who don’t really show up on Sundays.” She added, “you may think we have only these 3 young adults that you see who lead worship.... but there’s 27 more that get emails from me.” Anna is intentional to nurture and “maintains those connections.”

Both Ted and Wanda value “organic relationships.” Wanda said the “origin stories” of congregational partnerships have been “very organic” and beautiful... a focus for the congregation.” Ted added, “as missional ideas come and go it is the personal relationships that are at the heartand we often use the word community.” Ted shared that some of the most rewarding experiences that he has had in his present church “is hosting a Sunday night faith exploration group. I think being in the home and experiencing hospitality is a success.” Further, “having people sit around the circle in a non-church setting and talk about the issues that are closest to their hearts, has really in a sense built the church.”

Peter noted that the adult Sunday School class “is a very safe space where many things can be put on the table.” He has not seen this level of vulnerability and openness transpire in previous congregations where he has pastored. Marci notices that congregational committees

“are groups where people connect with each other.” Indeed, “the church becomes this place where people come to find connection with other people that share their values.”

Stan noted that at Martin Mennonite “there’s a strong appreciation for the support of friendships.” Supporting one another is so central and he often hears, “you should be visiting seniors more.” Embedded, is the congregation’s expectation that relational connecting is primarily the pastor’s role. Stan also notes a “a very strong commitment to children, investing in families, young families.” This is observed “in terms of parents own investment in their children and also in our Vacation Bible School and Sunday School.”

Relationships can also be challenging which both Ted and Ruth identify. Upholding the value of community for the congregation, Ted identifies a barrier saying, “in some ways we’re having such a good time in our own Christian community, but we haven’t learned what it means to open the door to people who may be interested.” Ruth notes that resultant from shifting attendance patterns, “deacons don’t necessarily know who the people are in the pews. So, they don’t know how to care for them because they don’t know who they are.”

Marci, Dan, and Stan noted a strong current, a shadow side of relationships expressed as this: “what will ‘they’ think?” Marci said, “what will people think is part of the Mennonite DNA.” While Marci noted a fear of giving offence, Stan noted that due to “strong family connections within the church, there’s this fear that anything you say will find its way back” through “the grapevine.” Indeed, when congregations are connected through families, there is fear and wondering, how sister congregations will “assess what we are doing?”

Relationships involve risk. Marcel stated, “When I think of missional church, I think about risk.....relationship and risk.” Marcel’s worship gatherings are relationally centered. He said, “In 2013 we started to serve breakfast to the community... we set up round tables with table

clothes. We invite people to come to breakfast and we do the service.” Currently approximately 60 meals are served and “around 40 per cent are newcomers each Sunday.” Relationships are valued and nurtured through radical hospitality. Commenting on the breakfast worship gathering Marcel said “when they come for breakfast, they will be welcomed. This is how the community behaves.” Marcel is so focused upon radical hospitality and welcome, should a congregant not be “in a good mood” he would rather they stay at home. Such highlights a potential barrier. Is risk and hospitality for all? What about hospitality for the cranky or not-at-their-best “insiders?” At its best, radical hospitality is grounded in risk-taking for both host and guest. Radical hospitality at its best facilitates transformation for both host and guest.

Yale’s engagement in the day-to-day life of congregants is unique. According to his congregation’s ethnic culture, “the leaders are the best or can do everything... their main job to drive everybody, everywhere.” For example, Yale provides transportation to the airport, translation lessons, renewal of driver’s license or health cards. Yale added, “I tell myself and my community that I’m not superman.” Relationships for Yale’s congregation are deeply rooted in Asian cultural norms and the day-to-day needs of non-English speaking congregants.

The value of collegial relationships is evident between Thomas and Eshe. Thomas has a mentoring role, supporting his sibling-in-Christ Eshe as he settles into Western culture. Thomas ensured Eshe was a full partner in the focus group conversation by providing back stories including the experience of journeying with Eshe and his congregation as they sought opportunities to sponsor refugees including their blood brothers and sisters from East Africa.

A unique relationship has emerged, the relationship between the church, social movements, and social media as previously noted. Social media platforms have thrust the

congregation's story into the public realm. Such has expanded attention and interaction to a wider community.

Depths of relationship and the struggle of relationship shapes community, transforms individuals, and becomes the ground for growth or grudges, healing and/or restoration, and at its best, life and light. The story-telling experience of research participated prompted further storytelling and personal reflection, deepening relational connectedness and enriched learning.

6. Integrating Theological Frameworks: God's Story / Our Story

As research participants conversed, they engaged in rich spiritual reflection, bearing witness to ways they are integrating Scripture, mission, Anabaptist ecclesiology/tradition, and discipleship, not just within their pastoral role but in their personal lives as well. They recognize intersecting points between God's larger story of redemption and salvation and their own story of pastoral leadership and faith development.

a. Biblical

Narrative pastoral leaders make meaning by linking the biblical story with their current storied context. Being biblically grounded, pastoral leaders identify the unfolding of God's story in the present. Thus, the church finds itself located at the intersection of stories that continue to be written. Rootedness in God's story and integrating lived experience within God's ongoing story emerged across focus group conversations. While the 40-year exodus journey emerged strongly, participants also drew upon other biblical stories in light of their current context.

Yang spoke about the sense of financial insufficiency his congregation feels when comparing themselves to long-established sibling congregations. Reflecting upon his congregation's economic status he said, "I look at the story Jesus told in Mark 12, the widow

woman who gave two coins. She gave the most.” The generosity of Mercy Mennonite abounds even as low-income families seek middle-class stability.

Dan with deep honesty shared, “I struggle in ministry with trying to be enough.” His statement emerged in response to a recent conflictual exchange with a neighbour which triggered a shame response for him. He said, “for us to lead in the presence of shame and not to dress ourselves in those clothes but to put on the wedding banquet clothes of the kingdom... you know I didn’t have to hit back.” He added that he looks forward “to the day when we [he and his neighbour] can sit down with God and talk about this.” Despite the relational tension, Dan holds hope that one day he and his neighbour will feast together at the eternal banquet table. Hope is embodied for Dan in his ministry in that conflicted “stories” are not the end of the story but rather one chapter in a much larger story.

Peter correlated the ministry of presence and Jesus’ words saying, “we don’t know what our presence has meant to people. And we don’t know what the Holy Spirit has done. Drawing upon Jesus’ words as recorded in Matthew 25 he said, “when did we feed you? And when did we do this? And when did we do that? We don’t know.” Peter, a gentle and wise ministering person is deeply grounded in incarnational theology, embodying the hands, feet, and heart of Jesus. Integrating Scripture with lived experience facilitates ongoing spiritual growth.

b. Missional

Service and mission, and justice and peace making are values of the Mennonite Church and this study’s co-researchers. Historically, institutionalized mission agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee, MennoHomes, Mennonite World Conference, have received strong support. Personal engagement in the neighbourhood is a growing edge for many pastors and congregations.

Yang stated, “I consider myself a missionary.” The concept of “mission” is unique “for refugee people coming from different countries.” In South Asian countries “when you talk about mission, it’s only one thing.....it’s evangelism. You tell someone about Jesus Christ..... there is speaking, visiting, handing out [tracts], talking about Jesus Christ.” Yang noted in western culture, “mission is something we find more difficult.... We don’t know how to switch properly.” Planting a new church in South Asian countries “is a lot easier than pastoring here” due to the cultural expectations for the pastor. In Canada, the 1st generation pastor is much more engaged in the day-to-day life of congregants including providing rides to appointments.

Stan stated that Martin Mennonite has a strong history of mission, supporting the local resource centre, Mennonite Central Committee, “more in terms of giving than actually being involved.” Anna’s congregation has had a long history with a community ministry partner. She said, “when something comes up about *Gather at the Table* we will still respond to that. They are their own thriving community center yet when they had a rough season it’s good that we could respond.”

Mission for Ruby’s congregation involves numerous community partnerships including a local Mental Health Agency, Homeless Shelter, United Way, neighbourhood congregations and more. The recent addition of congregational staff - a quarter-time community outreach worker - has been financed through a congregational bequest. Ruby admits she needs “to risk and be out of the office” leading “by example in being aware of what’s happening in our community and then invite the congregation or just say ‘this is what I’m doing. What do we need to do together?’” She added, “it just takes a long time to do the turning [outward].” It happens purposefully, intentionally, and is long-term.

Ted's congregation "has been talking about what it means to be a missional church." One priority has been "shifting our understanding of what it means to do mission. This congregation has a lot of wealth and one of the ways that they have stewarded that wealth is in supporting a lot of para-church organizations." Ted said, "we've been intentional to shift away from that and we've re-purposed our Mission Commission to be primarily focused on engaging our community." A staff member works in the local community centre one half day per week and a "food truck program" was "wildly successful."

While research participants exhibited competence navigating adaptive challenges, the research also revealed that in some cases technical fixes are utilized to address adaptive challenges. Restructuring a "Mission Commission" and assigning responsibility to committee members to "mingle" with neighbours at a weekly "Food Truck program" reinforces a programmatic approach to mission. Facilitating discussion about hospitality as a spiritual practice and ministry for the entire congregation holds the potential of inviting the entire congregation to engage in mission at a personal vulnerable level.

As Marci and Dan both named a "not good enough" congregational identity, Dan added, "we don't want to get down and friendly with our neighbours because we're just not sure we have something of worth." To which Marci stated, "mission then becomes one more thing that you're not good enough at."

Wanda acknowledges that for 20 to 30 years Avalon's "mission energy has been directed into two very specific relationships, one an international bible institute, the other, refugee sponsorship. There is a "sense of wanting to go deep and long and cautious" rather than "move on to the next shiny new thing." Avalon Mennonite Church, according to Wanda as Ted's congregation, has "always entrusted our mission work to others," a barrier that needs addressing.

Kale's congregational mission emphasis is directed toward three major projects: a food drive, participating in large denominational fundraiser, and hosting a community Christmas meal which includes a draw. Thomas' congregation was birthed as a city mission focused on meeting the needs of the poor while Li's congregation's focus has turned to the street, establishing community garden beds and installing picnic benches. The congregation is looking ahead to creating a pollinator garden. Li notes that these mission opportunities have brought people together. Eshe's congregational mission extends to East African populations across many communities and his congregation is heavily involved with refugee settlement.

Grant's congregation is situated on the edge of a large urban center in a tourist area. He said we "need to tap into that." While a congregational priority "is on the community... we're not going to go out door to door." Grant recognizes the tension of wanting to connect with the neighbourhood and at the same time facing resistance to personally engage.

Ken said, "when we start talking about turning our faces outward which is a conversation our congregation is having, there is still this idea that if we built it, they will come. You know, built it better, or bigger." Ken is navigating a tension acknowledging, "some people are doing stuff [engaged locally]. They are not even coming every Sunday morning anymore because they're doing stuff in their neighbourhoods on Sunday morning. Meanwhile there's other people who think we don't need any of that stuff." What we need is a program like they have at Fairhaven" [a sibling congregation.] Revealed is the mental model that programming will "fix the church" and that programs will draw in the community leading to congregational growth. A significant barrier impacting mission is the primary responsibility that a congregation places upon the community's actions including risk-taking. Congregational passivity is a barrier when it

comes to community engagement. Marcel has adopted a very different approach which others can learn from.

For Marcel, “being a missional community means risk. It’s not a big risk to hang out with people that I know, that I love, that are like me.... being a missional community means putting myself at risk to meet and be with people that are different.” Further he added, “when I think of missional church it’s relationship and risk.” Mission for New Life Church is lived out through radical hospitality. Marcel said, “you can walk in drunk or totally on drugs or with the dog, or not well-dressed and you will be welcome.” There is “no us and them. It’s always us.” Marcel’s congregational leadership are currently in a discerning process regarding painting a radical welcome statement on the outside church wall:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay or just not sure, filthy rich or dirty poor.
English speakers and to those who don’t speak English.
And a special welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds.
We don’t care if you are more churchy than the Pope or haven’t been in church since little Joey’s baptism.
We welcome you if you are over 60 but not grown up yet or a teenager who is growing up too fast.
We welcome soccer moms and Nascar dads, starving artists, tree huggers, late sippers, vegetarians, junk food eaters.
We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted.
We welcome you if you are having problems or you’re down in the dumps or if you don’t like organized religion. We’ve been there too.
If you blew all your offering money at the dog track you’re welcome here. We offer special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don’t work, can’t spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.
We welcome those who are inked pierced or both.
We welcome those who could use a prayer right now, at religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake.
We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts and you.
We welcome you because if you are good enough for God and you are, you are good enough for us.

Marcel added, “this is the risk that we are willing to take to be a missional community.”

“Missional” language was rarely used during focus group storytelling. It is possible that this points to “missional” being overused or perhaps a term that is misunderstood. It is also possible that “missional” has become a default for a congregation meaning “outreach” or “evangelism” which participants suggested carries heavy historical baggage and the cause of deep emotional wounding and harm. It is also possible that the church has still not fully grasped what it means to be a missional community despite “missional” being part of church language, resourcing, teaching, and preaching for more than three decades. The lack of clarity regarding what it means to “be missional” is a barrier the church would do well to explore and narratively unpack.

When assigning mission to others is deeply embedded in congregational culture, personal engagement in the local neighbourhood invites new learnings and experience. Believing the community understands what core to the Christian church is and that the neighbourhood desires to be part of the church creates a barrier between the church and its neighbours. Pastoral leaders can facilitate opportunities for congregational resourcing, training, and new experiential learning through the telling of stories that illustrate the why, what, and how of connecting relationally. Pastoral leaders can also facilitate discussion by re-considering limiting language and clarifying once again missional theology and practice, using accessible and new language. The challenge of how to incorporate missional practice is an adaptive challenge as it involves the cultivation of new beliefs, assumptions, and values.

c. Anabaptist Tradition

Research participants referenced historically formative Anabaptist theology. Menno Simons’ view of the church was purist, based upon Ephesians 5:25 – 27. Simons (1496-1561) believed that through holy living including discipleship and the ban, purity, or being the church

“without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind she may be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27). For some co-researchers Simons’ legacy of “pure church” lives on and is experienced as a barrier to culture change.

Reflecting upon deeply entrenched shame in his congregation and exploring “where’s that coming from?” Dan made a connection to historic ecclesiology. He said, “I think the theology back a way talked about being the church without spot or wrinkle.” To which Marcie added, “and then there’s also the long reach of so-called worm theology.” Acknowledging the oppressiveness of pure church ecclesiology Dan also referenced “tent crusades and the crap that went down in beating people up.” Dan finds *Amazing Grace*, “a hard song to sing . . . there’s a lot of stuff that’s worthy but ‘saved a wretch like me’ oh boy, come on.” When purity has such a tight hold on congregations, Marci suggested “mission then becomes one more thing that you’re not good enough at.” The presence of shame keeps a congregation bound to an unhealthy and/or unhealed past, a barrier to culture change. Pastorally addressing the presence of shame and the need for healing while being attentive to the ways God is already healing a congregation can facilitate communal healing and wholeness.

Another historic Anabaptist view rooted in Scripture concerns non-conformity. The Apostle Paul wrote: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2). Stan named a tension in that, “in this little local Christendom there’s both this history of Amish separation from the world. And yet strangely there’s this conformity to culture.” Stan named the both / and of being in and of the world.

Historical ecclesiology also emerged for Ruby when she discussed the possibility of writing proposals for community grant money. She said,

I grew up at Avalon Mennonite Church. Separate from the world. The church is in the world but not of the world. It is huge in our theology. We don’t partner

with. It's one thing to work with neighbours it's another thing to get funding from our neighbours to fund programs for and with our community. That's a huge shift.

Indeed, needing the community is a monumental shift when Anabaptists have historically valued separateness from their neighbours. What does it mean to be the church when the church needs the community's finances to run its programs?

Another example of shifting thinking and ways of "being the church" was offered by Ken who said:

if the only reason you are here is because there are nice people around, well eventually we all figure out that we're not all entirely nice people. I was very inspired when I heard Brené Brown talk about why she goes to church. She says she goes to church to pass the peace, sing, and share the rail, in other words share communion with people for the most part she would rather punch in the face. This is not how Mennonites think about going to church.

Ken reflectively acknowledged the need to be clear about the church's call, its purpose, and its mission. What does it mean to be the church, the people of God today? How will the church communicate its mission and the good news of Christ to its neighbours?

d. Discipleship:

For Anabaptists discipleship that is, following in the footsteps of Jesus is at the core to one's faith. Indeed, for Anabaptists, discipleship is central to understanding Christian faith.

Dan said,

We've been always hearing that we are to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Well, that's a pretty serious comparison to consider or responsibility to hold... And I often hear the first half of this famous Hans Denck quote, 'you can't follow Jesus unless you know him.' Period! So, we are consumed with following. Oh, I'll try hard and follow. But the second half is, 'you can't follow unless you know him!' And this is where the hunger to hear Jesus lies... I need to know this man! Because of what I was given in my evangelical upbringing... it put so much fear in me. I'm not living up to his standards, right? So, what is the heart and mind of Jesus? Not just the hands and feet.

Ruth said, “the value of radical discipleship is strong at Forest Street Church. It’s part of our history... I think the challenge is the inward spiritual journey people are continuing to ask for and are thirsty for... balancing what you know with wanting to work out one’s faith. I think sometimes we work so hard at it [discipleship] that we perhaps have lost sight of the inner life.”

In discussion with Grant about community Ken said,

For a tradition that relies on its well being to have this strong sense of community... we follow this Jesus character who is this completely iconoclast who disrupted community in all times and places in pursuit of something that could be better. What do we do when maybe what God’s doing in the midst of us feels very disruptive and threatening to the wonderful sense of community that has sustained us? If you ask people ‘why do you come to this church?’ 90% of them would say ‘it’s the people.’ You know not too many are saying it’s the radical message of Jesus.

Reflecting upon “great theological diversity” within the congregation Ruby said, “we’re asking people to risk and connect with their neighbours and we’re finding we’re needing to address deep hunger and the spiritual quest.” She pondered, “what is the faith we’re inviting people to join with us in sharing?” By sharing her experiences with neighbours including the man who lives in the church parking lot with the congregation, Ruby models that which she is working out personally: “how does Jesus invite us to simply walk with people and not try to fix them?”

Amidst their rich spiritual reflection, research participants offered their deep questions of faith, revealed the staying power of 16th century Anabaptist ecclesiology, shared diverse perspectives related to mission, and re-stated the deep quest of walking with Jesus.

7. Hope: Stories of Transformation

It is vital pastoral work to facilitate the writing and living into narratives of hope amidst the world’s narratives of scarcity, fear, and despair. Amidst real and present challenges as well as

fruitful and life-giving ministry opportunities, research participants experience hope and shared stories that embody hope.

Stan said, “One thing I hear from even the older people in the congregation... the congregation has seen a lot of change over the years. It’s mostly said with a sense of hope... we will continue to adapt.” Hope is expressed by Marci’s congregation in this way: “We really do believe that we will have enough leadership to do things and not just the paid people. We really do believe that there will always be a new Christian Ed coordinator.” While Marci believes the congregation’s perspective, “might not be unrealistic” however, as she looks toward the future she stated, “it’s been sustainable so far. So why would they not believe that?”

Ken identified a glimmer of hope in that ‘the inch worm is not threatening to tear itself apart.’ Ken drew upon the image of inch worm when he described extremes in the congregation related to change. While some congregants are eager to march ahead others have dug in their heels. It is hopeful in that the inch worm has remained intact.

Anna surmised her congregation is hopeful saying, “we’re in a season of having lots more kids than the congregation really remembers having so that gives lots of people hope of ‘yea, this church might be here after I’m gone.’” She added that just because “there’s kids who are part of the church.... That’s not necessarily the full story of what we want our church to be.” Ted noted, “there is hope in our congregation. There is a realization that the future of the church is going to be different.”

Both Dan and Yang expressed congregational hope uniquely. Dan acknowledged that a significant congregational bequest “has pushed to the surface, our feelings about how it is hard to accept grace, lavish, unexplainable grace. It’s messing with us. And it’s good.” The unexpected gift of a generous bequest has created discomfort which has led to spiritual growth and

transformation. Yang values the unity experienced in his congregation. He said, “a lot of Asian churches across Canada and the United States have a lot of problems with leadership. Conflicts amongst the leaders. At Mercy Mennonite I see the unity, the humble heart.” Unity serves as a bright beacon of hope for Yang.

Eshe and Thomas have a close collegial relationship. Together they shared a hope-filled story that dramatically illustrated how institutions can change when queries arise from grass roots. The two friends meet regularly with a group of 1st generation/ new Canadian pastors. In response to concerns related to the lack of support to re-settle East African refugees, Thomas arranged a gathering of pastoral colleagues with a staff person from the denomination’s international relief institution. The purpose of the meeting was to hear from the staff person as to why the relief institution was not sponsoring refugees from East Africa. According to Thomas, “it made no sense to the new Canadian churches.” The agency was “sponsoring all kinds of refugees. Why not their own literal brothers and sisters who are in refugee camps? It made no sense.”

The pastors were informed by the staff person that the institution “sponsors the poorest of the poor.” Thomas then added, “but do you know what? That has changed!” The relief agency changed their philosophy and policy regarding sponsorship as did a local refugee committee, “*Churches Joined to Sponsor*” made up of 6 to 7 local congregations. Referring to the new Canadian churches’ ministry, Thomas said, “Now they have sponsored many people who are friends, relations, and sometimes literally blood brothers and sisters from South Africa, from Kenya, from South Sudan and from all kinds of places.” The para church institution which began 100 years ago to offer aid “to their own people” has returned to its roots, grassroots conversations leading to institutional change. A willingness to listen to one another, to work

together, and seek understanding has led to transformation and change. Eshe and Thomas' story reveals hope in that institutional change can and does emerge through grassroots conversations. Eshe's story of disappointment was told and heard which led to a re-telling of the institution's origin story leading to a new story formed for both the institution and MCEC congregations. Hope is embodied in that policy, structure, and organizational cultures do change.

Marcel also shared a profound story that embodied hope. He said:

There is a guy that comes every other Sunday, and he got his face tattooed. His nickname is 'scare-face' because you just look at his face and you are scared of him. He is a really scary guy. He used to work as a security guard in what we call a crack house. He would be the security guy in the crack house. So for sure he needs to have a face that says 'don't play with me.' 'Don't mess with me.' He comes sometimes. He got his face tattooed ... racist stuff, white power... It's kind of tough. He got these tattoos back at a young age and now he is 45 and came to Christ 20 years ago. He is one of our leaders and he has these tattoos and now he is in the process of covering them.... Because he doesn't believe in this anymore. But he's welcome.

Marcel's faith community is bound together by common values: risk, relationship, and radical welcome. The story of "scare-face's" transformation bears witness to the fruit of their partnership with God's ministry and presence.

Hope was also evidenced in Stan's intention to embed new stories into the congregational system. The metaphor "Shepherd" has defined pastoral leadership, training, and leadership formation for generations. Shepherding pastor feed and tend, protect and guide their flock. This has created and reinforced relational dependency. Missional pastoral leaders are beginning to adopt a new pastoral leadership metaphor that challenges hierarchical and dependent relationships "the sower" (Luke 19 8:5-15). When ministry is embraced as "sowing seeds," – the seeds of salvation, the seeds of the Kin-dom of God – new beliefs, assumptions, values, and identity are its fruit. In missional congregations, both pastor and congregants take on the role of

“sowers.” With this transition, the pastor’s primary role shifts to that of trainer, assisting the congregation in sowing. In missional congregations both pastor and congregation trust in the provision of God for sun, rain, and growth through the activity of the Holy Spirit. The act of sowing draws people to faith and is an act of radical hope, for to sow seeds is to anticipate a fruitful future. Seeds must be broken open if what is within is to emerge. This is the work of God’s Spirit. In a congregational context, the breaking open involves examination of limiting narrative and barriers. Such facilitates freedom, the uncovering of potential, and resurrected new life. Sowing creates possibilities that something new will take root, sprout, grow, and bear fruit.

Summary of Findings

Pastoral leaders warmly welcomed the opportunity to think about and talk with each other about their leadership experiences. In response to questions regarding their lived experience responding and adapting to change, each eagerly shared experiences that have shaped and formed congregational identity. The research highlights the evolving nature of identity and the challenge of claiming a new identity amidst a changing ministry and cultural context. During the current unsettled time, significant questions regarding congregational identity revealed that congregations are living with and facing an “identity crisis.” Amidst change, congregations are asking the important question: “who are we?”

Metaphors emerged in storytelling as a crucial tool for making meaning of present context. Metaphors are generally easily understood therefore, their use facilitates rich spiritual reflection.

Holding space for participants to take the lead in focus group conversations, many, unprompted, shared stories that illuminated challenges and possibilities related to church buildings and/or properties including protectionism, re-imagining, and re-purposing. Buildings

and properties are a rich congregational resource, and the process of re-imagining and re-purposing has invited new stories within congregations including the potential for positive outcomes that will impact both the congregation and the church's local neighbourhood.

Pastors shared stories that disclosed liminality, the reality that the church is neither here nor there. Despite the term "liminal" never used directly, research participants clearly articulated evidence that the church is situated in a threshold moment. Liminality is not a new location for the church to find itself, but rather a rich "wilderness" place which invites contemplation, openness to ambiguity, growth, a deepening of spiritual practices, and listening for God.

As pastors live fully into their story, experimentation, organizational and decision making, professional development, and relationships emerged as strong themes. The pastors are also integrating God's story and their own and congregational story. Theological frameworks drawn upon include biblical, missional theology, discipleship, and Anabaptist tradition.

Despite real and present challenges, most inspiring, were the stories of hope. Hope-filled stories were told with energy and excitement. An institution has changed its policy regarding refugee sponsorship, initiated from grass root curiosity. Personal lives have been transformed through hospitality, radical welcome, and through the acceptance and love of a faith community. The aged, who have navigated tremendous change throughout their lives embrace hope that they will continue to adapt amidst a changing world. Contrasting the story of decline and fear, hope is grounding pastoral leaders as they lead their congregations into an unknown future. While pastors are clear that they do not have a map to navigate the way forward, they exhibited courage and insight about their personal limitations as well as their strengths as they give leadership at this time.

Research focus group storytelling uncovered barriers that risk keeping the church stuck as well as facilitators which can be built upon as the church seeks to align with God's mission in the local neighbourhood and the world. The format of focus group conversation was rich ground for engaged conversation, the collection of data, and the building and strengthening of collegial relationships. Finally, this research study confirms that collegial storytelling is an effective tool to analyze and examine MCEC pastors lived experience leading culture change.

The following chapter engages research findings alongside relevant literature.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Journeying the Wilderness

Moses has a leadership crisis on his hands. These liberated slaves whom God formed as a people have reached their limit and they are not silent in their protest. The Israelites are done with the diet and with loud grumbling voice their complaint: “At least in Egypt we had meat to eat, cucumbers and melons, leeks and onions” (Numbers 11: 4-6). The daily provision of manna was no longer satisfying their appetite. Indeed, a deeper spiritual, physical, and emotional hunger, which no potluck buffet could satisfy, cried out to be filled. In desperation Moses does not turn on the flock under his care, not this time anyway. Instead, Moses lashes out at his God, “Lord, why did you lay the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give birth to them? It was you Lord who promised an oath to their ancestors. I can’t do it! Besides, where am I supposed to get meat out here in the wilderness?” (Paraphrase Numbers 11: 10-15).

This angry outburst is more than Moses having a bad day. Is this the manifestation of burnout? Perhaps, or could this be evidence of an over-burdened and over-whelmed spiritual leader amidst a sea of upheaval and change? Moses’ protest to God is bold and raw: “if this is the way you are going to treat me God, put me to death right now!” (Numbers 11:15). With no ‘1-800 wilderness’ crisis line to call nor social media feed to capture the glorious mess, it is looking bleak for Moses and the people of God. Left behind is the familiarity of Egyptian oppression. What lies ahead is a future not yet revealed. God’s people are restless as they journey the sacred ground of uncharted territory, and they need a leader. And Moses needs a wilderness road map, vision, wisdom, courage, leadership competency, strategy, adaptability and more, to lead God’s people into God’s future.

Given the depths of faith, courage, and strength required for the 40-year wilderness journey as Moses led God’s children to the Promised Land and new life, compassion and empathy runs deep for this researcher and pastoral leader. Pastoral leaders as myself experientially know that journeying the wilderness is not for the faint of heart. To dwell in the wilderness is to experience disorientation, confusion, and lostness. To journey the wilderness of liminality, is to lose a sense of control, to face uncertainty, and unknowing. Grief is deep for wilderness wanders amidst the loss of the familiar including communal rhythms. Wilderness landscape is dry and harsh and unhealthy appetites including quick fix solutions, tried and true strategies or programs, or hiring an expert guide can tempt. Wilderness, or in the language of contemplative Richard Rohr, “liminal space is a unique spiritual position where humans hate to be, but where the Biblical God is always leading them.”⁴³⁰

As the biblical story reveals and as experienced personally, wilderness also holds profound beauty, potential, and possibility. For those who have entered the wilderness deeply, what is experienced is the rich soil of spiritual transformation. Greening and unexpected shoots of new life emerges from the dry and parched places of our hearts and lives leading to new pathways, change, new hope. In the sacred space of solitude, contemplation, and being fully present with the Divine, God’s people experience renewal and refreshment of mind, body, and spirit. Liminal wilderness is the soil for important narrative leadership work including identifying core value, beliefs, and assumptions, and uncovering the potential for new beginnings. While wilderness can be a lonely and disorienting place most especially for pastoral

⁴³⁰ Richard Rohr, quoted by Ruth Haley Barton in “Eastertide: The Emmaus Road – Between the Now and the Not-Yet” online, *Transforming Center*, www.transformingcenter.org/2015/04/road-together.

leaders, it also the place where God attends to daily needs and lives out the promise to never leave God's people on their own.

This study's participants understand wilderness, several describing their current ministry context and leadership lived experience as a "wilderness" journey. The unexpected re-emergence of a painful congregational historical incident thrust Thomas' congregation into the "wilderness." One congregant, in conversation with Thomas likened the current unsettled place to that of an "Arabian desert." Such unsettledness led Thomas to ponder an identity question asking: "Who are we in the desert?" Drawing upon the biblical story of Exodus and wilderness wandering, Ken identified the presence of resistance and the human yearning for homeostasis amidst chaos saying: "when you first hit the wilderness, it's faster and easier to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt than it is to wait the 40 years and get to the Promised Land." Stan related "40 years in the wilderness" to his congregation's nearly 40-year building project process. He acknowledged that upon completion of the major building addition, the "Promised Land" looked quite different than had been expected. In Stan's context, completion the building project coincided with a noted decrease in congregational attendance. The future, which had been envisioned as congregational growth and the story "build it and they will come" was not realized. The future which the congregation had stepped into looked foreign, certainly not reflective of their carefully processed planning. Some expressed disappointment. Others felt discouraged. What would it be to uncover conscious and unconscious assumptions and expectations within congregational stories and seek out the movement and the presence of the Spirit of God? God who leads the way through the wilderness does not desert God's people as they step through the threshold of a new beginning.

Research participants confirm Susan Nienaber's claim that the exodus story including forty years of wandering before arriving at the Promised Land is "a commonly used metaphor in

Christian and Jewish traditions.”⁴³¹ This major Old Testament Exodus narrative arose naturally for pastoral leaders as they described their lived experience adapting and responding to a changing ministry context. The wilderness metaphor is tangible, easily understood, and descriptively connects God’s story and pastoral leaders’ lived stories. Supporting David Snowden’s claim, metaphors effectively help communities and individuals to understand, communicate, and make meaning, from their current context.⁴³² Snowden further suggests metaphors “provide a common reference” point for a group as they work through current concerns and move into a more stable space.⁴³³ A disorienting liminal space is a ripe environment for the simulation of ideas and articulation of meaningful metaphors.

Metaphors, as research participants demonstrated function as a “container that allows us to hold together powerful and complex emotions.”⁴³⁴ They give expression to a host of human emotions and help us make meaning of our lived experience. In this way, metaphors provide order amidst chaos and nurture a sense of stability amidst uncertainty. The sacred story of Scripture is rich with metaphors: the Lord is my Shepherd; I am the Light of the World; You are the salt of the earth. When fear, despair, and anxieties swell during wilderness journeys, metaphorical visuals and language ground the church, theologically, biblically, and spiritually. Additionally, while metaphors provide language for the journey of disorientation, they also invite a deep and rich reading of our sacred story. As Scripture discloses, metaphors can change as

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² David J. Snowden, “The Art and Science of Story or ‘Are you sitting uncomfortably?’” 152,

⁴³³ Ibid., 152.

⁴³⁴ Susan Nienaber, “Crisis Fatigue” Metaphors Can Help, *Congregational Consulting Group*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/crisis-fatigue-metaphors-can-help>.

people change, revealing change is actually occurring. Such serves as a beacon of hope amidst the uncertainty and liminality.

The Exodus story, according to Brian McLaren's narrative approach to Scripture holds a profound gift for God's people, "liberation and formation."⁴³⁵ Exodus begins with the pain of oppression and injustice. Hearing God's people's cries, God works through Pharaoh, Moses, Aaron, and subsequently through frogs, gnats, weather, disease, and more. While the first phase of Egyptian liberation is the celebration of release and freedom from external dominating powers, the second phase is a deeper internal liberation, formation. On the 40-year journey "through law and ritual and trial, God forms character and faith and dignity in a people who have been debased by generations of slavery."⁴³⁶ According to McLaren, if Genesis is the story of sacred creation and reconciliation, the second narrative, the Exodus, is the story of God the Liberator who frees God's people from both external and internal oppression and forms a wandering community as the people of God.⁴³⁷

The prominence of this major Old Testament narrative held alongside the participant's ministry context reveals that as humans we live storied lives. Humans make meaning through stories. Indeed, stories are containers of meaning, experience, values, beliefs, assumptions, world views, and more. As these wise pastoral leaders embody, stories including the biblical story and the Christian tradition provide a framework to understand and make meaning of their lived experience as they lead their congregation into and through uncharted territory. As Moses, pastoral leaders are journeying an unsettled season, building skills sets and resources to lead faithfully amidst chaos, uncertainty, fears, and hopes.

⁴³⁵ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 56.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56-59.

It has now been two years since the research for this study was completed. The research puzzle as stated earlier is “What are MCEC pastors’ lived experiences of the facilitators and barriers to congregational culture change?” As noted, seven key themes/resonant threads emerged in this study. With the research puzzle, focus group stories, and key themes residing deep within me while living into the unfolding story of the Covid-19 pandemic, Clandinin’s wise insight regarding narrative inquirers always entering research relationships “in the midst” rang loud and true.⁴³⁸ Participants shared stories from the midst of their lives which have been shaped by unfolding cultural, institutional, individual, familial, and communal narratives, each impacted and shaped by past, present, and future. As a narrative inquirer I sought to be attentive to temporality, sociality, and places of participants’ lives.

Appreciation expressed for the conversation:

Deepest gratitude to all research participants – colleagues, teachers, transformers, and leaders – for being exceedingly generous with their time and for sharing their storied experiences with authenticity, honesty, and vulnerability. Participants also expressed appreciation for focus group conversation. Ruth acknowledged that time spent together resulted in “rich conversation” while Marci expressed thanks “for the opportunity” to share her ministry experiences with pastoral colleagues. Peter and Marcel, who prior to their focus group conversation had been unacquainted, expressed gratitude for having met one another and for the opportunity to learn from one another. Peter acknowledged that MCEC “needs [out-of-the box] leaders” as Marcel, his “contribution valuable and a little bit hard to come by.” And Marcel acknowledged the value of learning from those who are “in the box.” Tom expressed appreciation that I was willing to travel three plus hours to meet in person.

⁴³⁸ Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, 43.

Conversation Starter

Each focus group conversation was prefaced with findings as detailed in the *MCEC Environmental Scan Report – February 2014*.⁴³⁹ As previously stated, the purpose of the Environmental Scan was to acquire “a clear picture of the existing and emerging contexts of MCEC ministries in order to identify trends both within and beyond the church.”⁴⁴⁰ General observations and emergent themes as discussed in Chapter 1 served as a conversation starter for each of the five focus groups. In hindsight, it would have been helpful had I shared an electronic copy of the report with focus group participants prior to our conversations rather than taking time to review the data pre-focus group conversation. In this way, more time could have been focused on storytelling and less time on data sharing. The report shared orally, however, served as a valuable conversation starter.

This research project highlights the importance of identifying barriers and facilitators within narratives impacting culture change within MCEC congregations as the church transitions from a Christendom-maintenance model of church to a post-Christendom missional model of church. This study, utilizing a narrative leadership lens, provided opportunity to analyze, understand, and identify, how the church is functioning and ministering out of a missional church framework as the sent people of God participate in God’s healing, reconciling, and restoring mission in the world.

Storying: The Contextual Landscape of Research Participant’s Congregations

MCEC is a church in transition. Newly installed MCEC Executive Director Leah Reesor Keller (September 1, 2020 - present) in her October 7, 2020 VLOG, shared wisdom she gleaned

⁴³⁹ MCEC Environmental Scan Report.

⁴⁴⁰ MCEC Environmental Scan Report.

from a recent conversation with retired MCEC pastor and previous church Leadership Minister Herb Schultz (October 1980 – August 1994). Reflecting upon the unexpected challenge of the global pandemic and shifts that are occurring broadly within the Christian church, Schultz graciously reminded Reesor Keller that “this is the work of the church. The church is always in transition.”⁴⁴¹

MCEC denominational leaders as well as MCEC pastors are facing the reality of the constancy of change and the necessity of cultivating skills, competencies, and capacities that will both uncover and maximize potential within the current changing landscape. According to David Fleming director of Emerging Leaders Institute, “organizations must stop characterizing change as a mere event to be endured and learn to tap the possibilities that emerge from change as teacher and transformer.”⁴⁴² Research participants shared stories which paint a multi-textured portrait of a changing and disorienting landscape including changing congregational demographics as identified in the *MCEC Environmental Scan*.

In 2017, Ken’s congregation “noticed there was a big demographic hole opening up.” In two years, the congregation would have “no kids grade eight or younger.” Ken recognizes that with only “two married couples of child-bearing age” currently engaged in congregational life, “old solutions don’t work anymore.”

The average age of Peter’s congregation is “well over 60” and currently there are only “two kids in Sunday School.” Described on one hand as thriving in terms of mature Christian faith, on the other hand the story the congregation tells itself is, “we’ve been in decline for decades.” The congregation remembers a time when there were many kids in Sunday school”... a

⁴⁴¹ Leah Reesor Keller, “On the journey together,” YouTube Video, October 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n84zL6ZroQ&t=45s>.

⁴⁴² David Fleming, “Narrative Leadership,” 34.

time “that is well in the past.” For Chartwell Mennonite, the question regarding ‘how long is the church viable?’ remains on the table in some form. Ted acknowledges that his congregation is “one of the aging congregations” in MCEC. While shifting demographics were broadly noted by research participants, observations were not shared with dread nor gloom but rather as an honest overview of their current ministry context.

MCEC is an ethnically diverse denomination. New Canadian, immigrant, and refugee population congregations make up the majority congregations that have been welcomed into provisional or full membership over the past 15 years. While many long-established Swiss and Russian background Mennonite churches note a decline in children and youth, Eshe’s new Canadian congregation has experienced significant growth in attendance with the introduction of Sunday School programming. Eshe said, “it’s good for the future of our church..... most people now bring friends.” Both Yang and Kale who give leadership to 40-year-old congregations which emerged from refugee roots, continue to navigate east Asian and western cultural norms. Yang’s congregation includes second and third generation English speakers yet weekly worship is led in the founder’s mother tongue. Yang notes that his Russian and Swiss background brothers and sisters have navigated the transition of language and enculturation many years previous, issues that loom large on the horizon for him and his congregation.

Canadian Religious Landscape

As the religious landscape has been changing in Canada, pastoral leaders have been navigating ambiguity, opportunity, and possibility. The research participants who average 24.8 years of pastoral ministry respectively, have a rich lived experience providing leadership amidst a changing ministry context. Having pastored in the Mennonite church for 36 plus years Ruth, a well-seasoned pastor stated: “the church I trained for doesn’t exist and I think we need to start

recognizing that.” This dramatic shift is reflected in Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby’s 2008 and 2021 research as well as by missiologist Alan Roxburgh who reported that “if you were born after 1984, there is less than a 10 per cent chance you are in church today.”⁴⁴³

Further, Canadian religious professors Brian Clarke and Stuart MacDonald report that during the postwar boom of the 1950s “Canadian churches were vibrant institutions with attendance rates even higher than the United States.”⁴⁴⁴ However, during the 1960s “many baby boomers – notably among younger members of that generation born after the mid-1950s – dropped out of the church, not to return even when they started having children.”⁴⁴⁵ Emerging from this shift, several trends are noted. For example, according to statistics, “as of 2011 one-quarter of all Canadians - 7.8 million people – identified themselves as having No Religious Affiliation.”⁴⁴⁶ Wanda noted that this demographic - known as “nones” - have been attracted to non-traditional faith communities as the one she gives leadership. She stated involvement in a non-traditional worshiping community is “probably this groups “only spiritual formation.”

The decline of church attendance including active engagement in the church has accelerated rapidly and is forefront on the minds and hearts of pastoral leaders. Canada has become increasingly secular and spirituality which has become widely popularized, is steeped in individualism. Stan acknowledges that when he started ministry there was still a post 1950’s 1960’s expectation “that church is a good place to go. If you had programs...if you were welcoming... you make connections and there would be at least a few people who would

⁴⁴³ Reginald Bibby’s research is available: reginaldbibby.com/images/PC_10_BETTER_WITH_GOD_OCT0807.pdf; reginaldbibby.com/images/Millennials_update_Jan_21_2021.pdf; Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 6.

⁴⁴⁴ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, back cover.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

connect or reconnect.” A tremendous shift Stan noted in reflecting upon his 35 plus years of pastoral ministry is “church being one of many options and now church being looked at by many as being irrelevant or even harmful.” While not specific about the nature of harm, Stan affirms Suderman’s assertion that the church today “is a tough sell in the Western world.”⁴⁴⁷ While “good words are used to talk about Jesus – radical, revolutionary, counter-cultural, subversive, prophetic, alternative. Not so good words are used to talk about the church – institutional, bureaucratic, self-serving, conservative, slow, irrelevant, limited, calcified, resistant to change, out of date.”⁴⁴⁸ Ken reflected this tenuous perspective saying,

we follow this Jesus character who is completely iconoclast, who disrupted community in all times and places in pursuit of something that could be better.... What do we do when what God’s doing in the midst of us feels disruptive and threatening to the wonderful sense of community that has sustained us? If you ask people ‘why do you come to this church?’ 90% would say its the people. Not too many are saying its the radical message of Jesus.

Stan, Suderman, and Ken articulate a ministry context and a leadership challenge that extends far beyond aging congregations and shifting attendance and participation demographics. They draw attention to the widening gap between congregations and their neighbours who hold diverse beliefs, assumptions, and values.

Lesslie Newbigin extensively discussed Christianity in a pluralistic society in order to articulate a theology shaped by participation in God’s mission. Building upon Newbigin’s work, Mark Lau Branson and Alan Roxburgh name two concepts emerging from the modern era which I believe impact the widening gap between the church and its neighbourhood. The first, “modernity’s wager,” a primary characteristic of modernity is articulated as the conviction “that

⁴⁴⁷ Suderman, *Re-imagining the Church*, 3.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

life can be lived well without God.”⁴⁴⁹ Lau Branson and Roxburgh contend “modernity’s wager” has “settled deep into the bones, sinews, habits and defaults of the Western imagination. Indeed, this wager has overwhelmingly colonized the churches (no matter what the stripe – left or right, conservative or progressive) and it now shapes their understanding and practice of leadership.”⁴⁵⁰ A second characteristic of Euro-tribal churches according Lau Branson and Roxburgh, is “technical rationality” the “development of a whole culture of technocratic elites – professionals trained in the best methods of the social sciences to manage and control the systems and organizations for which they were trained to lead.”⁴⁵¹ While it can be a temptation for church leaders to want to “fix” the church and strengthen its health, pastoral leaders recognize a greater re-formation is underway, a reshaping that began in earnest generations ago.

Author Anthony B. Robinson notes that just a few decades ago, “as a religious establishment, mainline churches tended to rely on a *sense of obligation* as a powerful motivator for their membership constituency.”⁴⁵² Belonging to a church, having children or youth baptized and sending them to Sunday school was a societal norm. This norm began to shift dramatically in the 1960’s with the “diminished power of social norms, accepted values and expectations, and the sense of accepted obligations.”⁴⁵³ Church attendance was considered an obligation and as a generation of seekers emerged “*motivation replaced obligation.*”⁴⁵⁴ Other factors emerging in the 1960’s that contributed to a changing religious ethos include, an erosion of social trust and

⁴⁴⁹ Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency & Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 2.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵² Anthony B. Robinson *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003). 4.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

questions regarding authority of the church, religious pluralism, the emergence of a new postmodern culture, and complacency for the church who had assumed its place in society and its community.⁴⁵⁵ Thus led to a large wave of change for North American culture, its impact widely experienced within the church today in 2021.

Shifting cultural norms and congregational demographics, as the research revealed is impacting congregational life, pastoral care, and leadership roles and function. Ruth noted that regular attendance has shifted to “once a month, twice is regular attendance.” This impact is experienced in a number of ways: those who serve on committees no longer benefit from continuity of history or knowledge; worship committees members who have not attended worship services cannot reflect upon corporate worship experience; and deacons whose responsibility it is to “pay attention to the people in the congregation” – their spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing - “no longer know who the people are in the pews so they don’t know how to care for them.” At Sprucedale Mennonite, while 3 young adults frequently lead weekly worship, Anna acknowledges that she intentionally and regularly connects with a group of up to 27 young adults through emails and coffee shop conversations. These young adults want to connect to the church and are seeking alternate ways of maintaining connections.

As witnessed along Ontario’s Lake Huron shoreline during a recent cottage vacation, waves gently ebb and flow. The current wave of change, however, for the church is hitting hard and fast with no signs of letting up. As cottage owners experience, harsh summer and winter winds not only lash buildings and treelines but also re-shape the shoreline and natural landscape. According to *Barna*, a California-based visionary research and resource company, the present

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., For a fuller discussion related to changes in American culture see Anthony B. Robinson’s *Transforming Congregational Culture* (2003), 1 – 11.

global pandemic is significantly re-shaping the landscape of church attendance. According to September 2020 data, “22% of churched adults have stopped going to in-person or digital church.”⁴⁵⁶ Startlingly, this marks a further significant shift and decline from pre-pandemic attendance patterns. In response to increased disengagement, pastors as myself are wondering whether their flock will return post-pandemic. What will the church look like? Given projections, as reported by the CBC on May 29, 2019, “over the next 10 years, 9000 churches and other faith-owned buildings in Canada will be shutting down” one wonders how many more churches and faith-owned buildings will close or be re-purposed post-pandemic.⁴⁵⁷ Uncertainty stirs amongst pastoral leaders and congregations regarding the future of a post-pandemic church.

Wider Religious Landscape

Shifting attendance patterns, active engagement in congregational life, and aging congregational demographics, while significant does not capture the full story of change. Rather, these noted demographics are symptomatic of a much larger paradigm shift occurring within the Christian church. Founding editor of the Religion Department of *Publishers Weekly*, metaphorically describes the current landscape of change as a “giant rummage sale,” a recurrent five-hundred-year pattern across history when the church has needed “to clean out its attic.”⁴⁵⁸ The rummage sale is a process for the church to discern what needs discarding and what will be kept. These critical “hinge-moments” have been times of great upheaval for the Christian church to discover once again its common story.

⁴⁵⁶ “What Churches Might Miss When Measuring Digital Attendance,” *Barna*, October 20, 2020, www.barna.com/research/watching-online-church.

⁴⁵⁷ “Why it matters 9,000 churches and religious spaces will close over next 10 years,” *CBC* online, May 27, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/churches-closing-1.5150876>.

⁴⁵⁸ For fuller discussion see Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, Chapter 1 pp 19-31.

At a time when leaders are wrestling with what it means to be the faithful people of God in the current cultural context, this study highlights the importance of recognizing barriers, that is, limiting narratives, church policy, organizational structure, theology, ideologies, congregational introversion, assumptions, and belief systems that no longer serve the church and indeed may be obstacles, negatively impacting the furthering of God’s mission. The research revealed that protectionism of buildings and properties, expectations of the pastoral role, “old identities,” and turning toward programs to achieve goals and growth as in the past, need examining, at times discarding, and ultimately a re-storying. Alternatively, this study highlights facilitators, God’s presence and activity amidst an unsettled context, disrupting values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms, in order to strengthen God’s people’s faith and witness.

This study also highlights that the traditional marks of the church, kerygma (worship and proclamation), didache (teaching), koinonia (community and fellowship), and diakonia (service) must take priority and be built upon as facilitators, promoting continued forward movement. Effective pastoral leaders with their congregations, build on facilitators to face and overcome barriers of limiting stories and dysfunctional mind-sets and habits. The research shows that old policies or expectations that no longer serve the church in its present context are not worth holding onto just because “we have always done it this way.”

The church is transitioning from the Christendom / modernity era, “its hallmark values - reason, self-sufficiency, progress, optimism.... and taken-for-granted status” according to author Anthony B. Robinson.⁴⁵⁹ Witnessed today is “a new secular, religiously pluralistic, and postmodern culture,” a shift requiring a change of congregational culture.⁴⁶⁰ In a post-

⁴⁵⁹ Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, 3.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

Christendom era it is vital that mission not be viewed as a church program, a budget, nor the activity of the designated “Missions Committee” entrusted to forward funds to international ministries. Rather, “the church exists for mission, for the changing and transforming of human being and human communities, in light of the gospel.”⁴⁶¹ Because the location of the mission field has shifted, the church’s beliefs, assumptions, and values, thus culture needs to also shift.

Tickle asserts the presence of culture change and current pattern of upheaval must be brought into public view. While many pastoral leaders shared congregational demographic shifts as reported in the MCEC Environmental Scan, I have been drawn toward the need for the church to reframe its current story of decline. A new chapter for the church will begin to be written as pastors and their congregations take a deep dive, exploring the greater contextual story of upheaval, including each cycle of rebirth for the Christian church across history. Situating one’s story within the larger meta-narrative not only provides a framework to hold our belief systems, values, and assumptions, it also provides meaning-making and sense-giving space for congregations amidst upheaval and change. In this way, “missional” does not become another “fix it” strategy for the church, but rather an invitation to locate the church within God’s broader salvation story including the Anabaptist story. Indeed, Anabaptism was birthed during the 16th century Reformation. Tickle wisely assures the reader “that no standing form of organized Christian faith has ever been destroyed by one of our semi-millennial eruptions. Instead, each simply lost hegemony or pride of place to the new and not-yet organized form that was birthing.”⁴⁶²

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁶² Phyllis Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 27.

Renowned church historian Diana Butler Bass has written extensively about the changing the evolving state of the church. In her book *Grounded*, Bass contends the current epoch change and spiritual upheaval is flowing from the ending of the three-tiered understanding of the universe: God in heaven, humanity on earth, and the underworld of death.⁴⁶³ What is being discovered is that God is far more personal than previously imagined. In response, many are drawn to a God who is grounded, that is present within and amongst humanity. Accordingly, the church is discovering new pathways that holds together the mundane and the sacred, embracing a God that is simultaneously other world, mystical, and near. Bass further contends that the institutional church is losing its efficacy and its membership because “people lost trust – or simply lost interest- in distant institutions and distant Gods. Whenever a gulf opens between the way people experience God and how institutions respond (or fail to respond) to such concerns, historical conditions ripen for spiritual revolution, reformation, and awakening.”⁴⁶⁴ Ruth acknowledges that at one time “structure was an avenue to live into the vision. It no longer functions as a helpful avenue.” Ruth also notes the presence of deep spiritual hunger and the challenge of “finding different words, refreshing words, or different ways of talking and about and loving the bible, the biblical story, that doesn’t sound like the old.”

Confirming both Ruth and Bass’ observations, today many young adults prefer to feed the hungry and work for justice rather than support church budgets and buildings. Or as Wanda notes amongst her neighbours, there is a deep hunger for community and alternative forms of worship. New stories begin to be written in the context of questions and exploration. What is the purpose of the church? What is its primary calling? In what ways is the Spirit of God liberating

⁴⁶³ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, 11-26.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

the church from oppressive systems, institutions, limiting stories, and beliefs in ways that lead to a second level of liberation, transformation? These are vital questions for pastoral leaders and their congregations to wrestle with at this time of wilderness wandering.

Church leadership developer Reggie McNeal boldly suggests the church “has forgotten why it exists. The church was never intended to exist for itself. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand God’s kingdom.”⁴⁶⁵ Marcel and Peter have clearly not lost sight of the church’s calling and purpose. They discussed how crucial it is for mission to take the lead, Marcel insisting “our mission is to transform the neighbourhood.” Sharing Marcel’s story widely seeds new stories amidst the rocky soil of wilderness.

While one event and/or development cannot be identified nor named as initiating the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom, the rise of individualism, religious pluralism, the digital age including social media, globalization, science, immigration, and more have contributed to epochal change. While many pastors were trained to teach, disciple, and care for those who came to church on their own, today pastors are encountering people who view the church as one of many options. Today pastoral leaders find themselves in uncharted territory, the world ahead appearing nothing like the world they have left behind.

The changing landscape culturally and organizationally calls for a re-modelling of pastoral leadership including the re-storying of the fear-based narrative. Ted noted that his community’s culture is not “pro-church,” and long-term viability is on the table for Peter’s leadership. While pastoral leaders expressed much hope for the future and identify the presence

⁴⁶⁵ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: six tough questions for the church*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2009), 15-16.

of hope in their congregation, the undercurrent of uncertainty of long-term sustainability was also present.

The story of decline with accompanying in-ward survival-mode focus is a powerful narrative that can create “gridlock,” within a congregation, that is, stuckness. Wanda noted that Avalon Mennonite is becoming less of an intergenerational church. While the Ministry Team and leadership have considered a denominational missional discipleship opportunity and think “this is a great thing” Wanda noted the congregation “in some ways the church is on this cusp of still being healthy enough that we don’t need that sort of thing even though we would benefit.” Noted resistance to engage in a discipling process can create stuckness as can “let’s strengthen children and youth ministry programs.” While discipleship and energies directed toward children and youth ministries are vital to the life of the congregation, focused attention on programs also can create a “gridlocked” system.

Congregational systems expert Edwin H. Friedman identifies three interlocking characteristics that are both symptom and cause of a locked-in system. According to Friedman a system is “imaginatively gridlocked” when it finds itself on “an unending treadmill of trying harder.”⁴⁶⁶ Trying harder is “driven by the assumption that failure is due to the fact that one did not try hard enough, use the right technique, or get enough information.”⁴⁶⁷ Secondly, a system can become gridlocked when it continually searches for new answers to old questions” rather than seek ‘to reframe the questions themselves.’” According to Friedman, when searching for a solution, “questions are always more important than answers because the way one frames the question, or the problem, already predetermines the range of answers one can conceive in

⁴⁶⁶ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 34.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

response.”⁴⁶⁸ The third characteristic of a gridlocked system is black and white, either/or thinking.

Accordingly, if a system cannot get unstuck by thinking about their problems such as declining children and youth attendance or by trying harder such as running multiple programs as “sister congregation” (Ken), a new response and approach is needed. A reorientation including a spirit of experimentation is needed which enables “new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes.”⁴⁶⁹

Amidst the current context of ministry, I find Ronald Heifetz’s distinction between “technical work” and “adaptive challenges” as outlined in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* to be exceedingly insightful. According to Heifetz “the most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as though they were technical problems.”⁴⁷⁰ Heifetz characterizes “technical work” as problems or issues that are effectively resolved through expertise, resources, or technical skill sets. Responding to a recent refugee crisis when a particular people group were illegally crossing the border from the United States border into Canada, Marcel met with the refugee group’s leaders in the church building, offering his community’s support. In response to the refugee crisis, the church basement was transformed into a “welcome centre” and the congregation “managed to help about 500 people.” Technical problems were addressed by providing much-needed staffing, finances, and the church facility. In another instance, during sub-zero winter cold snap, the congregation answered an urgent neighbourhood need, homelessness. In response, the congregation created a plan to renovate the building, address water leaks, mould, and a foul odour. Not all challenges which pastoral leaders

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁷⁰ Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 19.

and their congregations face such as Marcel's congregation, can be addressed technically with expertise, financing, physical labour, or experts in the field. Some challenges have no obvious concrete solutions and are therefore deemed adaptive challenges.

“Adaptive work,” is not clear cut. The problem may be known, such as declining attendance and aging congregations. However, the solution will require new learning and change. This adaptive change, according to Heifetz “stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That's a lot to ask. No wonder people resist.⁴⁷¹ Launching a new program or “ramping up music in worship” while worthy to address, will not resolve today's problems because the issues facing the church are much deeper, requiring adaptive change.

Because the current cultural landscape impacts the culture of the congregation and the denomination, new learnings and new questions with no easy answers need to be asked. As the research revealed, the church is not facing a technical problem related to shifting congregational demographics but rather an adaptive challenge. Adaptive challenges require people to address problems which they do not yet know the answers and of which there is no obvious single solution. Adaptive challenges can be difficult to identify and describe and “can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties.”⁴⁷² To make

⁴⁷¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 30.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 19.

progress requires going beyond authoritative expertise “to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.”⁴⁷³

Without learning new ways, “changing attitudes or adopting new values and behaviors, people cannot make the adaptive leap to thrive in a new environment.”⁴⁷⁴ Ken’s congregation has faced the sharp and steady decline of Sunday School aged children and a transitory young adult population drawn away from the community for post-secondary education. He wisely surmised: “when you’re having these kinds of changes, your old solutions don’t work anymore.” Furthermore, “that kind of change is not something you can just innovate or pioneer your way out of. There are some pretty massive shifts that need to happen it’s those kinds of fundamental shifts that are difficult for us right now.”

Ruby’s experience confirms the presence of an adaptive challenge: “one thing that’s changing is that people don’t have the answers anymore.” With insight, Ruth acknowledges that at one time “structure was an avenue to live into the vision... it no longer functions as a helpful avenue.” Forest Street is a “revolving door... people coming and going. The deacons don’t necessarily know who the people are in the pews.”

If leaders are to lead beyond technical problems as experienced by co-researchers, technical competence is not enough. Questions for which there are no easy answers need to be addressed such as:

- What are the spiritual needs of young families?
- What values, assumptions, and beliefs are attached to mission?
- What underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs are associated with protectionism and perfectionism related to the community’s use of the church building or property?
- Given the rich resource of church buildings and properties, what creative opportunities, loss, or partnerships may God be inviting the church to consider?

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 13.

What risks and/or losses can we live with in order to further God's mission?
What is the impact of congregation identity if the congregation collaborates with community partners including applying for grant money to support and further congregational ministries?
When "who we think we are" is shifting, how will we define identity?

The congregation's ability to explore new options such as these, begin to shift habits, beliefs or values and requires a trustworthy space for dialogue and discernment. In this way, adaptive challenges, at its core is spiritual work because it invites God's people into authenticity, risk-taking, and transformation.

While leadership challenges abound during a season of re-orientation wise pastoral leaders intuitively know they cannot impose reorientation upon their congregation if the system is not ready for change. Heifetz asserts that at its foundation, adaptive leadership is "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive."⁴⁷⁵ Indeed, "solutions are achieved when "the people with the problem" go through a process together to become "the people with the solution. The issues have to be internalized, owned, and ultimately resolved by relevant parties to achieve enduring progress"⁴⁷⁶ Such requires more than changed minds. It requires changed hearts, beliefs, values, and behaviors.

When journeying the wilderness, adaptation is paramount. Heifetz asserts adaptation has three characteristics: it preserves the DNA essential for continued survival; it discards the DNA that no longer serves current needs; and it creates DNA that gives society the "ability to flourish in new ways and in more challenging environments."⁴⁷⁷ Adaptive change, as the giant rummage sale, is a process of discerning what is no longer serving the community, claiming the

⁴⁷⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Martin Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*, 14.

⁴⁷⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 127.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

community's core values and beliefs, and finally, building upon that which is core to the community through experimentation to change the ministry context and culture.

Missiologist Alan Roxburgh asserts, “we need to lay down and turn away from questions about how to fix the church or make it effective again (technical fixes) and embrace a different kind of question: ‘How do we discern what God is doing ahead of us in our neighbourhoods and communities and join with God there?’”⁴⁷⁸ Living faithfully and more fully into God's story involves a shift from focusing on church-centered questions to God-centered questions.⁴⁷⁹ One wonders what transformation and new life could be birthed if the church began asking: “what is God trying to reveal to us at this time?” Influential biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann preaching at the 2014 Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis Minnesota drew upon Isaiah 45, Jeremiah 18, and 2 Corinthians 4: 1-7 to critique the ancient Corinthian church for “majoring in minor stuff and neglecting major stuff.”⁴⁸⁰ According to Brueggemann, the people of God have the container, the clay jar, and they have the treasure, the gospel. And, God's people have confused them! The church has focused on the clay pot thinking it is the real thing while neglecting the treasure. This image is helpful when discussing institutionalism, social movement, structure, mission, and the present need for culture change within our congregations. As long as pastors and congregations focus upon the clay jar, we risk missing the very presence of the Divine in the local neighbourhood.

The Cultural Landscape of MCEC Congregations

We are this radical discipleship place” (Ruth), we are “settlers” (Ken), “when we

⁴⁷⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, ix.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “Getting Smashed for Jesus,” Sermon preached at *Festival of Homiletics* May 25, 2014.

gather we are like the United Nations” (Li). Narratively, each research participant graphically painted a portrait of their congregation’s unique cultural landscape. Culture is dynamic and fluid rather than static. Culture ebbs and flows and changes over time. The research revealed that congregational culture is expressed as “who we are,” an identity marker that encompasses beliefs, behaviors, and symbols, which a community accepts as normative.

Change theorist John P Kotter defines culture as “the norms of behavior and the shared values in a group of people. It’s a set of common feelings about what is of value and how to we should act.”⁴⁸¹ Anthony B. Robinson defines culture as the “thick network of symbols, language, and behaviors that characterize and define a human community.”⁴⁸² Missional leader JR Woodward suggests, culture is “what we make of the world. It is the combination of ‘the *language* we live in, the *artifacts* that we make use of, the *rituals* we engage in, our approach to *ethics*, the *institutions* we are part of and the *narratives* we inhabit that have power to shape our lives profoundly.”⁴⁸³ Research participants narratively revealed glimpses of congregational culture and identity in response to a question related to values, assumptions, and beliefs embedded in their congregation’s predominant stories.

Values are that which are held with great importance. The research participants articulated numerous communal values including: radical welcome, worship, forgiveness, grace, hospitality, risk taking, buildings / properties, leaning into discomfort, community, relationships, non-conformity, informal decision making, lay leadership.

⁴⁸¹ Kotter, *The Heart of Change*, 165.

⁴⁸² Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, 12.

⁴⁸³ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 20.

Assumptions are that which are accepted as true or expected to happen. Assumptions, are not always clearly articulated yet were identifiable amidst focus group storytelling: community engagement will translate into congregational growth, bigger is better, programs will entice newcomers/the community to come to us, we may have control over our future if we “get it right,” over-use of buildings will result in wear and tear which we are not sure is a good thing, decline is bad, growth is good, congregational growth equals congregational success.

Beliefs express confident expectation, trust, or faith. The research participants revealed: we have been reluctant to partner with, separateness from the world and non-conformity is core to Anabaptist theology and it is currently not serving us well and even working against us, shame causes us to believe we are “not enough” and have nothing of value to offer the community, we don’t talk about our faith we live it.

Research participants shared stories, revealing congregational culture in diverse ways. Li suggested “the idea of post-Christendom and decline is on the periphery” for one of the three ethnic congregations under his shepherding leadership and care. Nevertheless, Crosstown Mennonite would say “let’s have an evangelistic event... make it big... lots of music... lots of activities... have food. That’s the story for them.” Stan’s nearly 100-year-old Amish-Mennonite background congregation has deep historical and theological roots, the township having been settled “by Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics all from the same Alsace area.” As such “there’s this real strong sense of Christendom ... that everybody historically is already Christian.” Accordingly, “it’s very important to be a good member of this community, an upstanding member of the community” both within and beyond the church.

A story that disclosed deeply held cultural *assumptions* was shared by Ted. A few decades previous in a different ministry context Ted’s congregation was considering a building

project. Ted said: “the culture in that community was very pro-church and people went to church and the word that we sometimes heard was ‘if you build it, they will come.’ And we built and they came and the church in those years experienced growth. I come to Cranbrook. In this context the culture is not pro-church.” A church “insider” assumption that is deeply entrenched in this story is that the church possesses something the community understands, yearns for, needs, and will seek out on its own. It is a story that places responsibility and risk upon the community to find its way to the church. Anna commented “we know we can’t wait for new people to walk through our door, but we don’t want to presume to go out and invite anybody in. Wanda following up on Anna’s comment added “we expect the risk taker to be the visitor.”

Language emerged as a common cultural thread amongst first generation and new Canadian research participants. Li who is fluent in both Chinese and English, pastors a congregation that began with one language in worship, Cantonese. As the second generation has matured, translation was needed and eventually an English-speaking congregation was birthed. Currently three congregations worship under the umbrella of Crosstown Mennonite and according to Li, when they meet for joint services “it’s like the UN assembly.” Li acknowledges that when organizing joint services congregational leadership carefully balances “which is the priority language.” Li noted that East Asian cultural identity is evolving due to inter-marriage.

Kale’s congregation began as Laotian-speaking and over the years has evolved into a congregation of “many languages” and diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Eshe balances Ethiopian and Eritrean people groups. While congregants speak different languages, “culture is similar.” Yang notes that long-established sister congregations have navigated language, transitioning from Russian or German speaking to English speaking congregation. He foresees

language, a cultural identifier, as an issue the congregation will need to address in the near future.

Culture is “both constructed and dynamic.”⁴⁸⁴ Kotter argues that to test whether something is embedded in a culture, examine whether peers, without really thinking about it “find ways to nudge us back to group norms when we go astray.”⁴⁸⁵ Several research participants shared stories that disclosed tensions that nudge a system to return to group norms. Protectionism and perfectionism were expressed, related to church building use which is incongruent with missional values of welcome and radical hospitality. While it is reported in the MCEC *Environmental Scan*, that community involvement is a crucial part of being missional, some congregations hold a protective stance regarding building use. Wanda noted that rentals and community use of the building has revealed a “high level of perfectionism around care for the building.” Explaining she said, “people who have been caring for the building for decades and decades and decades have maintained [the building] so there’s fear around what will happen if we open the doors too much. Things get messy.” Grant’s experience is similar. While acknowledging his current congregation needs to “tap into” its’ neighbourhood he recalled a previous ministry experience where he launched a floor hockey ministry. In response to this activity, Grant heard the complaint: “it’s scuffing the floor.” When he “brought artists in once a month” the complaint he heard was “they’re making a mess, they’re not cleaning up.” Unpacking the story and asking the question “Who owns the church building?” is vital when the “nudge” is strong to return to an “inward focused” ministry mental model. How a congregation understands ownership of its concrete building resources shapes the community, its identity, and its mission.

⁴⁸⁴ Safwat Marzouk, “*Intercultural Church*,” MCEC Pastors, Chaplains and Congregational Leaders Event (on-line), January 16, 2021.

⁴⁸⁵ Kotter, *The Heart of Change*, 165.

For example, if the congregation believes God owns the building, the congregation self-identifies as stewards. If the congregation owns the building, the congregation self-identifies as host. And if the community owns the building the congregation self-identifies as guest. Identity and mission are critical to define.

Missional theologian JR Woodward argues that “more than strategy, vision or plan, the unseen culture of a church powerfully shapes her ability to grow, mature and live missionally.”⁴⁸⁶ Indeed the “unstated assumptions embedded in a congregation’s culture either aid or hinder it in its mission.”⁴⁸⁷ Or, according to the language of this study, unstated assumptions embedded in a congregation’s culture can become barriers or facilitators impacting a congregation’s mission. As the research revealed regarding building use, “a church culture built on meeting the needs of its members will struggle with implementing changes that depend on putting those self-interested needs aside.”⁴⁸⁸ Such is a significant leadership challenge as one leads cultural organizational change and living more fully into “sentness.”

Chair of the *Anabaptist Network* Stuart Murray asserts that as the church makes its way out of the Egypt of Christendom distinctives of individualism, consumerism, and materialism, into the post-Christendom wilderness, there is recognition that some of the church’s values are at odds with the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus.⁴⁸⁹ Many Post-Christendom disciples are facing anew “that we are called to live in community with others, to live simply, humbly, and justly, and to share our lives and our resources with one another and with all who are in

⁴⁸⁶ JR Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 19.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁸⁸ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 75.

⁴⁸⁹ Murray, *Naked Anabaptist*, 9-11.

need.”⁴⁹⁰ This stands in stark contrast to the rise of institutionalism and centralized power systems and structures of Christendom and protectionism.

Anabaptism emerged amidst 16th Reformation as a movement, passionately inspired by Radical Reformers who were rooted in Scripture and the conviction that “the kingdom of God is radically distinct from the kingdom of the world – and that these two must always be kept distinct.”⁴⁹¹ Separation from dominant culture articulated by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2) biblically undergirds the counter-cultural nature of God’s kingdom.

The mental model of nonconformity emerging from deep theological roots for Anabaptists was reflected by co-researchers. Discussion with congregational leaders about the possibilities of collaborating with community partners to further congregational ministry amidst current cultural context, Ruby is wrestling theologically. She exclaimed, “Separate from the world. The church is in the world but not of the world. It is huge in our theology. We don’t partner with.” Ruby also acknowledged that this predominant story is changing noting “in the last number of years, I think it’s a bit different. It’s not quite as strong” as it was in the congregation of her formative years. Such gives evidence to the fluid nature of values, beliefs, assumptions, and identity.

Identity: Who do we say that we are? Who does God say we are?

The research highlights the importance of recognizing the presence of and potential limitations associated with holding onto an “old identity” and how vital it is for congregations to clarify identity and wrestle with the question “who are we as the people of God?” Anabaptist

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 10.

scholar Safwat Marzouk at a recent virtual MCEC conference described identity as “porous and mutually negotiated..... never a finished product.”⁴⁹²

Organizations are created and shaped around an identity. According to Margaret Wheatley, “organizing occurs around an identity – there is a ‘self’ that gets organized. Once this identity is set in motion, it becomes the sense-making process of the organization.”⁴⁹³ Individuals as organizations interpret events according to who we think we are. While “we never simply ‘know’ the world; we create worlds based on the meaning we invest in the information we choose to notice. Thus, everything we know is determined by who we think we are.”⁴⁹⁴ While the “self” of an organization includes mission, vision, and values, an organization’s identity also “includes current interpretations of its history, present decisions and activities, and its sense of its future. Identity is both what we want to believe is true and what our actions show to be true about ourselves.”⁴⁹⁵ Clarity regarding identity - most especially during an unsettled liminal season - is crucial because amidst chaos, an organization will refer back to its sense of self. As it was for the liberated slaves, the yearning to go back is strong, not because cucumbers, onions, and melons are particularly satisfying, but because it represents a diet of familiarity.

When the congregation’s “self” is incongruent with its current context, the congregation will experience an identity crisis. Tod Bolsinger asserts that when we lead beyond the boundaries of what is known “we go through personal transformation of identity and mission.”⁴⁹⁶ Research participants described their lived experience as being thrust into the throws of change and in

⁴⁹² Safwat Marzouk, “*Intercultural Church*,” MCEC Pastors, Chaplains and Congregational Leaders Event, online, January 16, 2021.

⁴⁹³ Margaret Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, 37.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁹⁶ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 34.

some cases, experiencing an identity crisis. “Identity” is a resonant thread that was intricately woven across the focus groups and individual research participants as a common experience amidst present disorientation. Over decades, Ken’s congregation self-identity as “pioneers” has shifted to that of “settlers.” Ken suggested that currently Elmwood Mennonite’s changing context is demanding something of them, and it is tugging at the fabric of their “settler” identity. Ken reflects that at one time the congregation “were risk takers, they were settlers, pioneers... but the thing is pioneers becomes settlers when they get tired of being pioneers.”

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky in *Leadership on the Line* claim “habits, values, attitudes, even dysfunctional ones, are part of one’s identity. To change the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves.”⁴⁹⁷ Thomas asked, “how should we identify?” and “who are we?” Thomas also demonstrated the evolving and changing nature of congregational identity. Dundas Street Mennonite was birthed as a “city mission.” Amidst a visioning process, new insights emerged leading to a new communal identity: “volunteerism.” The congregation realized volunteering was a common experience and according to Thomas, seeing themselves with new eyes, they adapted. The congregation initiated an international student exchange program, sponsoring young adults to come to the city and engage in mission. Anna’s congregation’s identity was rooted in a ministry partnership, a relationship central to the congregation’s story. When the relationship ended, the question “who are we now in the community has been revived.”

Kale’s congregational identity has evolved from refugee status to that of explorers and adventurers in a new land. The congregation experiences much joy contributing to a large denominational fundraising event by offering ethnic food. Yang’s experience with identity is

⁴⁹⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 27.

deeply personal. The Laotian congregation perceives their pastoral leader as “superman” which Yang is quick to counter clarifying: “I am not superman.” First generation pastors are seeking to clarify individual and communal identity as they live, work, and share life in western culture.

Identity shaped by a congregational value of “community” as described by Ted is a “doubled-edged sword.” Ted said, “we consider ourselves friendly... it is our strength... and yet how do we open up that community and welcome new people? In some ways we’re having such a good time in our own Christian community, but we haven’t learned what it means to open the door.” As experienced by Thomas, there is incongruity between idealized identity, in Thomas’s context gracious, healing, and restoring and realized identity expressed as this: “We need of a new identity.”

Peter also shared a story from a previous ministry context that highlights idealized and realized identity saying, “when new people moved to town congregational leadership considered how best to open the doors.” Overwhelmingly the stance was this: “if they want to be like us, we’d love them to come.” While Peter’s current congregation may not say that Peter acknowledges “our actions would probably push in that direction.” He added, “we don’t realize what demand we are making on others to fit into our space.” Peter revealed that in a previous ministry context that there was a strong pull to control and manage congregational identity. Clarifying congregational identity is a spiritual process that reorients God’s people back to its foundational calling, purpose, and mission.

When Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan a voice from heaven declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Profoundly, baptism was an act that named the reality of Jesus existing and unending belovedness. In baptism, we are named

beloved. Rachel Held Evans, quoting her friend Nadia says, “Identity. It’s always God’s first move.”⁴⁹⁸ Formed, called, redeemed, - *beloved* – this is the church’s core identity.

The ministry of Jesus, narratively expressed in the Gospels reveals the church’s core identity. Jesus’ first public act in the Gospel of Mark was a bold proclamation: “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1: 14-15). What Jesus is saying is that because the kingdom of God is at hand, God’s kingdom has become accessible.

Jack Suderman suggests that Jesus’ definition of gospel good news is “so brief, it is often tempting to make it more complex than it is.”⁴⁹⁹ Amidst the now and the not yet, the kingdom of God is revealed amongst us when the sick are healed, when the rich share their wealth, when violent ones opt for peace, when the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, when children are upheld as models, when Samaritans become heroes, and when forgiveness rather than revenge is practiced.⁵⁰⁰ When God’s kingdom has arrived there is a new way to be, a new way to live, and this transformation is good news. The church, as kingdom-people are an identifiable people committed to living out the authority of God in their personal and corporate lives. As Suderman contends “a kingdom-people are a community with a common corporate personality, a communal identity. It figures out what it means to be faithful to the common authority. It worships the one God whose authority ties us to each other. Although it is not yet what it is meant to be, it tries to live as a public community that can be watched because it practices what it

⁴⁹⁸ Rachel Held Evans. *Searching for Sunday: loving, leaving, and finding the church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 15.

⁴⁹⁹ Suderman, *Re-imagining the Church*, 5.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

preaches. If others wish to see love, justice, equality, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and such in action, they can come and look.”⁵⁰¹ The watching world will see in kingdom-people, the will of God is for the healing and restoration of all creation. Throughout the gospels, Jesus sought to clarify with stories what it means to say that the kingdom of God is here. Formation of community was integral to Jesus’ understanding of gospel. Jesus needed a community to live kingdom values in order to transform the world.” Core for the church’s identity is God’s initiating action, Jesus’ foundational teaching including death and resurrection, and the Spirit’s presence and guidance.

Navigating ministry in the “betwixt and between” presents unique leadership challenges and opportunities. Susan Beaumont suggests discomfort may be felt deeply in liminal spaces and “an effective leader must help individuals and groups to remain in a liminal state for the time it takes to get clear about identity and discover new structures that are more appropriately suited to their emerging identity.”⁵⁰² While Jesus had to cut through layers of first-century institutionalism, the task of leaders today is to form communities that reflect the kingdom’s presence. This is at the very core God’s people’s identity.

Liminality: between here and there

Congregations today just as it was for the Exodus community as described in Numbers 11 are dwelling in a liminal space. Liminal, is derived from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold. During liminal spaces one is located on a threshold with one foot in the past of what was and one foot planted “in a thing not yet defined, something not yet ready to begin.”⁵⁰³ When we find ourselves in a liminal space, old structures may no longer be effective; staffing needs are

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁰² Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, 20.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 7.

evolving, and “strategic identities – who we are, who we serve, and what we feel called to do or become – were shaped by old experiences.”⁵⁰⁴

The biblical story is rich with liminal experiences. When Noah experienced the flood, liminality was lived out within the confines of the ark. **Hagar, conceived a son and when removed from those who controlled every aspect of her life, personal identity took shape.** Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers. Left behind was his identity as the favoured son. Eventually a new identity as dream-interpreter emerged. The New Testament also bears witness to liminal spaces. **Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel who proclaimed she would bear a son and name him Jesus. The virgin from Nazareth, a back-water town became the mother of the Son of God.** Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism and immediately entered 40 days of wilderness temptation where his identity as Divine teacher, healer, and savior was formed. The apostle Paul entered liminality following his Damascus Road experience. With recovery of eyesight Paul was reoriented from persecutor of followers of “The Way” to a ministry as evangelizer to the Gentiles.⁵⁰⁵

Franciscan contemplative Richard Rohr asserts all transformation takes place in liminal spaces and “we have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the ‘threshold’ (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.”⁵⁰⁶ Pastoral leaders and their congregations presently find themselves at a threshold. Marci stated, “a lot of people who think they know the church are referring to a church that they used to know. It’s hard to speak into what the church is at present.” Ken said, “I live with profound awareness that over the next 30 years I will be trained to do the job I am

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., p 3-4.

⁵⁰⁶ Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, 155.

doing today very well.” Anna’s congregation which was “founded addressing times of change” is currently finding itself in a liminal space. Several ministries have been released for various reasons and the congregation is waiting for “some new calling” to emerge. Sprucedale is in an in-between space as they wait for what they are called to do or become.

Congregational Consultant Susan Beaumont in her book *How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, focuses on congregational ministry situated between here and there – liminal space. Ruth has encountered “old operating structure” no longer working.⁵⁰⁷ She further noted that current congregational structure is “posing a challenge.... the structure has been part of the church for 100 years. All kinds of committees. That’s not working for us as well anymore because peoples’ lives are busy. People just aren’t here regularly.”

Long-held pastoral caregiving models are also in flux in this liminal season. Dan said, “everyone at Weston Mennonite expects the pastor to make a visit, annually.....there’s some of this old mythology about what the church is supposed to do for us that is no longer feasible, or I would think even consistent with the good news.” Acknowledging liminality related to community and congregational context Ruby said, “I feel like the church is at a transition place...I think we have to think differently about that.” She added: “people don’t have the answers anymore.” Congregants also experience liminal disorientation. One congregant encouraged Ruby saying, “one of the things we need from the pastor is that you tell us what you see..... help the congregation be aware of the tensions you are living with and facing. Tell the congregation what you are seeing.”

Renowned church historian Diana Butler Bass writes, “we live in a time of momentous historical change that is both exhilarating and frightening. Christianity is becoming something

⁵⁰⁷ Beaumont, *How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*, 7.

different from what it was.”⁵⁰⁸ Ken likens leadership at this time of momentous historical change to “hiking at night with no flashlight.” He readily acknowledges that he “can’t see any better than anyone else” he just happens “to be going first and stepping over things first.” While pastoral leaders are out front navigating an unknown landscape, leaving the familiar and transitioning to an unknown and new beginning, something transformative and beautiful can unfold. As it was for the Exodus community, the enslaved people experienced their old identity stripped away and a new identity as God’s liberated people fashioned and formed.

A further leadership task in liminality “requires helping people manage their anxiety, embrace the freedom of unknowing, explore new possible identities and pathways, and resist the temptation to reorient people before they are ready.”⁵⁰⁹ The current pandemic “threshold” season has provided rich soil for these tasks. Amidst the pandemic the church has embraced new forms of worship, including worshipping virtually, living into new questions without easy answers, and releasing what was and slowly moving forward into an unknown future. While this threshold has been an anxious space for some, others experience the gift of liberation from old structures and programs, fast-paced living, and social disconnection.

Identity is both challenged and re-shaped during liminal wilderness seasons as presently experienced amidst the global pandemic. As God led the Israelites to the Promised Land, the law was given, leadership structure including priestly roles were created, and communal identity was transformed from enslaved to free, from captive to liberated, and eventually from wilderness wanderer to settlers in a new land. The Exodus story concludes as a “to be continued” storyline. Brian McLaren writes, “If we are people who live in the Genesis narrative of creation and

⁵⁰⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 31.

⁵⁰⁹ Beaumont, *How To Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, 20.

reconciliation and the Exodus narrative of liberation and formation, what if we were to receive these images as a vision of the kind of future toward which God is inviting us in history? What if we saw them less as an eternal destination *beyond* history and more as a guiding star *within* it.”⁵¹⁰ McLaren’s third narrative, the peaceable kingdom leading to a new creation, brims with rich images of a promised land that flows with milk and honey. While the journey holds the reign of David, failed kingdoms, and exile, “the dream of a peaceable kingdom becomes even more radical and all-encompassing.... It morphs from a promised land to a promised time.”⁵¹¹ It is a promised time when oppressors are overthrown, when corruption is replaced by virtue and integrity, and when the blessing of justice and shalom for all creation flows as a mighty river. It is this mission of God which God’s people are invited to participate in as well as further for the sake of the world God loves.

Missional Ecclesiology: a theological framework

It has been said, “It’s not so much that the church has a mission as much as the mission of God has a church.” Accordingly, “mission” is not designated as one of many activities provided by the church for congregants as it is with worship, pastoral care, hospitality, and more, but rather as Missiologist Alan Hirsch claims, the mission or “sentness” of a congregation is its “true and authentic organizing principle. Missional church is a community of God’s people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God’s mission to the world. In other words, the church’s true and authentic organizing principle is mission. When the church is in mission, it is the true church.”⁵¹²

⁵¹⁰ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 62.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹² Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 83.

As denominational leadership support and resource pastoral leaders and congregations to recover their “sent” identity and to live into “sentness” as a missional movement, research participants demonstrated creative and bold ways which exhibit they are orienting in this way direction and demonstrated there is further room for growth. Ruby acknowledged she needs to risk “and be out of the office... more aware of the community issues.. and lead by example.” She added “change comes slowly and its long term.”

Absent from focus group conversation was an expressed desire for MCEC to provide “the right tools, staff, or programming to solve current issues” as indicated in the MCEC Environmental Scan. Nor did participants express that they are seeking denominational approval to experiment. Experimentation is already occurring. As Grant said, “I like experimenting and it’s happening.” Furthermore, the term “missional” was used very sparingly during focus group discussion although it is still common language. For Marcel, “being a missional community means putting myself at risk to meet and to be with people that are just different.” Discussing plans to paint a radical welcome statement on the outside of the church building he said, “this is the risk we are willing to take to be a missional community.”

The research of this study revealed engagement in mission is varied across MCEC congregations. Wanda acknowledged that Avalon Mennonite church has long entrusted their mission work to others including financially supporting an overseas educational ministry. Ted’s congregation has been discussing what it means to be missional and have identified this focus as one of their priorities. Ted said the congregation “has a lot of wealth and one of the ways that they have stewarded that wealth is in supporting a lot of para-church organizations.” As part of their re-structuring, Cranbrook Mennonite has “re-purposed their Mission Commission to be primarily focused on engaging our community.” For example, a Ministry Team member “has

developed the pattern of spending half a day a week at the local arena.” Additionally, the congregation has joined with area faith communities to host a “food truck program,” a summer Friday night community gathering in church parking lots. “Logistical teams” made up of congregational members engage community attendees and according to Ted this “program” has been wildly successful. While striving to embrace and engage their “sentness” Ted also acknowledges that despite significant growth in the community, “we haven’t learned to know each other very well.” Indeed, in his personal neighbourhood Ted acknowledged, “we know our neighbours two doors down and across the street, but I don’t think I can name everybody who is on our street and I’ve been there for 10 years.”

Ken faces a tension in his ministry context in that there are some “not even coming every Sunday anymore because they’re doing stuff in their neighbourhoods on Sunday morning... meanwhile there are others who don’t need any of that stuff. They say, ‘we need programs like they have at ‘Fair Haven’” (a sister congregation). Ken added “they’re still big enough they can still have those programs.” A desiring for programs hints at the consumer mind-set of some congregants. According to Hirsch’s recent Tweet, “You cannot build a church on consumers. They’ll desert you at a moment’s notice because they have no commitments beyond meeting their own needs. Jesus can take twelve disciples and build a movement that changes the world. You could never do that with consumers.”⁵¹³

Ken’s experience is an example of navigating a paradigm shift which Missiologists Alan Roxburgh and Romanuk identify. They argue that the church needs to move from a consumerist model of church to a missional model since the very nature of the church is to be God’s

⁵¹³ Alan Hirsch, Twitter Post. February 6, 2021, 5:08 am. <https://twitter.com/alanhirsch/status/1357994527303233537>.

missionary people. In order to lead the church through this paradigm shift, a leadership transition must occur first, personally for the leader, including development as cultivators of imagination and creativity, asking imaginative questions, and creating an environment in which God's people can discern new forms of life and witness.⁵¹⁴ Tod Bolsinger contends, "Leadership is energizing a community of people toward their own transformation in order to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world."⁵¹⁵ The research revealed that congregations are at different places adopting missional theology and practice and that such a transition requires perseverance, time, and culture change.

Cultural Organizational Change

*If one wishes to distinguish leadership from management or administration, one can argue that leaders create and change culture, while management and administration act within culture.*⁵¹⁶

The church and pastoral leaders are journeying uncharted and challenging territory. Tod Bolsinger asserts that while he is "indebted to missional thinkers of our day, it's become apparent *a missional shift alone doesn't lend itself to the capacity building that actually brings change*" (italics by author).⁵¹⁷ Bolsinger argues, "*the most critical attribute a congregation must have to thrive in uncharted territory is a healthy organizational culture*" (italics by author).⁵¹⁸

Change theorist Samuel Chand asserts organizational culture is "the personality of the church or non-profit. Like all personalities, it's not simple to define and describe."⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader*, see pages 12-13 for fuller discussion regarding characteristics of a pastoral versus missional leadership

⁵¹⁵ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 36

⁵¹⁶ Edgar H. Schein. *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2009), 19, quoted in Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 72.

⁵¹⁷ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 31.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵¹⁹ Chand. *Cracking Your Church's Culture Code*, 3.

Organizational culture includes both tangibles and intangibles and while the latter is harder to grasp, intangibles “give a better read on the organization’s true personality” including its values, beliefs, and assumptions.⁵²⁰ Peter followed up on his interesting story from a previous ministry regarding newcomers being “like us” demonstrates deeply entrenched intangible beliefs and assumptions. While his previous congregational leadership questioned whether “we open our doors to them (newcomers to town). And do we want them here?” at the time it was the consensus of leadership that “if they want to be like us, we’d love them to come.” While Peter believes his present congregation “wouldn’t say it and wouldn’t feel it.....we are so used to the things that we are used to, that we don’t realize what demand we are making on others to kind of fit into that space.”

The rigid boundaries of Peter’s former congregational system stand in stark contrast to Marcel’s congregational value and personality of “radical welcome.” According to Marcel, “there’s no them and us. It’s always us. Always us. There is no one that walks into this place that is not welcome. You can walk in drunk or totally on drugs or with the dog, or not well-dressed. You will be welcome.” Tangibly, welcome takes the form of a hot breakfast and warm welcome, a vital mission for this congregation which emerged from a dream by Marcel’s wife in 2010. New Life’s unconventional worship space is set-up restaurant-style with round tables, table clothes, and coffee. Following breakfast, a worship service is led.

Change theorist John Kotter further suggests that organizational culture “usually comes from the founders of the group” and is reinforced through success. When values lead the group to behave in a certain way and result in desired outcomes, values and behaviors “seep into the

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 4.

group's DNA."⁵²¹ Several research participants referenced the impact of its founding on congregational DNA. Anna's congregation was founded "addressing time of change" and a "changing ministry context." Anna added that such is part of "the DNA of the congregation." Ruth said missional work is "just part of our DNA." She connects Forest Street's DNA to two historical events. The first involves the congregation's founding of the first area Thrift Store. The second event occurred in 1924 when a group of people left the neighbouring Mennonite congregation over a dress code issue. Ruth said "radical discipleship" including congregational focus on social justice issues is part of "the embedded consciousness" of Forest Street, emerging from its founding.

First generation and new-Canadian research participants' congregational beginnings are steeped in the refugee or immigrant story. Yang discussed that when congregants came to Canada, they were young and worked hard to buy things they needed to "feel settled." Mercy Mennonite continues to see themselves as "very new to this country even though 40 years have passed." The economic challenges for this once refugee community have seeped into its DNA. Yang referenced a gospel story of a widow woman who gave two coins, saying she "gave the most"⁵²²

Safwat Marzouk, Associate Professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in his book *Intercultural Church* contends "as recent migrants read the Bible, it can evoke their painful experience of the world, feelings of estrangement, loss and disorientation."⁵²³ At the same time, immigrants' engagement with Scripture "shapes their hopes, resilience, and ability to see life

⁵²¹ John Kotter, "The Key to Changing Organizational Culture," *Forbes*, September 27, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2012/09/27/the-key-to-changing-organizational-culture/?sh=6335feb25509>.

⁵²² Mark 12: 41-44

⁵²³ Safwat Marzouk, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration*, 45.

through multiple cultural lenses.”⁵²⁴ Yang demonstrated that the biblical story serves as a vital lens through which to view and make meaning of congregational experience as they respond and adapt to a changing context and navigate life with feet planted in two cultures.

It is crucial to consider what does or does not impact organizational culture change.

Kotter argues:

a powerful person at the top, or a large enough group from anywhere in the organization, decides the old ways are not working, figures out a change vision, starts acting differently, and enlists others to act differently. If the new actions produce better results, if the results are communicated and celebrated, and if they are not killed off by the old culture fighting its rear-guard action, new norms will form and new shared values will grow. What does *NOT* work in changing a culture? Some group decides what the new culture should be. It turns a list of values over to the communications or HR departments with the order that they tell people what the new culture is. They cascade the message down the hierarchy, and little to nothing changes.⁵²⁵

As Kotter suggests, change begins through grass roots conversations and is furthered through changed actions and behaviours, thus leading to culture change. “While management acts within culture, leadership *creates* culture” according to JR Woodward.⁵²⁶ As several research participants articulated, during the current liminal season effective leadership nurtures a healthy culture and change process through risk-taking, experimentation, and adaptation. Primarily, “culture creation work rests on identifying the gaps between aspired values and actual behavior, and then working with the leaders to bring every aspect of the organization into alignment with the core ideology” that is, values and mission.⁵²⁷

When communal identity is in flux and liminality is experienced broadly, it is a leadership challenge to lead organizational culture change. Executive Minister of Mennonite

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁵²⁵ Kotter, “The Key to Changing Organizational Culture.”

⁵²⁶ Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, 20.

⁵²⁷ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 75.

Church Canada Doug Klassen, in a May 20, 2020, article entitled “Open for us a door” reflected upon Robert J. Suderman’s 1999-2000 “Re-imagine mission” series which he suggests revealed how little the church had been thinking about mission in Canada. Klassen contends that at the time of Suderman’s articles “it was not our reflex to pray for a door to open for us to declare the mystery of Christ with neighbours and strangers.”⁵²⁸ Klassen added, “I believe we have yet to fully embrace this understanding as the core to who we are. I say this as one who pastored for 27 years.”⁵²⁹ Suderman himself, in a personal conversation acknowledged the same truth saying, “missional church has not penetrated enough.”⁵³⁰ Suderman and Klassen observantly acknowledge the lengthy and time-investment process of transforming congregational culture.

At a time when “missional” is considered “insider language” by the church, Edgar H. Schein encourages the creation of a common language and conceptual categories so that organizational members can communicate with and understand each other.⁵³¹ Amongst research participants, “missional” was rarely used. Has “missional” language become over-used? Has “missional” lost its meaning? Is “missional” clearly understood by congregations? What new common language can effectively communicate the change process the church is engaged in?

Roxburgh argues, “The journey of joining with God calls for a huge transformation of a congregations’ self-understanding, habits, and practices. The Spirit invites us to do something that few families, ethnic, or affinity groups would choose: cross boundaries and enter the lives of others who are different and have their own stories, practices, and traditions.”⁵³² Roxburgh

⁵²⁸ Doug Klassen, “Open for us a door,” *Canadian Mennonite* Vol. 24 Issue 11 May 20, 2020, <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/open-us-door>.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Robert J. Suderman (retired General Secretary Mennonite Church Canada) in discussion with the author February 20, 2018.

⁵³¹ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 94.

⁵³² Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 107.

creates a vivid word picture to illustrate the term “missional” in response to “missional” language not connecting with people any longer. Roxburgh draws upon new language and explores new images and metaphors that “open us to the Spirit’s reweaving” amidst the present unraveling as the church. For example, Roxburgh’s “language house” has transitioned from “missional” to “neighbourhood” as a tool to address anxieties about congregational survival.⁵³³ This shift of language as Schein contends, helps to explain the unexplainable in ways that creates meaning so members can respond.⁵³⁴ Accessible language also helps to alleviate anxiety when an organization is faced with the unexplainable or the uncontrollable.

Schein’s three levels of culture, artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumption are established by the founders of the organization and furthered through the learning experiences of new group members. When a group develops and accumulates a history, pieces of that history will become embodied in stories about events and leadership.⁵³⁵ Stories in its many forms will reinforce assumptions beliefs and values to newcomers. Because stories are “in the eyes of the beholder” it is vital to note that at times this form of communication can be unreliable. However, as Schein contends, “If we understand the culture, then stories can be used to enhance” understandings and make them concrete.⁵³⁶

As Stan leads culture organizational change, he is intentional about embedding new stories “with missional emphasis” into the system in ways that articulate the future the congregation is moving toward. Stan shared the following story,

So, this past Sunday a fellow gets up at sharing time. And he’s the kind of a guy who rambles on ... but he talks about how he was delivering something to a home in the neighbourhood. Here he discovers a family member was shot by

⁵³³ Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 2.

⁵³⁴ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 94.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

a gang with a clear message that they're going to come back. He goes in and listens to the story. Prays with them..... So, people are starting to get it. We're here to be, to connect with people where they are. He told them that... I don't know how to help. But he had the courage to go to the door and just be.... You kind of think 'what's the narrative?'....this guy who I almost tuned out....

Stan's posture of tending and nurturing the planting and embedding of new stories into the congregation holds the potential of strengthening and furthering a social movement of "joining God in the neighbourhood." Ruby was encouraged by a congregant to "tell us what you see." This too is an important conversation that can serve to embed new stories into a congregation's culture. While experiences and beliefs tell a story, new stories begin to be authored through conversation.⁵³⁷ Indeed, "new stories open the system of relationships to new discoveries about who we are as people, as organizations, and as leaders."⁵³⁸ Organizations and individuals will generally respond to the call of a new story as they seek to discover more meaning in life, as they seek to contribute more good to the world, and to serve others. Unfortunately, however, over time "the organization that was created in response to the new story becomes a rigid structure, exemplifying yet again, the old story."⁵³⁹ Such creates an ongoing leadership challenge for an organization. Social movement theory stresses continued focus on forward momentum in order to lead culture change.

According to Brian McLaren "*institutions* exist in a dynamic relationship with social *movements*: simply put, institutions preserve the gains of past social movements. And with amazing consistency, they also oppose the gains proposed by current social movements."⁵⁴⁰ Historically, the American "civil rights movement was opposed by the institution of the U.S.

⁵³⁷ Wheatley, *Finding our Way*, 21

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁴⁰ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*, 248

government, but through the Civil Rights Act and other legislation, the U.S. government slowly but surely began turning the movement's social dreams in social realities."⁵⁴¹ The biblical narrative also bears witness to prophetic and priestly voices who spoke against cultural norms of the time in order to re-orient people to be participants in God's work.

Sociologist Todd Fuist has extensively researched how culture works to promote social movements by identifying how a culture renders a particular site fruitful; how culture can serve as a resource that assists in social movement action; and how culture provides a wider context that shapes movement activity.⁵⁴² As McLaren, Fuist references the civil rights movement which emerged in part through the teaching and preaching of the black church in the U.S. Bringing people together in social networks, people who hold common values and identities is a significant congregational resource that provides practices, discourses, and symbols that can be directed toward mobilization. Social supports create spaces outside the dominant powers which help members communicate ideas to different audiences. Moral authority and motivation to act help movements to survive in times of upheaval and unrest. In this way, narratives give expression to meaning and serve as a vital movement resource.

In the congregational context, before "joining with God in the neighbourhood" can be lived into, leadership must clarify for their congregants "How do we know what God is doing in the neighbourhood?" Identifying God's presence and activity must be widely understood if the social movement which Jesus began is to be furthered by God's people. The biblical story is a rich resource that reveals God's activity and answers the question of God's presence. It also

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 248.

⁵⁴² Fuist, "Culture Within Sits, Culture as Resources, and Culture as Wider Contexts: A Typology of How Culture Works in Social Movement Theory," 1044-1052.

provides a narrative to understand and demonstrate concrete actions, thus leading to culture change.

In the Book of Acts 16: 1-12, Luke tells a story about the disruptive movement of the Spirit of God. Paul and his companions unexpectedly found themselves in Philippi, having been “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (16:6) and “having been kept by the Spirit of Jesus from preaching the word” (16:7). The small band of disciples, following the vision of a man from Macedonia to come over and help, travel directly to Macedonia. However, they do not find what they are looking for in Philippi, the man nor a synagogue. After spending several days in the Roman city, including looking for a synagogue, the presumptive place where the teachings of Jesus would be preached, they set their sights beyond the city walls and look for a “place of prayer” (16:13) Instead, a group of Gentile women hear them talking. In what could only be an unexpected, disruptive situation, Paul and his companions end up talking with the women. One of them, Lydia, is a Gentile, a God-fearing businesswoman from Asia, a place where Paul and companions had previously been ‘prevented’ from going by the Spirit.⁵⁴³ Roxburgh suggests, Lydia’s “whole life is disrupted by the Spirit when she becomes a follower of Jesus. The point is hard to miss. It is in the Spirit’s disruption that plans are turned on their head and the mission of God becomes clear. There was no prior imagination in Paul or his companions that a community of Christians would form in the Philippi house of a Gentile businesswoman.”⁵⁴⁴

This biblical story highlights that the normative strategies practiced by Paul and his companions and by extension, today’s church, are default positions which the Spirit of God is

⁵⁴³ Roxburgh, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, 109.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

disrupting. As the late author Rachel Held Evans wrote, “It seems those most likely to miss God’s work in the world are those most convinced they know exactly what to look for, the ones who expect God to play by the rules.”⁵⁴⁵ Such confirms that the margins are the holy places where God’s activity and presence are witnessed. As Bolsinger asserts “the art of leadership is helping the system override the instinct of self-preservation and replace it with a new organizational instinct to be curious about and open to the terrifying discomfort of asking ‘Could God be up to something here?’”⁵⁴⁶ The biblical story is a rich resource to illustrate the change process that is being sought.

Systemic change and social movements are fueled when pastoral leaders from different cultural backgrounds, urban/rural contexts, socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnic traditions gather together, as experienced in this study. As individuals reflect upon questions, hear each others’ stories, engage openly and vulnerably in storytelling, and engage with each other’s stories, a beautiful new creation begins to emerge in ways that inspires relational connectedness, greater creativity, innovation, and the bridging of understandings. Pastoral leaders need these interactions in order “to be encouraged, to be inspired, and to join forces and to do the work of transformation.”⁵⁴⁷ It has been my experience that this level of learning and engagement does not occur in regional ministerial gatherings but rather in the context of intentional learning cohorts.

Effective leaders nurture a learning culture amidst their congregations, according to Schein through proactivity, a commitment to learning to learn, having faith in people, believing an environment can be managed, a commitment to truth, positive orientation toward the future,

⁵⁴⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 90.

⁵⁴⁶ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 175

⁵⁴⁷ Dave Gibbons, *The monkey and the fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 203.

commitment to task-relevant communication, a commitment to cultural diversity, systemic thinking and believing, and reflecting upon their culture as a necessary part of the learning process.⁵⁴⁸ A word of caution, however, is necessary should leaders be tempted to believe they carry the full burden of leading cultural organizational change. While “moving the horizons of possibility and impossibility is what human beings do and are meant to do”.... and while “transformed culture is at the heart of God’s mission in the world, and it is the call of God’s redeemed people.... Changing the world is the one thing we cannot do.”⁵⁴⁹ Andy Crouch, Executive Editor of *Christianity Today* provocatively asks, “Is the Maker of the world still at work ‘changing the world?’ If so, what are the patterns of God’s activity, and what would it mean to join God in what God is doing in every sphere and scale of human culture? How can we join God’s culture making and live out our own calling to make something of the world, without slowly and subtly giving in to the temptation to take God’s place?”⁵⁵⁰ Such undergirds a theology of leadership that promotes a way of life that pays attention to God’s initiatives.”⁵⁵¹ God is the active agent. Period.

Re-storying: Shimmering Hope

Leaders are facing the disorientation of uncharted territory. Ruth noted that structures that have been part of the church for 100 years “are not working for us anymore.” Indeed, she suggests the church she trained for no longer exists.” Ruby noted “people don’t have the answers anymore” and Ken acknowledged that in 30 years he “will be trained to do the job” he is doing

⁵⁴⁸ For a fuller discussion see Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 365-371.

⁵⁴⁹ Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling*, 189.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁵¹ Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, & Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 10.

today. While co-researchers provided examples of new initiatives and experimentation amidst this uncertain time such as a “community garden,” notably absent was the impulse to try harder to “fix” the challenges that are currently experienced. The co-researchers did not discuss strategies to fill the pews, how to “fix” attendance patterns, nor express a desire to seek out experts to help reverse congregational demographic changes. Co-researchers exhibited deep awareness that the landscape is foreign and as such they are committed to adapting and responding amidst unknowing and unfamiliarity as they lead God’s people into God’s future.

Experimentation

Ruby’s congregation experiences “a lot of joy... when we try something new or different... we just call them experiments.” Ruby noticed that when a community senior group rented the building, “the pews were moved in the sanctuary, tables set up, and food placed everywhere.” She hinted that using the sanctuary as a multi-purpose space years previous would not have been as well received by the congregation. Grant shared ways that South Lawn is experimenting with new initiatives during worship including setting up puzzles and providing knitting needles, wool, and patterns. Li’s congregation tried a one-year experiment, a community garden. The experiment was so successful it was extended for a second year including the commitment of financial support. Emerging from that experiment led to the decision to experiment with a pollinator garden.

Experimentation is generally non-threatening to a congregational system because experimentation welcomes evaluation. Experimentation is rich soil for learning and reflection. Ken’s congregation experimented with intergenerational Sunday School. Acknowledging it had “some rough spots” he added, “if we had children all the way through, it might not have been the

same good idea.” Ruby lightheartedly admitted that Lakeside we will never plan another grade 7 and 8 boy’s retreat!

Relationships

Heifetz asserts that “one of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in a any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships.”⁵⁵² Moses understood during the 40-year wilderness journey, “he could not create sustained revolutionary change without key partners.”⁵⁵³ Ruby understands the value of collaborating with community partners as she and her congregation address homelessness in their community. She has proactively reached out to Lakeside’s city Mayor, mental health agencies, ecumenical ministry partners, neighbours, and more. Ruby understands that value of “investing in relationships” and building partnerships within and beyond the congregation around common goals and priorities. Bolsinger asserts that “while most of us are good at *personally* relating to people (praying, teaching counseling), most of us have not been trained in *organizational relationship skills*.”⁵⁵⁴ Because many pastoral leaders place emphasis upon order and moderating, many well-intentioned efforts to “bring transformation are *doomed* because of a lack of capacity more than anything else.”⁵⁵⁵ Jesus’ example of calling disciples, affirms a theology of leadership as a shared task which was exemplified by Thomas and Eshe. The close collegial relationship between Thomas and Eshe was evident during the focus group conversation.

According to management consultant Margaret Wheatley “it is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend

⁵⁵² Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 75.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁵⁴ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 166.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another.”⁵⁵⁶ Leading change involves connecting beyond the congregation thus creating a wide cohort of collaborative partnerships. For Wanda’s congregation relational building involves going “deep and long ... rather than moving on to the next shiny new thing.” Avalon’s refugee sponsorship commitment nearly 40 years previous was about “relationships” and from that relationship emerged “the last building addition to the church.”

Ruby has been part of a missional leadership cohort for seven plus years with 4 MCEC colleagues. She values sharing ministry challenges and opportunities alongside her colleagues. New learnings, insights, transformation, and new stories emerges through collegial engagement and group learning opportunities.

Narrative Leadership

Human beings think in stories. They dream in stories. Their hopes and fears reside in stories. Their imaginations consist of stories. They plan in stories. They gossip, love, and hate in stories. Their emotions have a narrative character.⁵⁵⁷

Storytelling is a powerful tool at the disposal of pastoral leaders. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is memorably quoted saying, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do? If I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁵⁵⁸ Humans live rich storied lives. Faith communities gather around the sacred story of scripture, a story they live into, interpret, and engage with as they make-meaning amidst the beauty and brokenness of life. James Hopewell in his book *Congregation: Stories and Structures* argues that congregational

⁵⁵⁶ Margaret Wheatley, “When Change is out of Control,” *Human Resources for the 21st Century*, 2002, <https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/When-Change-is-Out-of-Our-Control.pdf>.

⁵⁵⁷ Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership*, 43-44.

⁵⁵⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201.

culture is “a coherent system whose structure logic is *narrative*.”⁵⁵⁹ As such, a congregation’s story not only shapes its distinct identity but also shapes its future and its mission.

Effective pastoral leaders require a host of skillsets in order to respond, adapt, and help their congregations to not just survive but to thrive amidst an ever-changing context. As the research revealed, both pastors and congregations are facing an unknown future and the current pandemic adds another complex layer of uncertainty. What will be required of the church to live faithfully into its calling as the sent people of God? David Fleming contends, “change requires leaders and organizations to embrace paradox and process – ambiguity and opportunity. In other words, for organizations to remain open to new possibilities and opportunities they must learn to capitalize on the role of uncertainty and ambiguity.”⁵⁶⁰ The current liminal season, as it was for the wandering wilderness dwellers is an experience of facing uncertainty and unknowing. By capitalizing on uncertainty and ambiguity, narrative pastoral leaders can assist their congregation to write new stories and embody new chapters of their personal and communal story.

Effective narrative pastoral leaders are risk-takers, willing to tell a new story and disrupt the status quo for when risks are taken, new outcomes abound. As Moses, effective leaders guide their community through the ambiguity-opportunity cycle, leading to transformation of beliefs, values, assumptions, and identity. As communal resilience and flexibility muscles are strengthened it is possible for a congregation to capitalize on liminality. Fleming suggests “few tools are as powerful and readily available to the leader as the use of personal and organizational narratives. Learning to listen to, tell and interpret stories within the organization helps leaders to maximize their sensemaking/sense-giving role.”⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structure*. xii.

⁵⁶⁰ Fleming, “Narrative Leadership: using the power of stories.”

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

Sensemaking/sensegiving draws attention to barriers within communal narratives and frames facilitators in ways that provide a pathway forward into the unknown. Accordingly, narrative leaders challenge values, assumptions, and beliefs, extending an invitation to the congregation to tell, re-tell, and re-story their experience. Ambiguity is characteristic of liminality and seasons of ambiguity are an opportunity to release the familiar and venture and step boldly into an unknown future. “The current ambiguity is preparing us for the new opportunity.... sensemaking/sensegiving.... [and] gives the organization permission to embrace the ambiguity with confidence and courage.”⁵⁶² Storytelling, utilized as a leadership change process “moves people beyond fears toward hope, beyond remembered pasts to present and future potential, beyond limited resources to unbounded possibility.”⁵⁶³

Humans relate to stories because our lives are rich with stories including plot lines, characters, scripts, crises, and more. Research participants eagerly and vulnerably shared painful/disruptive stories, release stories, transformation stories, risk-taking stories, origin stories, hope-filled stories, limiting stories, congregational organizational stories, community engagement stories, unfinished stories, and more. Narratives disclosed both closed systems and radical hospitality, theological wrestling, institutional change, the presence of shame and inadequacy, hope and fear, and deeply embedded values, assumptions, and beliefs. Stories incited laughter and gentle groaning. The use of metaphors and images in storytelling effectively situated lived participants’ experience within the larger narrative of God’s story in meaning-making ways. Stories exposed identity probing questions including “where are we now?” and “who are we?” vital questions for the current liminal season. Stories evidenced strong

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Golemon, “The Practice of Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” in *Finding our Story*, 27-28.

relationality, wisdom, organizational and personal resilience, leadership competencies, openness to experimentation, and adaptability capacities. Stan is intentional to embed new stories in his congregation and leaders are aware of the influence of origin stories. Participants interacted amidst their storytelling, relating to one another through storytelling, drawing out further stories, revealing all of life is story.

Stories enable change because they open pathways to the very heart of a congregation or an organization. Stories can communicate complicated change while at the same time lead the way forward toward implementation. Amidst complex change processes, as the church is currently experiencing, stories enable understanding. Because stories touch the very heart of individuals, they impact how we think, ponder, and act thus leading to a re-storying. Stories open new pathways, behaviors, and decision making, leading to change in light of new insights. Stories are also an effective leadership tool as they are easily remembered and are generally non-adversarial and non-hierarchical.⁵⁶⁴ Because stories generally engage feelings, they bypass normal defense mechanisms. In my own life, stories have been passed along from one generation to the next, providing continuity, conveying a sense of where I come from, my history, and my heritage, my home. Stories share experiences of success and experiences of overcoming challenges. Knowing one's story is a vital narrative leadership task.

Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, authors of *Know Your Story and Lead with it* argue that it is an essential component of effective pastoral leadership to know one's own story among the myriad of narratives that fill our lives. With profound insight Dan connected his congregation's shame story expressed as "we're not enough" to his personal story and struggle

⁵⁶⁴ Denning, *The Springboard*, " xv.

with shame saying “I may be projecting [a sense of inadequacy] onto my own congregation. I’m being frank with you. I struggle with ministry with trying to be enough.”

Further, Hester and Walker-Jones assert narrative leadership “is based on the idea that more than one story can be told about any person or event.”⁵⁶⁵ When a system, for example Chartwell Mennonite tells a story about being in decline for decades, it is but one story about their lived experience. Indeed, multiple stories are being lived out simultaneously. Peter also described Chartwell as thriving in mature Christian faith. Embracing the both/and of Chartwell’s story releases a congregation from binary thinking, leading to a fuller expression of their story.

It is a normative practice for both “individuals and congregations [to] construct narratives to make sense of their situation; however, other narrative possibilities exist and usually lie hidden from view.”⁵⁶⁶ Narrative leaders know how to seek out and unearth other narrative possibilities and invite curiosity about “the unfolding plot of their situation” thus prompting the system “to make conscious choices between plots they prefer and plots they don’t.”⁵⁶⁷ Together congregations writing a story, navigating stories of hope and fear, unity rather than division, light not darkness, abundance or scarcity. Stuckness can occur when a congregation focuses upon one story about the situation rather than exploring several competing stories.

The story of decline is a powerful story for many congregations. Narrative leaders, drawing upon a narrative therapy framework can assist their congregation to identify other stories that are present and begin to construct alternatives to problem-saturated stories by pulling back the curtain to untapped stories. Narrative leaders help their congregation stand outside a problem-saturated story, guiding them to recognize there are multiple perspectives. By seeing the

⁵⁶⁵ Richard L. Hester & Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead With It*, 45.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

problem as the problem rather than persons as the problem, stories can begin to be re-authored by including neglected and potentially significant events and experiences. A new story begins to be written as new possibilities are shared and acted upon.

Leaders both communicated stories and embodied stories as storytellers.⁵⁶⁸ Diana Butler Bass contends that “in relating stories, leaders call forth corporate imagination, creativity, and resources that enable the whole group to move forward and change.”⁵⁶⁹ According to Bass “narrative leadership is a deceptively simple practice: know your story and live it.”⁵⁷⁰ She notes that in vital mainline churches, “leaders knew their stories and lived them – thus turning the power of narrative into a source of and resource for change.” Bass presents four pathways applicable to pastoral leadership:

1. Story shapes leadership: The story a congregation tells about itself has serious implications. For example, does the congregation self-identify as the Titanic or the Mayflower?
2. Leaders shape stories: Storytelling is vital to meaning-making. Moving between personal, congregational, and biblical stories, creates an environment for spiritual and theological meaning making. Because scripts can be rewritten, pastoral leaders can lead their congregation from fear-based stories to stories of possibility.
3. Leadership is character and context driven: Being attuned to ones’ strengths and rooted in Christ grounds the personhood of a leader. Leadership functions best amongst “a connected network of relationships.”⁵⁷¹
4. Leadership is based in charisma, not celebrity: Charisma (giftedness), authenticity, generosity, that is “walk the talk,” creates congruence between faith and one’s life.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practising Congregation*, 99.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁷⁰ Diana Butler Bass, “Living the Story,” in *Living our Story*, 152.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 152-158.

These leadership qualities, according to Bass are not a “magic bullet” solution but rather observations she has identified as an emerging style of narrative leadership leading to congregational renewal.

Narrative leadership researcher Larry A. Golemon cautions that narratives can have an unconscious hold on congregational life. Accordingly, a vital pastoral leadership task is to ‘uncover narratives to understand the congregational culture, identity, and mission.’⁵⁷³ Effective narrative leaders uncover congregational values, beliefs, and assumptions by attentively listening for images, metaphors, and phrases used by congregants. Images, metaphors, and phrases provide a lens through which to interpret the larger narrative of the congregation. A stance of curiosity and not knowing serves pastors well. One wonders what story is impacting Avalon Mennonite’s protectionism regarding building use or the story behind Stan’s congregation’s 40-year building process? Marci acknowledged the story “that everyone is watching... what will people think? .. and the fear of giving offense.... needs to be dug up a little bit and re-told.” N. Graham Standish argues, effective leaders “creatively script their congregations’ stories by finding alternative plotlines that lead to resolving the crises in a way that steers people to experience redemption, reconciliation, and sometimes resurrection.”⁵⁷⁴

Amidst the current narrative of decline, narrative leaders have opportunity through weekly sermons and teaching opportunities, as did the Black Church of the 1960’s, to intentionally embed new stories into the system. What does Scripture reveal about God’s sustaining, faithful, and guiding presence? Where is social justice being done? How has the stranger been welcomed? Who has a story about personal or institutional transformation? Where

⁵⁷³ Golemon, “The Practice of Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” *Finding our Story*, 5.

⁵⁷⁴ N. Graham Standish, “Pastor as Narrative Leader,” in *Living our Story*, 76.

has forgiveness and reconciliation occurred? During his earthly ministry, Jesus the master storytelling drew upon parables, metaphors, and mundane items such as seeds and wheat fields to teach deep truths to reveal the presence of the Kingdom of God. God's presence is revealed when joy breaks through our sorrows, when wounds are transformed into compassion, when Jesus' disciples take the path of love, non-resistance, and peace rather than the path of hate or violence. An identified area for the growth for the church, is identifying the presence of God and developing language – indeed, stories - to articulate Divine presence that God's people may declare, “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). It is these “springboard stories” that can effectively communicate a change process and provide the necessary momentum and deepened expressional of missional ecclesiology.

Stories enable change when connected to the living center of the congregation. The church is counter-cultural when stories of abundance counter the story of scarcity. Stories about peaceable living counter stories of chaos and disruption. Stories revealing generosity, goodness, and grace counter stories of violence, division, and suspicion. Stories of hope have power to break through stories of fear and scarcity. As stories are brought into the light of day, they lose their binding power and new life springs up.

Practically, pastoral leaders can introduce a new story through “*controlled* discussion and *skillful* conversations.”⁵⁷⁵ Ronald Heifetz refers to this space as a “holding environment.”⁵⁷⁶ Introducing a new story does not begin with evaluation of what is broken but rather depends “upon the *descriptive* telling of stories of what could be, based on the real experience of the

⁵⁷⁵ Gil Rendle, “Narrative Leadership and Renewed Congregational Identity” in *Finding our Story*, 34.

⁵⁷⁶ Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 66.

people in the current moment. Evaluation invites resistance; description invites conversation.”⁵⁷⁷

Drawing upon a descriptive process, the conversation moves toward identity and questions such as “who we are as a congregation?” Through the re-storying process, pastoral leaders help a community live into their new identity which gives people direction, values, and vision.

Beyond the unconscious hold of some narratives, other narratives we live by can become so “internalized that we may not see an alternative to them, especially when they become dysfunctional or unable to adapt to changing conditions.”⁵⁷⁸ This was evidenced in Ted’s storytelling. On one hand, Ted noted the congregation’s desire to be more missional. On the other hand, he verbalized a programmatic mental model, referring to the Friday night “Food Truck Program.” Additionally, as a resident of Cranbrook for 10 years Ted acknowledged “knowing neighbours two doors down and across the street” yet he was unable to “name everybody who is on our street.”

There is good news here, however. According to social theorist Michael Foucault’s framework, “internalized narratives can be deconstructed by naming the ways they dominate or control our own lives.”⁵⁷⁹ In this way, “narratives can be reconstructed or replaced by re-storying our lives according to newfound strength and capacities for change.”⁵⁸⁰ In order to effectively guide and lead congregations into neighbourhood engagement, pastoral leaders must take the first steps, challenging and even deconstructing their own primary narratives including unconscious assumptions, habits, and actions and being willing to share their personal learnings, transformation, and encounters with the Divine. Resourcing and training opportunities for

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

pastors are a practical means that can assist pastoral leaders to unpack their own values, beliefs, and assumptions. Just as one's own culture is not challenged until it intersects with an alternate culture, personal stories can go unchallenged until new stories are told, listened to, and integrated into learning and action, thus providing a new framework for one's life.

As the research revealed, the current unstable context calls for the dismantling of limiting narratives and mental models, the need to identify predominant narratives, and bring to consciousness the unconscious. Co-researchers demonstrated this leadership capacity whether striving to embed new stories (Stan), suggesting an old story "be dug up" (Marci), or reframing an Anabaptist foundational story "do not be conformed" (Ruby). To lead during a liminal season is to examine and reconsider the cherished narratives and assumptions of the congregation, keeping in mind that as Heifetz argues "refashioning narratives means refashioning loyalties."⁵⁸¹ Anna's congregation had a long history with a community ministry, *Gather at the Table*, which was a "huge part of Sprucedale's identity and served as "Sprucedale's face in the city." The ending of that partnership has left a significant gap. Living deeply into the question "will some new calling emerge that we don't know how to grasp?" causes a congregation to reconsider their beliefs, habits and values, the core of adaptive work. The liminal space invites the formation of a new identity and a new life-giving story for the congregation.

Stories can be limiting. Holding to limiting narratives, "build it and they will come" binds God's people to a time past at a time when God is doing something new (Isaiah 43:19). The story pastors and congregations have been accustomed to interpreting the world and their assumptions and beliefs about "doing" and "being" church is also tied to a time past. Research participants

⁵⁸¹ Ronald A Heifetz, "Leadership, Adaptability, Thriving," *Faith & Leadership*, November 18, 2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSZIdIVYxc&t=207s>. accessed February 6, 2021.

noted that Anabaptist “separation from the world” theology which was spiritual grounding for the 16th century re-baptizing movement, is currently working against the church, binding God’s people from living fully into God’s mission in the world.

Ruby bumped up against this theological pillar as she began exploring homelessness with community partners. She acknowledges that partnering financially with outside organizations to further ministry opportunities is new territory for herself and Lakeside Mennonite. Looking ahead to be in a better position five or ten years from now regarding local low-income housing, Ruby is exploring how to write funding proposals for a 5-year grant. She experiences an internal conflict in that she grew up in a church “separate from the world.” As this foundational historical theological value and belief which was core to 16th century communal identity and protection, is exposed it becomes ripe to challenge and re-story.

Ruby embodied that in a changing world, leaders must be “continually committed to ongoing personal change, to develop new capacities, to be continually transformed in ways that will enable the organization’s larger transformation.”⁵⁸² Leaders have the capacity to identify limiting narratives including identifying barriers and facilitators within narratives that are impacting cultural organizational change. Such resides at the core of God’s mission to transform the world. As Bolsinger writes “transformation is accomplished not through signs of power, shows of force or unavoidable miracles that force us to our knees, but *through the transformed lives of people* who transform communities who transform their sphere of influence (Romans 12:2).”⁵⁸³ Leadership not only requires but results in “transformation of the whole organization, starting with the leaders.”⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸² Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 216.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

At a time during which a decline of master narratives within culture is noted, when institutional power is challenged, and when technical fixes are inadequate to address current adaptive challenges, God continues to shape and form God's people, leading the church into God's unfolding story.

Conclusion

According to David Gibbons in his book *The monkey and the fish*, "the best innovations often come from the fringe."⁵⁸⁵ The research of this study revealed that culture change occurs when leaders from different cultural backgrounds, ministry contexts, socio-economic backgrounds, diverse lived experiences, are in intentional relationship and are intentional to support one another. The power of story-telling and relational connectedness can achieve lasting change including institutional change as demonstrated by Eshe and Thomas.

Eshe is a quiet gracious man who speaks in broken English, not a leader one might describe as a "powerful person at the top." In conversation with his collegial friend Thomas, Eshe inquired why the Mennonite Church's peace and justice institution "was not sponsoring refugees" from his homeland in East Africa. In response, Thomas arranged a meeting of new Canadian pastors with an institutional staff person. Thomas noted the institution was "sponsoring all kinds of refugees... why not their [Eshe's] literal brothers and sisters who are in refugee camps?" Thomas added, "but you know what? That has changed!" The peace and social justice agency "changed in their philosophy about who they sponsor." Additionally, another regional church-supported refugee sponsorship group also changed their policies and now the new Canadian "church has sponsored family upon family." Institutional change occurred, not "from top down" but rather through grassroots questions laden with values, beliefs, assumptions, the

⁵⁸⁵ Dave Gibbons, *The monkey and the fish*, 202.

power of relationality and listening, all grounded in the commitment of faith communities to further the mission of God.

Re-storying related to refugee sponsorship has freed an “imaginatively gridlocked” system and new stories, highlighting collaboration and creativity are being written, thus re-storying wider communal identity and mission. Such confirms sociologist Todd N. Fuist’s theory that engagement with cultural resources within congregations including collective identities and narratives are a powerful force through which to engage and initiate change.

Just as Spirit-led movements shaped Judaism from the time of Moses and has sustained the Christian Church, God’s Spirit continues to inspire, equip, and empower.⁵⁸⁶ God continues to call men and women to lead God’s church and further God’s mission. God’s people are the writing instrument in God’s hands as God continues to write the story of salvation.

The next chapter includes the researcher’s personal and theological reflection.

⁵⁸⁶ Richard Rohr, “A Faith Created by Courageous Movements,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, November 30, 2020, [ac.org/a-faith-created-by-courageous-movements-2020-11-30](https://www.ac.org/a-faith-created-by-courageous-movements-2020-11-30).

Chapter 6 – Personal and Theological Reflection

At the time of this writing, the 18-month mark of the global Covid-19 pandemic is quickly approaching. Globally, we have been thrown into a disorienting wilderness of unfamiliarity, unknowns, and unsettledness. Journeying a pandemic wilderness, many are weary, lonely, anxious, or afraid. And as it was for the ancient exodus wilderness wanderers, some are grumbling and yearning to return to “normal.” Familiar patterns of daily life including family gatherings, the freedom to travel or to simply enjoy dinner at a favourite restaurant with friends have ceased, in order to ‘stop the spread.’ Practices including regular hand sanitization, physical distancing, and mask-wearing in public settings have become the new norm.

Journeying this pandemic wilderness, I sense that communally we intuitively know that we have left behind a way-of-life that provided meaning, purpose, and a sense of security, a life that was predictable even with its ups and downs, its beauty and its brokenness. While the roll-out of vaccines offers hope and light as we journey toward the “promised land” of freedom, before us, remains a great distance yet to be journeyed. A lament, ‘How long, oh Lord? How long?’ is solemnly raised.

Thirsty for connection. Hungry for freedom. The wilderness exposes our deepest appetites and thirsts. While the wilderness allows us to tap into our strengths and imaginative creativity, it is also the place where identity is challenged and re-shaped. In the wilderness soul-searching questions take shape and are asked. *Who are we now? Who are we as a people of God in this unsettled time? Who are we as the church when we cannot gather in-person? Who are we becoming?* An expansive cultural unravelling and reshaping is underway. Pastoral leaders have been thrown into the role of leading culture change, not because we possess the road map nor

because we can see the future any better than anyone else but because we have been called to leadership by God for such a time as this.

Life experience over the past two years has deeply connected to my “barriers and facilitators” and “culture change” dissertation. Culturally and personally, we are living at a pivotal threshold season. Our tight grasp on the past is loosening at a time when the future is unclear. The church is situated on the threshold between what was and what is yet to be. This threshold space invites God’s people to face their fears and release much that has been held dear, even sacred. The threshold space brings to the surface personal and congregational values, assumptions, beliefs, and mental models, revealing barriers that keep us stuck in the wilderness and facilitators that can be built upon and strengthen God’s people to journey faithfully into God’s future.

At present, the core of our beings is being broken open, generating new possibilities and new life. Journeying the wilderness, all is being transformed. All is being refashioned and made new. In this wilderness season we hear the gentle and beckoning whisperings of the Divine, “I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19).

Amidst the pandemic and current liminal space, pastors and congregational leaders have worked tirelessly to create and implement safety protocols. While there is no wilderness road map, the rocky terrain of unknowns, the unexpected sharp curves, and steep hills have been bravely faced and navigated. Church buildings have been closed for the health and safety of all. The church defined as God’s people gathered in a building has been shaken to its core. Since March 2020, I have worked primarily from home rather than based in the church. I preached to a camera and an IT volunteer in an empty sanctuary. A congregational you-tube channel was

launched connecting local and distanced communities. Christian formation and book clubs transitioned to a virtual platform. I intentionally sought meaningful and creative ways to keep the congregation connected and provide pastoral care safely distanced. My heart bled as I provided end-of-life care to the dying over the phone when everything within me cried out to be physically present to pray and extend comfort. Other times my heart was flooded with joy as I baptized youth at their home, led parent-child dedications, and officiated a small intimate wedding, all at a time when provincial group-size restrictions were at 10.

Decision fatigued. Increased work hours. Sleepless nights. No models available to plan for nor lead virtual Good Friday, Easter Sunday, or Christmas Eve worship services. A postponed sabbatical. A virus, unseen to the naked eye has disrupted all aspects of life resulting in the emotional, relational, and physical suffering of millions globally, including death. Amidst the current global crisis and way of life that is unravelling, pastors as myself wonder where the church will go from here? What is God up to? Some pastors wonder whether congregants will return for in-person worship. What will the new normal look like for the church?

Over 10 years ago I attended a worship service of Celebration and Thanksgiving for a friend whom I became acquainted at seminary. The worship service was a small gathering of family, friends, and colleagues and was held in my friend's childhood church the afternoon following her ordination. Following the worship service, during a time of refreshments and fellowship, my friend's aged childhood pastor asked if he could share a few words. I anticipated warm words of blessing and encouragement. That is, however, is not what occurred. The aged pastor stood and loudly announced to the newly ordained young pastor: "I couldn't sleep last night and it's all your fault!" Wrestling through the night the elderly man had reached a conclusion which he felt compelled to share. With bold conviction he said: "The church you

were ordained into last night is NOT the same church I was ordained into. The church needs to go back!”

“The church needs to go back.” It is a familiar yearning amidst wilderness uncertainty. Psychologist Virginia Satir is credited as saying: ““The certainty of misery is preferable to the misery of uncertainty.”⁵⁸⁷ Expressed in other words, “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.” The liberated children of Israel who had grown weary and discontent journeying the wilderness craved for what was, just as my friend’s childhood pastor expressed. What was, feels safe, provides security and groundedness at a time when the future appears foreboding and uncertain.

The people of God knew who they were as an enslaved people. The heavy labor of brick building, while cruel and inhumane, was familiar as was systemic Egyptian oppression intended to keep God’s people bound and chained, keep them down, keep them from flourishing and living fully alive. Freedom and living into a new chapter of life was unknown and disorienting for God’s people.

The church’s sacred story reveals that the actions of God include liberation. God who formed God’s people and claimed them as God’s own heard the cries for help and pleas to be released from misery. In response, God raised up a leader, Moses, to liberate God’s people and lead them into freedom. And when the time was ripe, God freed God’s people from the chains of Egyptian bondage and led them into the wilderness where they journeyed for 40 years. The journey to the promised land was long and hard and throughout the journey God provided for their daily needs including manna, quail, and water from a rock. And, as the journey continued to

⁵⁸⁷ Sam Young, “Acts of Leadership,” August 31, 2016, quote by Virginia Satir, <http://www.samyoung.co.nz/2016/08/the-certainty-of-misery-is-preferable.html>.

go on without promised land in sight, a freed people began to grumble against their God and their leader Moses saying: “did you bring us out here to kill us?” (Number 21:5) Facing an uncertain and unknown future they yearned “to go back.”

The Christian church is at another pivotal times of reform, yet another season during which a “giant rummage sale” is underway when everything is pulled out and examined and decisions are made regarding what to discard and what to retain. When values, assumptions, and beliefs are called into question, it is unsettling work for God’s people. The temptational pull to “go back” is strong. While cucumbers, onions, and melons are not a particularly appetizing meal, they do represent the comfort food of familiarity.

As it was for the ancient wilderness wanderers as it is today, held in the heart of God is God’s desire for all of creation to be liberated, flourish, and to partner with God for the healing and the restoration of all creation. Liberating God’s heart’s desire is that God’s people be freed from all that enslaves us and holds us captive, including systems of oppression, institutional sin, myopic vision, injustices, the deep yearnings amidst stress to align with church bylaws and policy rather than God’s mission, and the deep craving for certitudes including embracing Christianity as a defined system of beliefs rather than a lifestyle centered upon love and compassion. Amidst a culture of quick fixes, “build it and they will come” story lines and ecclesiocentrism, God is moving in ways to liberate God’s people from structures that are no longer serving the church well and indeed working against the church in its current cultural context. Liberating God is moving to free God’s people from belief systems that enslave, free us from our limiting stories, and the idolatry of self-sufficiency, pride, and ego. God is writing a new story amongst us at this liminal time, providing for our daily needs, and beckoning us to step forward into a new future rather than succumb to survival mode. Paying attention to the

presence and activity of God is a crucial stance for liminal wilderness dwellers, a learning edge for God's people as we continue the wilderness journey.

God is resurrecting something new. New hope. New beginnings. New possibilities. New opportunities. A new identity. Deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions are the clay in the Potter's hand, all re-created through the power of resurrection new life. To be sure, to be raised to new life is not the journey for the faint of heart because it involves a death, leaving behind the familiar, releasing what was, all at a time when the future is not clear. Hope that sustains the church is the confession that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in God's people, transforming lives and the church.

Amidst the current unsettled season, pastors are responding to God's invitation to unbind the church in order for resurrection new life to emerge. Facing the tomb of all that is life-denying, just as Jesus did at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, we hear Jesus command, "Come out.....unbind.....let go...." (c.f. John 11:43-44). At the core of pastoral ministry through the power of God's Spirit is the calling to pastoral leaders to unbind, to "bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free" (Mark 4: 18).

God is inviting the missional church including pastoral leaders into deep listening, to go deep within where God is gestating something new. New life flourishes not in certainty but in the unknowing. New life flourishes from questions rather than certitudes. New growth emerges from struggle rather than times of stability. Growth germinates in upheaval, and it hurts! New life begins in the dark. In soil cultivated and prepared, God the Sower sows the seeds. God nurtures and nourishes the seed. Seeds gestate in the womb of darkness. Patient unfolding is the ground of our waiting.

God's people across all time have waited. Noah waited for the waters to recede. Sarah waited in her barrenness for a child. Jonah waited in the belly of a fish. God's people waited through 40 years of wilderness wandering. Mary awaited the birth of the Messiah. God enters the experience of those who wait. Emptied of our need to fix, or to "go back" I hear God's call to wait, secure in the truth that the same mystery that occurs deep in the soil is occurring in the ground of the church's soul and very being. New life is incubating in the darkness and in active waiting.

A favourite hymn, *In the bud there is a flower*, poetically captures the mystery and the hope embedded in the cycle of death and rebirth.

Verse 1:

*In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed an apple tree;
in cocoons the hidden promise;
Butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season
something God alone can see.*

Verse 2:

*There's a song in ev'ry silence,
seeking word and melody.
There's a dawn in ev'ry darkness,
bringing hope to you and me.*

*From the past will come the future;
what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.⁵⁸⁸*

Seeds, dry and brittle, break open beneath a thick blanket of earthy loam. The process is unseen, a mystery. God the Sower is calling and equipping missional church's leadership to sow seeds generously and to call the church's attention toward the sprouts of new growth, the budding, the greening, the growing, "first the blade and then the ear." (Mark 4:28). Jesus said some seed will fall upon the path, other seed on rocky ground, still other seed will fall among the thorns. Jesus has promised that some seed will fall on good soil and will bring forth an abundant crop (Matthew 13: 1-9). God the Creator sends the rains, the sun, the warmth, and nurtures the seeds, cracking open what is dry, breathing new life, a new story into being.

Cultivating the good soil and sowing of seeds is achieved as missional congregations build adaptive practices of experimentation and do the work of ongoing evaluation. 'Practicing congregations' engage with deeply rooted spiritual practices, grow in their attentiveness to the Spirit of God in their lives, in their neighbourhoods, and in the world. God is out ahead of the church inviting God's people to join in God's mission. The seeds have been sown. During seasons of wilderness wandering, it is not uncommon to lose sight of one's core identity. God is inviting the church to remember who we are: beloved children of God, people of peace, a sojourning people, faithful people and co-authors with God in God's ongoing salvation story.

⁵⁸⁸ Natalie Sleeth. (Text and Music) Hope Publishing Co., 1986, Hymnal: A Worship Book (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992),614.

My family tree holds the legacy of pioneers, settlers, and farmers. My family roots trace to Swiss Anabaptist farmers who migrated to Pennsylvania during the 17th century and later, during the 19th century migrated to Waterloo County. My family roots include pioneers who were brave, trailblazers, adventurers, a freed people who ventured beyond rigid bounded borders. When pioneers become settlers in a new land however, new values, assumptions, beliefs, and world views arise including the values of stability and security. Identity is deeply connected to the land, to the “promised land” which we call home. The Israelites had to learn that their real home was not in a particular place, not even the wilderness. Their true home was in the heart of God. Their true home was with their Liberating God who was with them every step of the way.

In this season of wilderness wandering God is inviting the missional church to drink deeply from worship, to be renewed through solitude, prayer, Scripture, and community. Spiritual disciplines deepen attentiveness to the Spirit’s nudging and inspiration, God’s presence in the world. The journey of growing as disciples of Jesus is to trust in God’s daily provision of manna and not to succumb to survival mode. And what is the manna God is providing God’s missional people? The manna God provides is our sacred story, bread & cup, a basin and towel, and Holy presence with us. These are the gifts of God that sustain wilderness wanderers.

As Liberating God unbinds the church from all that binds, our need for certainty, control, and fix-it plans, the invitation is to live boldly as people of hope, for this is who the God of Liberation and Resurrection has unbound us to be.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

This study found that stories serve a crucial function as pastors strive to lead cultural organizational change. As author Sue Monk Kidd asserts, “our stories are the best bread we can offer one another.”⁵⁸⁹ Valuable for pastoral leaders are structured story-telling opportunities that reveal how missional ecclesiology is being lived out, or not. Trusting that God’s Spirit moves in and through story, as it is for the biblical narrative, openness to God’s Spirit leads to spiritual transformation and new life for both pastors and congregations. Storytelling invites communal and individual reflection upon experiences leading to new learnings, thus new experiences. Additionally, through the listening of stories, congregants can identify where they are already actively involved in God’s story and build their capacity to join with God’s mission.

Through congregational stories as it has been throughout history, God’s vision, purposes, and mission are revealed. Through story, God’s people bear witness to the presence and the activity of God in their neighbourhood and the world, a vital spiritual practice for this time in history.

This research study found that storytelling is a rich resource for pastoral leaders and congregations at this threshold season, liminality. God’s people are held within and sustained by God’s ongoing salvation story. Individuals and communities make meaning through storytelling and are active participants in an ever-unfolding story, participating at the intersections of multiple plot lines and characters, crises, and resolution. Story telling is a relational process that uncovers deeply held values, beliefs, and assumptions which impact God’s invitation to God’s

⁵⁸⁹ Sue Monk Kidd, *When the heart waits: Spiritual Direction for Life’s Sacred Questions* (NY: Harper One, 1990), 154.

people to be actively involved in the neighbourhood with attentiveness to God's restorative and reconciling presence.

Within a comfortable settling of confidentiality and safety, focus group participants eagerly, honestly, openly, and with vulnerability shared diverse ministry experiences through stories – success stories, shame stories, founding stories, stories of decline, hopeful stories, and more. Participants actively engaged with one another and amidst focus group storytelling, were spontaneously prompted to reflect upon their lived experiences, glean new insights, and share further stories based upon their experiences leading. Storytelling encouraged enriched learning. Laughter abounded during conversations and thought-provoking questions and wonderings which invited further reflection were shared and pondered aloud.

While some pastors suggested they had a shallow reservoir of stories from their current ministry context, their experiences of ministry, immigration, cultural identity, adaptation to western culture, navigating language, and facing unique challenges related to 2nd and 3rd generation congregants added richness and depth to the conversation, thus building bridges of connection across ethnicity and cultures. New Canadian pastors look to pastors from historic established Swiss and Russian Mennonite congregations for wisdom, due to their experience transitioning from mother-tongue to Canadian language in worship. Likewise, pastors from historic established Swiss and Russian Mennonite congregations have much to learn from their sisters and brothers in Christ regarding their lived experience adapting to a changing culture. All participants exhibited collaborative skill, relational capacity, and openness to engage with and learn from one another.

Opportunity to reflect upon one's ministry context within a focus group context was warmly welcomed by the participants. A common challenge however, associated with thinking

critically, is getting outside ones' own story which has been shaped and influenced over time through personal and professional experience. Much of human thought holds unexamined biases, prejudice, blind spots, unchallenged assumptions, and more. Focus group conversations while rich, did not reach the depths of participants' fears, definitions of pastoral leadership, the role of the church in the 21st century, the reality that congregations are at different stages of the change process, reliance on the institution, personal growing edges, and more. The iceberg image is helpful in that while 10% of the iceberg is visible to the naked eye, 90% resides out of sight. It is possible that gathering each focus group several times over a period of months could create a safe space to access that which lies beneath the collection of stories the participants chose to tell.

A multiplicity of stories shape and influence organizational culture, congregational mission, vision, and identity. As limiting narratives are re-storied, it is vital to clarify that no "one" story emerges. Congregations as a living system with interconnected networks are formed in response to new stories which will hold a different vision, new values, beliefs, habits, and more. Change occurs as the organization interprets their shared life differently. Narrative leadership is a vital leadership capacity for this time when the church is at an advanced stage of unravelling. Through storytelling both barriers and facilitators impacting cultural organizational change can be identified.

In a post-Christendom era as the church finds itself moving ever closer to the margins of culture, rather than existing at the center as during the Christendom era, the church can discover all over again that God's story has always been located at the margins. While shepherding pastors will continue to primarily engage in maintenance ministry, "sowers," by definition are missional, trusting in the movement and activity of God. God is actively present amidst MCEC

congregations and telling the story builds faith, nurtures spiritual growth and development, and serves to further the mission of God.

The research clearly revealed that despite barriers, God is moving and active amongst God's people. Amidst the unravelling of structures, and as long-held values, beliefs, assumptions, mental models, and more are being refashioned, God continues to take the loose stands, the unfinished and frayed edges, weaving together a diversity of ethnicity, cultures, languages, spiritualities, and experiences, to author new a chapter in the church's story, a new creation, all for the furthering of God's mission of restoration and recreation.

The implications of this research for a post-pandemic church abound. The pandemic occurred at a time when momentous change for the church and culture was already in motion. Change that was noted by research participants has rapidly accelerated since March 2020. Indeed, the pandemic has amplified realities that were already present. Literature is just beginning to emerge focusing on how Covid could impact and change religion in Canada.

New habits have formed, including virtual worshipping communities, making a return to regular attendance and participation less likely, most especially amongst young families and young adults according to John Longhurst (Mennonite) faith reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press*.⁵⁹⁰ When community is a foundational value for Mennonites, reimagining community and adapting to further shifting attendance trends is creating angst. Many congregations valued the flexibility that virtual worship provided most especially when the church was shuttered. In light of less restrictive regulations, pastors as myself have begun focusing on how to strengthen

⁵⁹⁰ John Longhurst "Common Themes Emerge on Pandemic's Impact on Religion," *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/common-themes-emerge-on-pandemics-impact-on-religion-574426562.html/> (accessed February 6, 2022).

connections between virtual and in-person worshippers. The *Barna Group* cautions pastoral leaders from taking a consumerist approach, as consumerism does not nurture resilient disciples. *Barna* identifies “7 Ingredients of Church Community” modelled from the New Testament church: Spiritual Engagement (Colossians 3:16); Preaching the Word (Hebrews 13:7); Worship and Prayer (1 Timothy 2:8); Evangelism (Acts 1:8); Interpersonal Responsibility (Romans 12); Inconvenient Hospitality (Acts 4); Institutional Physicality (Matthew 26:26).⁵⁹¹ While it is possible to facilitate each of these worship elements in-person, *Barna* contends three elements cannot be met virtually: Interpersonal Responsibility, Inconvenient Hospitality, and Institutional Physicality. While there are many good things about going virtual, the experience of discipleship involves sharing life in community with real people. Bridge-building between in-person and virtual worshippers is an adaptive challenge that many pastors are facing amidst the pandemic.

In his May 17, 2021, article Longhurst invited several Canadian academics who study the impact of religion on society into conversation. Scholars, including Reginald Bibby (Lethbridge), and Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald (Toronto) and more, contend that online worship is here to stay. Examining current trends, it is noted that while many congregations followed public health restrictions, dissent arose amongst some congregations who resisted and even defied restrictions. Such has led to deep divisions and has fueled a negative view of Christianity. Local congregations can counter a negative view through wholesome engagement with their community, embodying a counter narrative that is grounded in “love for neighbour as oneself.”

⁵⁹¹ “Excerpt: Digital Church in a Lonely World – 7 Ingredients of Church Community,” *Barna Group*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/digital-church-community/>, (accessed December 3, 2021).

John Stackhouse of Crandall University (Moncton, NB) asserts “there is very little theological reflection on the pandemic.”⁵⁹² Indeed, Stackhouse wonders if people are even looking to religion for answers. Kevin Flatt of Redeemer University (Ancaster, ON) suggests the crisis of pandemic may indeed “create an opening for religious groups to connect with people who are now open to new perspectives... Religious groups with a clear sense of identity, strong local communities, and a belief in the priority of evangelization will likely be more interested and able to connect with such seekers.”⁵⁹³ As I have observed in my own ministry context, congregants have demonstrated creativity connecting with neighbours and supporting local initiatives. Congregants have generously responded to local needs. For example, in partnership with a local deli the congregation financed lunches for health-care providers, hosted food trucks, sewed face masks, and made home-made Easter cards for local long-term care residents. Congregants also share recorded worship services with friends and family near and far.

There is deep awareness that the church has and is changing and will not go back to previous ways of being. Structures that once served the church well are less effective at a time when a new structure paradigm is not yet clear. Amidst ambiguity and unknowing, the path forward is being paved with honest conversation and observations, imagination, courage, listening, prayer, experimentation, adaptive and narrative leadership, and more.

The themes/resonant threads identified in this research study are even more relevant for the present time. Amidst chaos, there is a strong pull to clarify congregational identity. Identity grounds a community and provides a sense of security and stability. An identity described as “wilderness wanderers on the move,” calls forth communal values, assumptions, and beliefs.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

When examined, pastoral leaders can work with their congregation as together with God a new story is written. Change occurs as new values, assumptions, and beliefs are named and lived into.

Church leaders and congregations have adopted the language of liminality to describe their current ministry context and are drawing upon rich metaphors to make meaning. An evaluation of church buildings is underway. A January 2022 Global News article reports that “75 per cent of lay people want a return to pre-pandemic levels of worship but only 37 per cent expect to return to how it was.”⁵⁹⁴ This projected trend which highlights an even greater decline of attendance is more urgently opening the way for discussion with community partners about church buildings and properties and the urgent need for affordable housing.

Amidst such an unsettled time, people are looking for hope. Sharing hope-filled stories that bear witness to God’s presence and activity is a rich resource for the church. When the hungry are fed, when the precariously housed secure shelter, when the lonely are cared for, God’s kin-dom has come. Sharing our Easter faith that proclaims death and endings are never the final thing but rather the ground through which new life emerges, counters cultural and congregational narratives of decline, dying, and death. While identifying God’s activity is often seen through hindsight, the present context shimmers with Divine presence. It is this reality which future studies can build upon practically, theoretically, theologically, and experientially.

Limitations of the study

This study, while rich in data is limited by its small sample and the unique lived experience of each of the seventeen research participants. This study focused on the lived experience of pastors who have served a minimum of five years in their current congregation.

⁵⁹⁴ Ashleigh Stewart, “How Covid Could Change Religion in Canada Forever: There is No Going Back,” Global News, January 16, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8471775/covid-religion-canada-future/amp/> (accessed February 9, 2022).

This sample is important to ensure participants have a depth of knowledge and familiarity with congregational narratives. There are many other MCEC pastors with years of ministry experience who will have different lived experiences, different ethnic and cultural backgrounds including having migrated to Canada from various parts of the world. There is a need to research the lived experience of a greater diversity of pastoral leaders in order to identify barriers and facilitators as pastors lead cultural organizational change.

It is difficult to comprehensively identify, analyze, and report barriers and facilitators impacting cultural organizational change so more study will be needed with a wider and more diverse sample. Different experiences are anticipated especially amongst pastors who are giving leadership to congregations that have been established for less than 10 years.

Pastoral leaders are diverse in experience and ministry context including team or solo ministry position, social setting, cultural context, gender, educational experience, and conflict and leadership style. Consequently, it is difficult to generalize experience although resonant threads and trends were identified. This study provides information regarding the diversity within MCEC, strengths, context, hopes, and unanswered questions including shifting congregational demographics. While this research provides rich data, more research is needed for greater understanding.

Participants in this study were invited to engage in a focus group discussion with pastoral colleagues. While openness, eagerness to engage, and vulnerability were evident amongst many participants, it is possible that not all participants engaged in this way. A longitudinal study would be valuable to follow up with research participants and their lived experience and compare and contrast their experiences including barriers and facilitators.

Focus group interviews were scheduled to not exceed 90 minutes. While rich data was gathered, 90 minutes limited the amount of engagement with research questions and engagement amongst participants.

Future Direction

Future research could expand the diversity of MCEC pastors. More research is needed amongst immigrant and refugee population pastors as the denomination strives to become an intercultural church.

The research for this study was completed 5 months prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Having been locked out of our church buildings, having gathered virtually for worship, having adapted amidst significant change thrust upon us, the church has built tremendous adaptive capacity. What pastoral experiences including barriers and facilitators would be identified in a post-pandemic study? What adaptive challenges can be named? What experimentation was attempted? What cultural organizational change occurred due to a national lockdown? What might focus group participants say they learned about themselves, their neighbours, God, and the world having navigated the pandemic wilderness? What happened to protectionism of buildings and properties in light of being the church beyond its four walls? What new missional initiatives and ways of connecting with local neighbourhoods and ministry context emerged? What new metaphors, images, or biblical stories helped pastors and their congregations navigate an unsettled time? Did neighbourhood and wider community relationships continue post-pandemic? In what ways did congregational identity shift due to the pandemic? What new identity emerged? Who do we say that we are now? Who does God say that we are? Who are we becoming? What spiritual resources nourished and nurtured pastoral leaders and faith communities?

Finally, more thought and research should be invested in pastoral leadership. What further leadership capacities are needed? How do post-pandemic challenges and opportunities shape and inform continuing education opportunities for pastors and higher learning? What denominational supports do pastors identify as most needed? What new stories are faith communities living into? What limiting stories unravelled and re-storied? How did leaders and congregations wrestle with and unravelling narratives?

This study revealed the need for long-term collegial cohort learning groups in which roots of vulnerability and trust go deep. Safe learning environments promote growth, learning, and the formation of new stories to take shape and lived into.

APPENDIX A - Research Ethics Board Approval



May 28, 2019

Dear Kara Carter

REB # 6136

Project, "God's Story, Our Story: Telling, Re-Telling, and Re-Storying"

REB Clearance Issued: May 28, 2019

REB Expiry / End Date: September 30, 2020

The Research Ethics Board of Wilfrid Laurier University has reviewed the above proposal and determined that the proposal is ethically sound. If the research plan and methods should change in a way that may bring into question the project's adherence to acceptable ethical norms, please submit a "Request for Ethics Clearance of a Revision or Modification" form for approval before the changes are put into place. This form can also be used to extend protocols past their expiry date, except in cases where the project is more than four years old. Those projects require a new REB application.

Please note that you are responsible for obtaining any further approvals that might be required to complete your project.

Laurier REB approval will automatically expire when one's employment ends at Laurier.

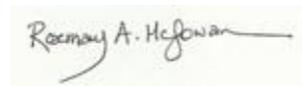
If any participants in your research project have a negative experience (either physical, psychological or emotional) you are required to submit an "Adverse Events Form" within 24 hours of the event.

You must complete the online "Annual/Final Progress Report on Human Research Projects" form annually and upon completion of the project. ROMEO will automatically keep track of these annual reports for you. When you have a report due within 30 days (and/or an overdue report) it will be listed under the 'My Reminders' quick link on your ROMEO home screen; the number in brackets next to 'My Reminders' will tell you how many reports need to be submitted. Protocols with overdue annual reports will be marked as expired. Further the REB has been requested to notify Research Finance when an REB protocol, tied to a funding account has been marked as expired. In such cases Research Finance will immediately freeze funding tied to this account.

All the best for the successful completion of your project.

(Useful links: [ROMEO Login Screen](#) ; [REB Students Webpage](#); [REB Connect Webpage](#))

Yours sincerely,



Rosemary A. McGowan, PhD
Vice-Chair, University Research Ethics Board
Wilfrid Laurier University

APPENDIX B – Recruitment Letter



MCEC

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Kitchener ON, N2G 3R1
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Toll Free 855-476-2500
Website: www.mcec.ca

May 30, 2019

Dear XXXXXXX

I am inviting you to participate in a research study. The researcher, Kara Carter, pastor of Wellesley Mennonite Church is a doctoral candidate in the "Human Relations - Pastoral Leadership" program at Martin Luther University College, and has chosen to do a narrative study involving MCEC pastors. The focus of this research study is to investigate the lived experience of MCEC pastors as they respond and adapt to a changing ministry context. This research project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University (Approval #6136). This research project involves three to six focus group interviews consisting of three to four participants each, representative of MCEC's diversity including geographic area spanning Ontario and east to New Brunswick.

As we are currently witnessing, shifting trends within and beyond the walls of the church are reshaping Christianity in our present context. Because the way forward looks nothing like the path the church has journeyed, church leaders, theologians, and scholars as Kara recognize the need for innovative and adaptive leadership expertise to meet the opportunities and challenges of the present time. The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to examine and interpret narratively, predominant narratives within MCEC congregations in order to identify barriers and facilitators and their impact on organizational culture change. Stories are containers of meaning, experience, values, assumptions and a tool to help us understand our complex context of ministry. The goal of this study is to enable MCEC pastors to engage with their experience with congregational stories, to tell, re-tell and re-story narratives in order to lead congregations into God's future.

Once you have read this information letter, if you are interested in participating in a focus group interview with 3 to 4 MCEC colleagues, please **complete and email the attached demographic sheet to Kara at carterka@perth.net within a week (by June 7)**, which will aid in the selection of a diverse sampling of focus group participants. The researcher will select research participants. All participants will be individually contacted. Selected participants of this study will be asked to select an interview time from suggested dates. Should you be selected, please **bring the signed consent form** and completed demographic form **to the interview**. Should you have any questions feel free to call Kara at 519-749-5008 or her church office at 519-656-2700.

MCEC has chosen to sponsor this project because we believe that it has the potential to significantly impact the health of MCEC congregations. This study is timely as MCEC supports congregational leaders as together we seek to align with God's mission within our local contexts.

For more details, please review the enclosed letter from Kara and get back to us if you have questions. Please give this invitation your prayerful consideration. Your participation in this research project would be both appreciated and valuable.

Sincerely,

David Martin, Executive Minister

Extending the Peace of Jesus Christ • making disciples • growing congregations • forming leaders



APPENDIX C – Information Letter and Consent Form

INFORMATION LETTER

God's Story, Our Story: Telling, Re-telling and Re-storying: A Narrative Inquiry

Principal investigator: Kara Carter, PhD candidate, Martin Luther University College

Advisor: Dr. Kristine Lund, Assistant Principal Martin Luther University College

Dear MCEC Colleague,

You have been invited, in consultation with David Martin MCEC Executive Minister, to participate in a research study. The focus of this research study is to investigate the lived experience of MCEC pastors as they respond and adapt to a changing context. The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to examine and interpret narratively, predominant narratives within MCEC congregations in order to identify barriers and facilitators and their impact on organizational culture change. The goal of this study is to enable MCEC pastors to engage with their experience with congregational stories, to tell, re-tell and re-story narratives in order to lead congregations into God's future. This project will constitute a contribution to the field of pastoral leadership. This research project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board at Wilfrid Laurier University (Approval #6136). This research project will involve three to six focus groups consisting of three to four participants each representative of MCEC's diversity including geographic area which spans across Ontario and extends east to New Brunswick.

Once you have read this information letter, if you are interested in participating in a focus group interview with 3 to 4 MCEC colleagues, please **complete and send back the attached demographic sheet** to the researcher Kara Carter at **carterka@perth.net within a week (by June 7)**, which will aid in the selection of a diverse sampling of focus group participants. All participants will be individually contacted by the researcher. Selected participants of the study will be individually emailed and asked to select an interview time from suggested dates. Should you be selected, please **bring the signed consent form and demographic form to the interview.**

Research data will be collected through focus group interviews. Focus groups will take place in a congregational setting. The appointed time and place of the interview will be confirmed, and the participants will engage in a 60 to 90-minute-long conversation that will be digitally recorded. In order for the interview to be digitally recorded, consent will have been given on a signed form. The interview will begin with the consent process being reiterated, asking whether there are any questions or concerns, and reminding the participant that they can conclude the conversation at anytime. The conversation will be open-ended with the purpose of understanding the lived experience of pastors as they respond and adapt to a changing ministry context.

Following the interview, the researcher will draft a narrative account of the stories that emerged in the interview, with all identifying information removed to protect the participant's

privacy. This draft will be reviewed by the participants to verify quotes, facts, and to confirm that the stories reflect the conversation. Focus group participants will be asked to give final consent to use part or the full narrative account as written by the researcher, by signing the final part of the consent form.

There are limited risks to this research, but the potential of minimal psychological or emotional risks could arise from asking participants to reflect amongst MCEC colleagues, deeply on their lived experience. There is an additional risk because of the dual nature of the researcher as colleague of MCEC participants. It is noteworthy that this research depends on diverse personal responses that create a rich description of participant experiences. Interactions will be respectful, allowing for difference. The potential of dual relationship with participants will require clarification that the researcher and participants are currently engaged in a narrative inquiry study that is seeking deeper understanding of the lived experience of research participant. If there is need for follow-up conversations due to emotional or psychological consequences, the researcher will be available. 24-hour counselling service is available by phoning HERE247 at 1-844-437-3247, Waterloo Region 24/7 Crisis Line at 1-844-437-3247, York Support Services 1-855-310-COPE (2673), Distress Centre Niagara 905-688-3711, Delton Glebe Counseling Centre 519-884-3305 and other resources will be found as needed. If needed, referral will be made to an alternate conversation partner, Marilyn Rudy-Froese MCEC Leadership Minister.

It is expected that through this research study the researcher and the participants will discover together a deeper understanding of congregational narratives including potential barriers and facilitators impacting organizational culture change.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions, to refuse to be recorded, or to end the conversation at any time. During the research, no participant's information will be shared with another by name. Pseudonyms will be used orally and in all written account. All direct quotes, facts and dates will be verified with the participants. Focus group participants are invited to keep the conversation/interview confidential. With approximately 110 MCEC congregations, it is possible that in the narratives of this study, the stories may be identifiable. This will be discussed with the participants and included on the signed consent form. In addition, the narrative inquiry participants will have opportunity to review the drafts to approve the account of the co-constructed conversation.

Digital recordings of the interview will be kept on a separate portable hard-drive, double password protected, and secured in a locked office in the researcher's home. Hard copies of field notes and transcribed material will be protected and secured as well. All written material will remove identifying information and use pseudonyms. The researcher and the research advisory committee will review the personal data on the demographic sheets to determine the sampling to be studied. The researcher and advisory committee are the only ones who will have access to interview data collected from participants.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, Kara Carter at Wellesley Mennonite Church 519-656-2700. This project has been reviewed and approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (approval #6136). If you

have any concerns regarding your participation, you may contact **Dr. Jayne Kalmar**, Chair University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University at **519-884-0710 x 3131** or by email REBChair@wlu.ca.

The information letter has been sent to potential research participants in consultation with David Martin, MCEC Executive Ministry. The researcher looks forward to hearing from you if you are interested. Thank you for considering this request to deepen our capacity as pastoral leaders.

Kara Carter, Principle Investigator
PhD Candidate, Martin Luther University College

Consent

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form.

I agree to participate in this study. _____

I agree to be audio taped ____

I will have opportunity to vet direct quotes prior to publication ____

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

-

APPENDIX D – Demographic Information Form

**MARTIN LUTHER UNIVERSITY COLLEGE – Data for Sampling Selection
God’s Story, Our Story: Telling, Re-telling and Re-storying: A Narrative Inquiry**

Principal Investigator: Kara Carter, PhD candidate, Martin Luther University College

Advisor: Dr. Kristine Lund, Assistant Principal Martin Luther University College

Dear colleague,

Thank you for expressing an interest in participating in the research study regarding leading change. As explained in the introductory letter, the researcher will interview a diverse sampling of MCEC pastors **SELECTED IN CONSULTATION WITH MCEC EXECUTIVE MINISTER DAVID MARTIN**. To that end, please indicate your interest by filling out this simple demographic page. Non-identifying information will serve as data in the final report. It is hoped that a diverse sampling will allow the researcher to explore the variety of lived experiences of MCEC pastors.

1. How long have you served in pastoral ministry? _____

2. Age Range: (check one box)

30-34 [] 35-44 [] 45-54 [] 55 – 64 [] 65+ []

3. What is your role in your present MCEC congregation? _____

4. How many years have you been in this role? _____

5. How many churches have you served? _____

6. Describe your training/ educational preparation for pastoral ministry?

7. What year was your congregation founded? _____

8. Briefly describe the congregation's background. _____

9. What style best describes your approach to conflict? (Check one)

- Accommodating
- Avoiding
- Collaborating
- Competing
- Compromising

10. What best describes your predominant pastoral leadership style? (Check one)

- Entrepreneur – a leader who casts vision and inspires others
- Shepherd – cares for the lost, the least, the hurting
- Teacher – studies and teaches the Word of God
- Administrator – excellent at creating plan and strategies; delegating tasks

11. Ethnicity:

I have lived in Canada all my life []

I was born in _____

12. Language:

I speak these languages fluently _____

Other comments:

Thank you very much.

Kara Carter, Principal Investigator

APPENDIX E – Focus Group Research/Interview Questions

1. Would you describe your current context of ministry as stable or unstable? Why?
2. How would you describe your experience adapting and responding to a changing ministry context?
3. What are the stories that have been disruptive, challenging, or transformational?
4. What have been some of your personal learnings?
5. What have been learnings for the congregation as you take this journey together?
6. How do you experience the congregations' predominant stories? What values, assumptions, or beliefs are embedded in these stories? Are stories hope-filled? Are they binding?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say? Is there anything else you would have like asked that hasn't been asked?

APPENDIX F – Focus Group Narratives

NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

FOCUS GROUP #1

PARTICIPANTS: Thomas, Li, Kale, and Eshe

**God of many languages
cultures, ethnicities, and traditions
God encountered in densely populated urban centres
in the desert places
in your people's faithful seeking**

**Refugee welcome
grass roots movement
institutional change**

**Worship, service, hospitality
mission to the poor,
with the neighbour, and the stranger**

**God of diversity
gathered into one by your Spirit
we find our unity in Jesus Christ.**

I arrived approximately 15 minutes late for the scheduled focus group conversation due to an unexpected highway closure resultant from a multi-vehicle collision. Calling the meeting host from my car while at a complete stop on the major roadway, I was met with gracious understanding. Indeed, upon arrival the research participants shared their own frustrating city traffic experiences, such being the reality of ministry and daily life amidst a sprawling populous urban center. Thomas extended warm hospitality, providing welcome refreshment following 4 ½ hours of travel.

The focus group gathered around a large table in the airy basement gathering space of Thomas' church. The church building was difficult to identify and locate amidst the density of neighbourhood businesses and pedestrian traffic. Unfamiliar with the area, it was a moment of grace in my searching to notice Kale walking down the sidewalk, having just parked his car. He directed me to paid parking and then joined me for the short walk to Dundas Mennonite Church.

Pastors Thomas, Li, Kale, and Eshe embody the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) congregations, diversity which is also noted in each of the pastor's neighbourhood ministry contexts. It is clear to see that the four participants enjoy a close collegial bond, nurtured through formal and informal connections and collaborative ministry experiences. Li, Kale and Eshe as ministering persons have been shaped through the lived experience of immigration (Kale and Eshe) and 2nd generation experience (Li). In all, focus group participants speak six languages: English, Cantonese, German, Amharic, Lao, and Thai.

Mentioning the word “language” several times in our conversation, these grace-filled pastors discussed congregational beginnings and foundational roots, congregational partnerships and collaboration, and congregational growing edges related to “language” as each seeks to respond and adapt to a changing ministry context.

Pastor Li has served in pastoral ministry for 20 years. A son of Chinese immigrants, Li spoke with fondness about his introduction and welcome to the Mennonite Church. Some 40 years previous, Li’s parents received a knock on their door informing them “there is a Chinese school happening at the local church.” “Pastor William” spiritual leader of the local Mennonite Church “and the church decided to just go knocking on doors.” That knock served as an important “foot in the door.” Li attended Cantonese language classes in the very space the focus group gathered. Li reflected that for the early church planters, “it was a surprise that there were a lot of [Cantonese speaking] people in this neighbourhood.” Many children came to Dundas Mennonite for language classes. Ultimately, it was the children that began the ministry of Pastor’s Li’s current congregation, Crosstown Mennonite. Following, “parents came.” The ministry of offering language classes to immigrant families within the local neighbourhood has nurtured abundant fruit.

Pastor Thomas who grew up speaking Low German is the current pastoral leader of Dundas Mennonite. With sharp memory, he recalls Pastor William’s wife, Joan who was “passionate about how the language ought to be taught. She knew the right way and she knew substandard ways” he mused. Youth- focused pedagogy related to language and writing skills grounded Joan’s passionate teaching.

Pastor Eshe is an immigrant from Ethiopia and speaks with a thick accent. He is soft-spoken and well-connected with his colleagues. Eshe’s congregation is experiencing fast growth through immigrant population. Amharic and Oromo people-groups value the experience of belonging and connectedness as they worship together in a common language.

Pastor Kale, a bi-vocational pastor immigrated to Canada as a refugee in 1980. He has served in a Canadian context for 15 years and leads a vibrant multicultural faith community. Ministry for this joyful pastor includes offering “translation work.” Kale likes to help neighbours by teaching “basic English in the church” before worship gatherings. Beyond assisting with language, when neighbours have problems with immigration or with the courts, he accompanies them. With such frequent trips to the immigration center, it feels “like my home.” Indeed, so well known at the local courthouse, Kale was asked by a court employee if he wants a job there. The neighbourhood that connects with Pastor Kale’s congregation is a “mixed” neighbourhood including Congolese, Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

Both Kale and Li noted the experience of navigating multiple languages in their congregations. At present Kale’s congregation worships in “four different languages every Sunday.” In order “to feel at home” in worship, congregants are encouraged to read their bible in “their own language” whether it be Vietnamese, Chinese, Mandarin, Thai, or English.

Li oversees three congregations under the umbrella of Crosstown Mennonite at one location: Mandarin speaking, Cantonese speaking, and English speaking respectively. The first-generation founding congregation “started with one language. It was Cantonese in worship.” The Mandarin speaking congregation was birthed from the outreach ministry of the Cantonese congregation and the second-generation young people formed the English-speaking congregation. Crosstown’s three congregations gather for joint worship services “about six times per year and it’s like the UN assembly.” Li notes that with three language groups, “we have to carefully balance which is the priority language.” For example, at Christmas the speaker may be Mandarin. At Easter the speaker may be Cantonese. Expressing pastoral concern Li stressed how important it is that people feel “honoured” and that language not be “a barrier.”

Translation receives special attention in Li and Kale’s congregations. Li values flexibility saying occasionally in worship, power point with summary translation is used rather than word for word translation. Pastor Kale laughingly interjected saying, “If you take too long [for translation] they will just leave!”

With awareness of cultural differences Kale notes he has “to be careful” when inviting guest speakers, being clear sermon length expectation for his congregation is 20 to 30 minutes’ maximum. While a four-hour sermon is normative in Thailand, Kale laughingly adds that in Canada, “people will go to sleep.” Delicate and deliberate attentiveness to culture and present ministry context is vital to Kale’s leadership.

While Li, Kale, and Eshe’s congregations were birthed from immigration/refugee beginnings, such is not the case for Thomas’s congregation. Dundas Mennonite was “started as a city mission.” “Identity” emerged as a significant theme amongst focus group participants. When sharing predominant congregational stories, congregational identity emerged. Origin stories, communal values, mission and vision contribute to identity. First generation congregations experience a common identity related to their immigrant/refugee experience identity. Eshe’s immigrant population congregation values gathering around a common identity related to origins, immigration experience, faith practice, and language. “Provisional Membership” within MCEC is an identity marker for Eshe’s congregation as they journey toward “Full Membership” status. Li notes that congregational homogenous cultural identity is shifting due to inter-marriage.

Thomas said that a “mission identity was determinative of the beginning of the story” and “mission identity has been imprinted on the Dundas congregation.” “City mission” emerged when “a group Mennonites from as far as 80 miles away responded practically and financially to an outreach opportunity to the poor areas of the city. Thomas noted a new identity emerged during a congregational visioning process some 20 years ago. Both pastor and congregation were delightfully surprised when data and storytelling revealed that a large number of members had been involved in voluntary service nationally and/or internationally. In response to such rich congregational resource and personal experience, the congregation established a “Mennonite Voluntary Service” unit bringing together international young adults to serve in various ministries. According to Thomas “volunteerism was something the congregation could heartily support.” Thus, volunteerism emerged as an identity.

With vulnerability and deep sorrow, Thomas shared that Dundas' mission identity has recently come under scrutiny as a painful historical event recently re-emerged. He reflected that for years Dundas viewed "itself as a place where there is grace for people." Radical welcome, rehabilitation, healing, restoration, and forgiveness are values deeply woven into the congregation's narrative. Faced with revisiting a painful past, "now our narrative, our story is such that we need to find an identity." He added, "How should we identify? Who are we in the desert?" Amidst present disorientation he wonders, "Who are we now?"

Leadership that includes "adaptation" and "experimentation" emerged as participants discussed engagement with the local neighbourhood. Eshe reflected on the development of Sunday School programming. Through invitation, neighbourhood children have begun attending and now "most of the people now bring friends." Li shared that the Mandarin congregation at one time would say, "Let's have an evangelistic event...make it big, lots of music, lots of activities, have food then people will come and [we will] follow up with them." Li's said that the English-speaking congregation "has gone through coffee houses, evangelistic meetings. We recognize that story has not worked for us." In response, "we've been experimenting with different things that connect with community." One experiment involves financing and building a community garden.

Building relationships and engaging collaboratively arose as vital for these pastoral leaders. Li's congregation is applying for a pollinator garden, bringing together the David Suzuki Foundation, a local butterfly club, and congregational financial resources. Vacation Bible School (VBS) is a collaborative venture for Thomas, Li, and Eshe's congregations. Dundas Mennonite began the VBS ministry and at that time Crosstown contributed children, money, and volunteers. Eventually as church membership and demographics shifted, Crosstown Mennonite took on primary leadership for VBS and today, Eshe's congregation's children also attend.

Focus group participants shared stories that exhibit risk-taking in the face of obstacles and barriers. Kale's congregation "fought the city for some time to get a permit" during their search for a building in which to gather for worship. Despite resistance from local landlords and caution from denominational leadership regarding debt load, sights were set on purchasing a building rather than renting. Kale challenged denomination leadership saying, "if we can't make it, MCEC will own it anyway." After a lengthy search a non-commercial building was purchased, and the congregation has managed debt load exceedingly well.

Together Eshe and Thomas took a risk by bringing together ethnic MCEC pastors and a staff person from Mennonite Central Committee, the 100-year-old justice and service arm of the Mennonite Church. The question asked of the institution, "why is this Mennonite institution not sponsoring refugees that were Ethiopian?" When Ethiopian's literal brothers and sisters are in refugee camps, this made no sense to Pastor Eshe and other pastoral leaders. According to Thomas, MCC changed "their philosophy about who they sponsor" as did another local not-for-profit refugee sponsoring group. Thomas added, "Now the Ethiopian church here have sponsored family upon family. They have sponsored many people who are friends, relations, and sometimes literally blood brothers and sisters from South Africa, from Kenya, from South Sudan, from all kinds of places." Pastor Eshe said he did not know why MCC was not working through the

church saying, “if they work through the church, so many things change.” Ultimately institutional policy and philosophy was changed due to questions arising from grass roots.

Kale, Li, and Eshe are intentional about connecting with the wider community. Kale’s congregation holds three main events annually including food collection for local food bank and a Christmas dinner “which is drawing people from outside.” Li’s congregation is home to a senior’s group and a pre-school and neighbours enjoy the community garden. Eshe’s congregation is geographically widespread, extending beyond the borders of the large urban center which they call home. With immigrant population on the move across Canada, looking to smaller urban centres as possible future church plants involves ongoing strategic planning, visioning, and solid leadership. Connecting with immigrants is a developing narrative.

As focus group time quickly slipped away, in closing Pastor Thomas spoke again about his congregation’s current challenge and acknowledged that the congregation is in the midst of an evolving and unfolding story. Amidst the challenges and opportunities of each story and ministry context, each are intricately held within the ongoing story of God’s grace, reconciliation, and restoration.

NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

FOCUS GROUP #2

PARTICIPANTS: Grant, Ken (two Zoom participants not recorded)

Origin stories and identity

Ministry located at a threshold

Responding and adapting

Pioneering spirit and settler stability

Community paradoxes

Clarifying vision and mission

The focus group included four Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) pastors, representative of diverse ministry contexts, gender, age, and pastoral experience. Grant welcomed Ken and I to his church's boardroom and due to geographic distance Laurene and Jake joined via ZOOM. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties Laurene and Jake's participation was not recorded. Their rich contribution is deeply missed in this narrative account. Upon arrival Grant indicated he had another meeting to attend to immediately following our discussion. Ken arrived dressed in a dark suit, having just attended to a grieving family at a local funeral home. Despite the "lazy hazy crazy days" of July, ministry continues at full pace for these engaged pastors.

Referencing "community" several times in our conversation, pastors Ken and Grant exhibited attentiveness to their neighbourhood community and the core value of "community" embodied by their respective congregations. Ken, pastor at Elmwood Mennonite Church for 8 years acknowledges the congregation does not "have a community that just naturally wanders by the church."

Established in the mid-1980's, South Lawn congregants travel from many communities, upwards of 30 minutes' commuting distance, impacting "carbon footprints along the way." "Mennonites tend to value their community almost above all" according to Grant. Indeed, for South Lawn, "the priority is on the community." Grant suggests this core value may be holding the congregation back from engaging more outwardly, the most immediate neighbours to the church property, hospitality-industry related. Hoping "to tap into that," is a current agenda item for South Lawn's leadership. While considering neighbourhood engagement at the same time Grant said, "we're not going to go out door to door." "Shyness" is present and there is hesitation to "disrupt the harmony in our conformity."

In response to Grant's remarks Ken notes a tension saying, "for a tradition that relies on its' well being to have this strong sense of community, we follow this Jesus character who is this completely iconoclast, who disrupted community in all times and places in pursuit of something that could be better." It is paradoxical that God's movement within community is disruptive and threatens "the wonderful sense of community that has sustained us."

Both Grant and Ken shared congregation origin stories and how beginnings impact community identity. When Elmwood tells their story they say they have a "pioneering spirit."

Established as a church plant in the mid-1960's, the congregation made the decision "right from the get-go that they would sit as families" rather than worship divided according to gender. The congregation was made up of risk takers, pioneers, and settlers. Ironically however for Ken, "pioneers become settlers when they get tired of being pioneers." While Elmwood's "self-perception is that we are a pioneering community, quite honestly we are tired of change." The change Ken is referring to relates to changing congregational demographics including life-stage transitions, aging population, and marked decline of children and youth.

Origin stories that impact South lawn involve the building and congregational leadership structure. The founders of South Lawn "have great satisfaction" that they built the building and contributed to a prominent architectural feature. The feature holds rich theological, historical, and personal meaning for its earliest members. Those who have integrated into the faith community since its beginnings "do not have a sense of ownership or connection to that history."

Related to congregational decision-making, South Lawn is a church that "likes to process things, debate and discuss things." Grant suggests this "may arise from their beginning when they really wanted to be a strong lay led church." Originally, this leadership structure was "doable" and overall, it "served the church well." However, "newer attendees with absence of strong ownership want more professional leadership instead of self/lay leadership."

Related to church buildings and property and the potential to enhance local ministry opportunities, Grant suggests there are "lots of creative things that can be done around the building" including construction of a healing lodge, a permanent labyrinth, or removal of "ugly" out-buildings.

Ownership and protection are attached to church buildings related to community use. In a previous ministry context Grant experienced congregational resistance to community activities in church recreational space. Grant launched a floor hockey event and initiated bringing in artists once per month. In response he heard "they're making a mess. They're not cleaning up." Resistance led Grant to reflect upon an important question connected congregational mission and vision asking: "what is this building for?"

Furthering the focus on building use and congregational resistance, Ken added, "If people can't see a purpose to our program, the littlest thing becomes an issue" such as an unlocked door or "pair of runners left in the corner." Ken suggests, "If we're getting tripped up on about scuff marks on the gym floor clearly, we're not clear on our why."

A significant leadership challenge for Ken is related to major congregational demographic shifts. Ken observes that "15 or 20 years ago Elmwood had a significant number of farmers." Upon retirement, a significant number "moved into town." Also noted was a sharp decline in child and youth and transient young adult population. Ken reflects, "when you're having these kinds of changes, your old solutions don't work anymore." With insight he added, "that kind of change is not something you can just innovate or pioneer your way out of." He is aware "there's some pretty massive shifts that need to happen." This intuitive pastor trusts in his congregation's capacity to "tolerate almost anything for a while." For example, the congregation experimented with intergenerational Sunday School. Upon evaluation, he shared a significant

learning saying had there been significant numbers of children, “it might not have been the same good idea.”

Grant welcomes change and also values experimentation. South Lawn is tapping into creative energy. Puzzles, yarn, needles, and patterns for knitting are made available to the congregation “during the worship service.”

Ken spoke metaphorically to describe the experience of responding and adapting to change. He likens congregational change to an “inch worm.” While leading edge congregants are eager to adapt and move forward other hold tightly to the past. Ken is attentive to the need to pace movement of the entirety of the “inch worm” for fear it could tear apart. He expressed hope in that to date the inch worm has not fractured. Ken keeps systems theory and J-curve theory in mind as the congregation negotiates change which foundationally assert “when change happens things get worse first.” He drew upon the biblical story of the exodus wilderness wanders and their orientation under duress to return to the “fleshpots of Egypt” to illustrate.

Deep awareness was expressed that the church is at a threshold. Both Elwood and South Lawn are situated between what was and what is yet to be, a liminal space. Amidst changing demographics when old solutions no longer work, the congregation is “trying to figure out what it means to be Elmwood Mennonite Church” and “what might be a future for us.”

Ken acknowledges that he lives with a profound sense of awareness that over the next 30 years he “will be trained to do the job” he is doing today. He believes that in 30 years he will have the experience to navigate what he is doing at present. He added “If I’m leading it’s only in the sense that it’s hiking at night with no flashlight, and I just happen to be going first and stepping over things. I can’t see any better than anyone else.”

With awareness that there is a need to release some things from the past Grant acknowledges “we just can’t do church like we’ve always done it.” While not clear what is ahead, he points to two recently formed non-traditional congregations that are experimenting with innovative ways of being the church in a changing world.

Ken’s congregation has been immersed over the past several years in discussion and practices to engage more outwardly. He acknowledges however, “there’s still this idea that somehow what this really is ‘if we build it, they will come.’” Hearing the yearning to build “better” or “bigger” or run programs as a neighbouring congregation Ken is aware that neighbourhood engagement “is not necessarily even going to be anything that we will do in this building.” Some congregants have adopted new practices within their neighbourhood on Sunday mornings apart from corporate worship.

Grant offering his reflection regarding neighbourhood engagement said, “Mennonites don’t like to do outreach.” Mennonites tend to “value their community almost above all.” A wondering hung mid air following lively participant interaction: “how do Mennonites talk about why they go to church?”

In closing, with awareness that the church is moving through a significant season of change Ken speaks from a place of self-awareness and humility saying, “I know what I can do, and I know what I can’t do.” He wonders how the church might incorporate training disciples when the church “has been functioning for the 2000 years” as teaching centres

NARRATIVE ACCOUNT
FOCUS GROUP #3
PARTICIPANTS: Marcel, Peter

The “Hood”
Norman Rockwell small-town charm
Contextual diversity

Neighborhood memory
Transformed and transforming disciples
Healing communities

Radical welcome
Open table hospitality
The lost, the last, the least

Mission and vision
God’s kingdom come

Three pastors accepted the invitation to participate in this focus group interview. One pastor, however, was called upon last minute due to a pastoral care emergency and was therefore unable to attend. Peter and I met together in person and due to geographic distance, Marcel joined through ZOOM.

Both Peter and Marcel are experienced pastors. As this was the first-time meeting one other each offered a brief introduction. Following, each shared a detailed description of their neighbourhood ministry context. The diversity of their ministry contexts was stark!

Marcel is personable and enthusiastic and ministers in an under-resourced neighbourhood in a large urban center. The neighbourhood is “tough” and has a bad reputation due to warring gang violence dating back to the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Gang violence which included bombings and organized crime has left a lasting imprint in the community and is etched in the neighbourhood’s memory. Neighbours include the poor, homeless, prostitutes, the addicted, and a large population of “teen moms.”

Marcel was called by God during the gang war to start a church in the neighbourhood which he refers to as “the hood.” The New Life congregation is made up of residents of the suburban neighbourhood. While noting the neighbourhood is much safer today than previous decades, tragically Marcel noted that a murder had occurred right behind his home just weeks prior to our conversation. This tragedy was an occasion to remind the community that the streets are safer now than during its dark history.

New Life’s weekly worship style and setting is flexible and unique, having emerged from his ministry partners’ dream in the year 2000. Gatherings were envisioned in a restaurant style setting with round tables, coffee, and people free to come and go. Acquiring furnishings and preparing to live into this dream unfolded over time and in 2013 the congregation “started to

serve breakfast to the community.” The congregation of approximately 30 to 40 persons serves on average 60 meals each Sunday. Marcel stresses discipleship in his teaching and estimates about “40% are newcomers every Sunday.”

Marcel candidly admits that he is “not a “church person” and that he “really does not like church.” Light heartedly he clarified his statement saying, it is not that he doesn’t like church people, “it’s church meetings, pews, sitting and sitting” he is averse to.

Peter is a soft-spoken and gentle man. He has served as a Mennonite pastor for 35 plus years. The small congregation where he currently serves is located in a quaint southwestern Ontario village with population of approximately 400. The neighbourhood is “a little bit like a Norman Rockwell kind of neighbourhood where kids run around each other’s yard.” When the congregation goes carolling in the village, if “somebody doesn’t answer the door” the leader “walks right in to see what’s going on.” This open-door ethos is something one can expect in this village.

Chartwell Mennonite Church was started 70 years ago when neighbouring community Mennonite churches were at capacity. Many of the founding members lived in the small town. They bought an empty church building and started the church. Demographically, the average age at Chartwell is “over 60.” The congregation has “few children and each is a high needs person.” The congregation remembers a time “when there were many kids in Sunday school. But that’s all in the past.” The question “how long is this viable?” is on the table in some form.” Chartwell is “thriving in terms of mature Christian faith. And on the other hand, it is in decline.” The congregation says, “we’ve been in decline for decades.”

Peter described the uniqueness of his neighborhood context with a story. One day he overheard a young boy waiting on the camp school bus shout to his friend, “Jesus wouldn’t want you to do that!” This apparently, is “something you would shout out across the parking lot in this community.” Highlighting the stark difference between ministry contexts Marcel laughingly added that in his community, “probably Jesus would be in the sentence but not that way.”

“Memory” or “remembering” was mentioned several times by both pastors. For Marcel, the memory of gang violence is deeply imprinted in the neighborhood. A different kind of violence is held within the memory of Chartwell Mennonite related to a devastating accident four decades previous which tragically claimed the lives of several community members.

Peter and Marcel shared experiences related to “hospitality.” Responding to a question about their lived experience adapting and responding to a changing ministry context Peter offered a story from a previous ministry context. At the time when new people were coming to town a congregational leader wondered “how can we open our doors to them, and do we want them here?” Further the congregant added, “well, if they want to be like us, we’d love for them to come.” Acknowledging that this story goes back a few decades Peter reflected on this experience in light of his present ministry context saying, “I think where I am now, they wouldn’t say that. They wouldn’t say it and they wouldn’t feel it. And yet, we are so used to the things that we are so used to, we don’t realize the demand we are making on another to fit into

that space.” Peter notes a tension adding, “So I don’t think we’d say that. I don’t think we’d wish it and yet our actions would probably push in that direction.”

Hospitality for Marcel’s congregation is radical, inclusive, risky, and transformative. At New Life “there is no them and us. It is always us.” To avoid creating barriers between people “we never say Christian and non-Christian.” Marcel shared several stories to illustrate the transforming power of hospitality as a spiritual practice: one involving a former crack house security guard who is in process of having “white power” tattoos removed from his face, the other involving the mother of a main-line Christian church colleague from another city who has embraced the non-traditional congregation and worship and has made New Life her home. When Marcel thinks about missional church he thinks about “relationship and risk.” Currently congregational leadership are in discussion regarding painting a radical welcome statement on the outside wall of the church building.

New Life’s building serves as safe refuge, yet another vital example of how far this community is willing to go to extend hospitality. During a particular wintery cold snap, Marcel brought the issue of homeless in the neighbourhood to the congregation’s attention. In response, the congregation made a decision to offer over-night shelter in the building. Several outcomes have emerged including: a major building renovation, formation of a non-profit, collaborative relationships with community partners. Also, many overnight guests stay for breakfast and worship.

As diverse as Marcel and Peter’s ministry contexts are, so too are their leadership styles. During the early years of Peter’s ministry at Chartwell, the Syrian refugee crisis exploded. Peter describes the congregation’s informal decision-making process as “refreshing.” Chartwell’s informality stands in contrast to previous congregational experiences. Peter noted that as Chartwell explored refugee sponsorship there was “no congregational meeting, no motion, no vote, no resistance. The process is really lovely.”

Peter is enriched as a pastoral leader through leadership wisdom from a wide breadth of scholars and professionals. Specialized interim ministry training which stressed the value of “ministry of presence” resonates deeply for this intuitive pastor. Peter stressed that while nobody wants to hire a pastor “that will do the same old” trying to do too much is also not going to work. As a pastoral leader he seeks to be attentive to how much “is on the plate of the church” and how much more can be handled. He is attentive to timing. Is time opportune or is it counterproductive?

Peter affirming the need for innovative leadership drew upon a metaphor to illustrate his approach to leading change. He said “It’s like cutting the dog’s tail off one inch at a time. It’s painful every step of the way. But if you do it all at one, it’s too much.” Peter believes change has to be paced and that “process is important.”

Marcel is an “outside the box” thinker and pastoral leader.” Indeed, he is “so used to thinking outside the box” he admits he has “lost sight of the box.” He values talking to pastors such as Peter who are working in the box and “trying to do the best they can in this reality.”

Marcel sees himself as an innovator, “a mover and shaker” who will admittedly “never stabilize a church.” He is accustomed to bringing about change quickly in response to community needs. At times he initiates new projects by “just pushing” and is very sensitive to times when the community is out of their comfort zones. Having initiated significant change very quickly he has communicated to the community that he will not bring any change to the church before consulting with them. Marcel is learning the value of good process.

Leadership and change for both Peter and Marcel are firmly grounded and guided by congregational vision and mission. When Marcel experienced exhaustion following high energy engagement related to a local refugee crisis, he re-grouped and with clarity reflected, “it is not our call to work with refugees. Our actual mission and vision is for the people of the neighbourhood.” When another urgent community need arose – homelessness - congregational vision and mission informed a response. Peter reflectively added that if you can tie ministry opportunities “back to why this church is here” the congregation has “a much better way of processing.”

Peter shared a story from a previous ministry context that illustrates how at times change occurs in the congregation and the institution has not yet caught up. The experience was related to a theological matter: “would people who were baptized as infants need to be re-baptized?” Many years previous the discussion erupted with strong reactions. However, when re-visited some 20 years later, congregational leaders were surprised to learn it was no longer an issue. Peter is aware that much “churns in the world and the church is not immune.” In response the church can decide to “let that change reform us” or “drag our heels or dig them in.”

Amidst the stories, thoughts, lively interactions, and experiences shared, beautiful collegial connections and affirmations occurred. Peter, acknowledging that MCEC needs out-of-the-box innovator types suggested “presence” is a gift that Marcel brings to the church. And Marcel expressed the value of connecting with “inside the box” pastors such as Peter. With leadership styles and contexts so diverse, Marcel and Peter reflected and learned from each other about decision-making, process, self, and the wider MCEC church.

NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

FOCUS GROUP #4

PARTICIPANTS: Ruth, Yang, Stan, Dan, and Marcie

Established and Evolving

Cultures Colliding

Liminal Spaces

Deep roots

Binding and freeing

Spiritual growth with “Feet to the fire”

Neighbour awareness

Communal identity

God’s people trans4formed

Focus group participants Ruth, Yang, Stan, and Dan were warmly welcomed into a spacious meeting space provided by Ruth at her urban church location. Marcie joined through ZOOM and once technical glitches were resolved participants engaged with lively interaction and conversation. Time together began with each pastor describing their ministry context.

Ruth has pastored 35 plus years spanning 8 congregational calls. She has served in her current congregation Forest Street Mennonite Church, for seven years. Ruth’s congregation is located in the urban core of a southwestern Ontario city. She describes involvement in the community is “as close as the doorstep” and “we don’t have to go looking for it.” Over the years Forest Street has developed programs to meet the needs of community residents including a Saturday supper program attended primarily by community homeless persons and the precariously housed.

Yang, a first-generation pastor is fluent in 5 languages and has served in ministry for 19 years, 15 years at his current congregation. Mercy Mennonite Church is located in a southwestern Ontario city and was established in the mid-1980’s in response to the needs of the local Laotian refugee population. Congregants travel a distance upward of 30 minutes for weekly worship. The original focus of the church was on the Laotian people due to “limitations of the language.” However, since its beginnings second and third generation congregants are marrying and dating English speakers, creating new dynamics for the congregation.

Stan has served in his current pastoral role for 16 years. During his 34-year pastoral career, Stan has enjoyed long-time pastorates. Smithville Mennonite Church is one of two congregations that he has faithfully served. The congregation is approaching its 100th anniversary and is amongst the oldest of MCEC congregations. The congregation is served by a ministry team of three pastors. This gentle and wise pastor describes Smithville as a “regional church” of agrarian background although agriculture is no longer a strong element in the church. Congregants travel on average about 20 kilometers for weekly worship, mostly from two larger towns near by. While the congregation boasts deep roots and generational family connections,

others are connecting as well. The congregation is quite intergenerational and includes a “fairly large population at a local nursing home.”

Dan’s congregation, founded in 1840 traces its roots to white European settlers of Swiss background who fled persecution. Settling first in the United States many eventually migrated to Canada. Today there is greater diversity at Everly Mennonite Church in terms of families from the community and from other backgrounds. Dan acknowledged “we really don’t have neighbours” beyond a farm across the road. Situated in a rural setting, congregants travel upwards of 30 kilometers for worship. “Short on babies at the moment” and with noted dip in Sunday School, the congregation boasts a significant young adult demographic. Despite many young adults going off to university for studies, “many are circling around back.” Congregational leadership is thinking about their young adults as they look to their future.

Marcie has served in pastoral ministry for 8 years. The Loewen United Mennonite Church is Russian Mennonite background and was founded in 1948. Located in a large urban centre the congregation is “somewhat progressive” theologically and includes people from many different backgrounds, gender diversity, and sexual orientations. The congregation is very supportive of women in leadership and prides itself on a history of refugee sponsorship. Marcie describes the congregation as a “commuter church.” Because congregants are geographically distant, youth event scheduling is a challenge. Congregants scattered across the expansive urban center come together to “be at a Mennonite Church that has a Sunday school.” The congregation, from its beginnings has drawn people in from their Mennonite roots, including students.

Shared stories about their lived experience adapting and responding to a changing ministry context highlighted how each pastor is leading in a liminal space between what was and what is yet to be.

Liminality was especially evident in Forest Street’s context. Ruth noted that congregational structure, “part of the church for 100 years” is “not working for us as well anymore because people’s lives are busy.” Structure once served as an “avenue to live into the vision” no longer “functions’ as a helpful avenue.” Additionally, Sunday morning worship patterns have shifted to “once a month, twice is regular attendance.” Also, there is a disconnect between history and knowledge as evidenced when the Worship committee met together to reflect on the services in Advent. Ruth noted that “nobody except the pastoral staff had been to the services in Advent. So, nobody could reflect except for the staff.”

Another example of liminality concerns the role of deacons whose responsibility it has been to pay attention to the spiritual and emotional health and physical wellbeing of the congregation. Ruth notes, “we are a revolving door in the core” with people coming and going. Accordingly, “the deacons no longer necessarily know who the people are in the pews.” It is a challenge to discern congregational spiritual and emotional care needs when leaders do not know their fellow congregants. With deep awareness Ruth stated, “the church that I trained for doesn’t exist. And I think we just need to start recognizing that.”

Yang’s congregation straddles a cultural threshold with one foot in Southeast Asian culture and the other in Canadian culture. Rooted in the refugee experience and Canadian settledness also situates Mercy at a unique threshold. When Mercy looks ahead, they think

mainly about language. Yang noted, “we are not ready to switch to English worship because we have some people who are not yet 100% English speaking.” Yang is aware that many traditional sister congregations in their history have navigated the shift of language in worship, many transitioning from German to English. Reflecting upon cultural adaptation Yang added that Laotian people coming from a Buddhist tradition believed Canada is a “Christian country and this makes it more difficult to do mission here the same as back in southeast Asia” where door to door evangelism was normative.

Stan noted at Smithville, “there was probably still a post 50’s 60’s expectation among some people, a few people, that church is a good place to go. If you had programs, if you are welcoming, you make connections there would be at least a few people who would connect or re-connect with the church or moving into the community would connect.” He added “that has shifted tremendously over the years to church being one of many options and now to church being looked at by many as being irrelevant or even harmful.”

Marcie notes “a lot of people think they know the church.” However, “they are referring to a church that they used to know so it’s hard to speak into what the church is at present.” To which Stan added, “church is alma mater.”

Liminality is also revealed through congregational expectations. Dan noted that at Everly the congregation continues to expect the pastor to make a visit annually. He added, “there’s this old mythology about what the church is supposed to do for us that is no longer feasible or even consistent with the good news.”

Congregational buildings are a rich resource for furthering God’s mission. Both Ruth and Marci’s congregations own multiple buildings. Loewen Mennonite owns a building in which programming is run by the congregation in support of women who have been victimized by human trafficking. The building is also shared with a new Canadian congregation and houses a Mennonite immigration centre which was founded some 30 years ago. These ministries ensure the building sitting in the middle of the city is serving a useful purpose during the week.

Forest Street also owns a number of properties. Community partners rent the space and run their own programs including refugee resettlement and a program for men who are transitioning back into the community following time in rehabilitation.

Both Dan and Stan have experience with major building projects. Having navigated major hurdles and resultant delays, Dan’s congregation is anticipating ground-breaking for a major building project. Dan notes the congregation’s biggest worry related to the build is this community perception: “What are people thinking? They must be doing a lousy job that we don’t have it together, that we’re wasting our money, that we’re irresponsible, that we’re dreaming too big. The list is endless as to what we are worried about.”

A predominant story connected to building project for Stan’s congregation is articulated as a journey of “40 years in the wilderness” as experienced by the Israelite exiles. Relating to Dan’s congregation’s prolonged building process, Stan noted it took almost 40 years for Smithville Mennonite to build a large addition. Ironically, construction occurred at a time when

“attendance was waning,” at a time when younger people were not “really into an institution church model” much preferring “to give money to the poor not to buildings and budgets and stuff.” Thus, the “promised land” looked different than anticipated.

Engagement in mission including neighbourhood engagement is a primary ministry focus for Ruth, Stan, and Dan.

In recent years Dan has focused on resourcing congregants “to go out in their neighbourhood.” Stan, a culturally aware pastor acknowledges he is making the shift from “trying to sort of being out there, welcoming people in, to helping people in the congregation to make connections where they are at work and in their community.” With recognition that there are many points of contact between people who seek to follow Jesus and others, Stan added, meaningful connections will be “in those contexts much more than in buildings and programs.” With humility Stan added that he is not saying he has done a good job encouraging outward engagement, but it is the transition that “he is making.” Stan’s congregation has a “strong history of mission,” missionaries, and support of local Resource Centre “probably more in terms of financial giving than actually being involved.”

Ruth’s congregation is in a unique position related to community engagement in that the church employs a staff person whose ministry responsibilities focuses on issues such as community needs, Indigenous reconciliation, climate action and ore. Thinking missionally is “just part of our DNA.” Indeed, according to Ruth, “it comes fairly easily or naturally to us.” She relates congregational missional culture to its history. 70 to 80 years previous Forest Street established a local Thrift Stores in response to community needs.

Yang noted that for refugee people coming from different countries to western culture, “mission” single-mindedly translates to “evangelism,” telling somebody about Jesus Christ. For Laotian people evangelism includes speaking with, visiting, handing out materials, and talking about Jesus Christ. Yang, a soft-spoken gentle pastor speaks about the unique challenges of being raised in a different culture than his current congregation. Yet similarly across cultures “mission” is understood as “evangelism.” Indeed, Yang’s pastoral identity in his homeland was that of “missionary.”

Marcie stated “our mission is to provide community for each other.... The church becomes the place where many come to find connection with other people that share their values.” When Loewen Mennonite talks about community they are referring to themselves, “how we are scattered people that come together to form community.”

Lived experience including the refugee experience, related to congregational roots, and the presence of congregational shame shape and inform congregational identity. Each pastor in their storytelling peeled back layers that disclosed congregational identity.

Dan, a joyful kind pastor shared a story emerging from a Lenten worship service. Congregants were invited to record on a sticker, “one word or short phrase” in response to: “how do others label you?” Dan estimates 95% of congregants responded with: “I don’t feel like I am enough not good enough, fast enough, smart enough, attractive enough. Something isn’t

enough in our lives.” Pondering the congregation’s response in light of MCEC’s vision and ongoing resourcing for congregations to engage locally, Dan wondered: “Is that what’s holding us back from thinking we have something to offer? We don’t want to get down and friendly with our neighbours because we’re just not certain we have something of worth.” Dan is deeply curious why the congregation believes they are not enough. He believes a bequest “has really pushed to the surface our feelings” including how hard it is to “accept grace, lavish unexplainable gifting. Oh, its messing us! And it’s good! It’s been spiritual growth with our feet to the fire. And good things have come out of it.”

Ruth identified an embedded congregational story related to a divisive historical and theological event. In 1924, a group of people from a neighbouring congregation left the church over a dress code issue. In response, “the embedded consciousness is that Forest Street is kind of this radical discipleship place.” Forest Street is “known for working at social issues.” Forest Street includes a group of people known as “recovering evangelicals.” Ruth describes this group as those who “have been harmed in past congregations because of strong evangelicalism, more conservative theology.” They have sought a congregation different from their theological and spiritual roots. Amidst congregational diversity, “people are asking the question about theological and biblical identity.”

Stan drew upon deep historical roots and the geographic context of Smithsville saying the area “was settled by Mennonites, Lutherans and Catholics from the same Alsace area. So, there’s this real strong sense of Christendom.... everybody historically is already Christian.” This has shaped local culture in that “it’s very important to be a good member of this community... an upstanding member of the community.” This ethos is evidenced in the church through strong family connections and “beyond the church there’s this fear that anything you say will find its way back through the grapevine.” On one hand strong appreciation is expressed for support of friendship, while on the other at time congregants are overly cautious about speaking up out of fear of what others will think which can lead to a lack of transparency. As it is at Everly Mennonite Stan notes the congregation in some way communicates, “how will local congregations assess what we are doing?” To which Marcie asserted, “What will people think is part of the Mennonite DNA!”

Marcie made a further connection between the fear of being watched with ways Mennonites have understood “mission as witness” saying, “There is a deep fear of giving offense.” Referring to deeply entrenched fear-based story she said, “I think this story needs to be dug up a little bit and re-told.”

Yang noted a unique identity marker. Despite Mercy being part of MCEC for many years, Yang often hears “we are not like this church, this church, or this church.” Mercy Mennonite compares itself to 100- or 200-year-old congregations. Yang said his congregation feels “like we are still a baby” despite its 40-year history.

Pastoral self-awareness emerged as a significant stance for these experienced leaders. Focus group participants generously shared personal learnings, growing edges, and insights.

Dan light heartily said “I’m always thinking about words I want to have chiseled on my memorial plaque. The most recent is this: ‘Dan learned that the issue isn’t really the issue.’ Dan has learned that when people are agitated about the building project and how it may be looking to the community, something else is at the root.” He has also learned that “we’re not enough” bears evidence to congregational shame.

Further, with vulnerable honesty he acknowledged: “I struggle with ministry with trying to be enough.” With deep self-awareness he shared tenuous experiences that trigger shame in him. He added, “for us to lead in the presence of shame and not to dress ourselves in those clothes but to put on the wedding banquet clothes of the kingdom” is critical in order to resist the impulse to “hit back.” Related to the challenging exchange with his neighbour, he added “I look forward to the day when we can sit down with God and talk about this.” So beautifully, this shame story highlights the ongoing nature of story. Story is ever unfolding, changing, including transforming story participants in its wake.

Marcie shared that a significant pastoral learning has been shaped by a previous employer who often would say, “you can get a lot done if you don’t mind who gets the credit.” She acknowledges that “in a church full of leader-types” it is challenging to know how to lead as a pastor.

Ruth noted an incongruence at Forest Street. Congregants say: “this is a congregation that functions well with lay leadership.” However, “what we are finding is that more and more is needed on the part of the paid staff to fulfill the programmatic and vision roles.”

Yang is defining himself as a pastoral leader in a Canadian context. He said: “I tell myself and my community I am not superman.” Yang added that in his congregation “the culture is that the leaders are the best or can do everything. Even though they hear from me, it’s still in their mind. They want their pastor to do everything.” “Everything” can include driving congregants to appointments, the airport, translation lessons, and to update driver’s licenses or health cards.

Pastoral leadership learnings for Stan are expressed in this way, “it’s not so much getting things done...it’s investing in other people who you know make things happen... sometimes ideas, you planted as seeds take root and somebody else runs with their idea. You have to bite your tongue.” Focus group acknowledged such is unique for both male and female pastors.

A number of values were named as focus group participants engaged in conversation.

Stan said, “One thing I hear from even the older people in the congregation, the congregation has seen a lot of change over the years. It’s mostly said with a sense of hope not like those changes have been bad. But its like, we will continue to adapt.” Hearing from the congregation that seniors need more visits Stan witnesses strong congregational commitment to children, investment in families, including young families.

“Self-sufficiency” according to Marcie is an unspoken congregational value. Explaining she said, “I think my church has the idea that we are self-sufficient, financially. We imagine that

we will always be able to come up with resources enough to share.” There is also the belief there will be enough lay leadership to further congregational ministries. As Marcie looks ahead, she does not believe this is a reasonable expectation however notes that to date it has proven true.

Yang suggested that at Mercy “insufficiency” is expressed. He connected Mercy’s experience to the biblical story as told in Mark 12 in which a woman who gave from her lack was honoured for her profound generosity. While economic stability is an ongoing challenge for some Mercy households, the congregation is rich with “unity.” While many Thai and Lao congregations across Canada and the United States have leadership struggles Yang witnesses the values of unity and “humble hearts” at Mercy Mennonite.

Marcie named how important it is to “not be afraid to conspire with God and to recognize when the fruits of our prayer and of our work are showing up.” She shared a hope-filled and faith-infused story related to a fruitful ministry which a congregant noted emerged due to faithful prayers.

Discipleship is a core value of Anabaptism. For Ruth’s congregation radical discipleship is deeply connected to congregational history and is furthered through a designated staff position. She notes a tension saying the congregation works so hard at discipleship that perhaps the inner life is lost.

Reflecting upon denominational focus and resources to strengthen missional leadership, Dan’s is clearly focused upon discipleship. He strongly stated, “you can’t follow Jesus unless you know him. Period!”

Both Stan and Marcie value of power of story. While Marcie noted a story that she believes needs to be unpacked and re-told, Stan is intentional about embedding new stories in the congregation. As a discipling practice to strengthen missional stance, he strives “to embed, plant new stories.... there are shallow roots but its encouraging when they take root.” He added as stories are told of neighbour engagement “people were starting to get it. We’re here to be, to connect with people where they are.”

These pastoral leaders referenced the long reach of formational Anabaptist theology. Dan struggles with the ongoing impact of historic and the widely held Anabaptist theology: “being the church without spot or wrinkle,” the expectation the church be “pure.” Marcie relates and uses the term “worm theology.” Dan said, “We really bought into tent crusades and the crap that went down in beating people up.” Dan acknowledges he finds *Amazing Grace* is a hard song to sing: “There’s stuff that’s worthy but *saved a wretch like me*, oh boy!” In response Marcie thoughtfully asked, does “mission then become one more thing that you’re not good enough?”

Another example emerging from Anabaptist history and deeply entrenched in Amish background congregations is “separation from the world.” The ongoing tension of being “in but not of the world” runs deep in Anabaptist DNA. Stan suggested, “it’s so important to fit in that you say yes to cultural movement, to what is happening politically in community. It’s an interesting both/and.”

Both Marcie and Ruth mentioned the Bible. Marcie said, “people think they know the bible.” Thoughtful in her processing she added “there’s kind of a hunger for that core.” Marcie’s reflection was shaped into a question: “How do you recover that (the Bible) in ways that don’t sound like the old ways that are still part of God’s grace.”

Ruth names “the challenge of finding different words, refreshing words, or different ways of talking about the Bible, different ways of loving the Bible and embracing the Bible, so that the biblical story doesn’t sound like the old.” Speaking gospel is core for these well-grounded Anabaptist Mennonite pastors.

As focus group conversation quickly came to a close participants expressed appreciation for the rich conversation. Honest, open, and vulnerable sharing enriched the experience.

NARRATIVE ACCOUNT

FOCUS GROUP #5

PARTICIPANTS: Wanda, Ted, Anna, Ruby

Relationships

Deep and long

Organic and nurtured

Anabaptist theology

Separate from the world

Binding and freeing

Community Paradox

Open and closed

Who is my neighbour?

Liminal Spaces

New energy unleashed

Hope-filled reimagining

On a beautiful autumn day, four grace-filled and experienced pastors gathered for conversation. Three were present through ZOOM while the fourth pastor hosted the researcher in a private meeting space in his church building.

Conversation opened with each pastor describing their current ministry context. Wanda has served in pastoral ministry for 22 years and is presently in her 17th year of ministry at Avalon Mennonite Church. Avalon has multiple staff including a multiple-member Ministry Team. The congregation was founded in 1944 by Swiss Mennonites and today is more diverse than its ethnic beginnings. Avalon is a “village church” with approximately half of the congregation living within the quaint village borders and the other half scattered further afar. Wanda does not live in the village. Rather, she makes her home in a densely populated neighbourhood in a nearby city. Her “personal neighbourhood is very disconnected from the neighbourhood of the congregation” and she acknowledges this holds both pros and cons. Wanda also gives leadership to a non-traditional worshipping community. Formed in 2016, the congregation represents a variety of denominations including “dones” or “nones.”

Anna’s ministry is located in a large urban centre. Fluent in both English and French, Anna has served in pastoral ministry for 12 years, including 9 years in her current role as the solo pastor. Sprucedale Mennonite Church began as a mission in 1952. Founding members originally met in a home, then briefly in a school until breaking ground for the current building in 1964. While many of its current members chose the Mennonite church as adults, the largest representative demographic in the congregation is Russian Mennonite background. There are few Mennonite churches in the area. Therefore, congregants come from numerous surrounding communities and cities to be part of the congregation.

Ted is the lead pastor of a pastoral team at Cranbrook Mennonite Church, a well-established faith community located in a bustling southwestern Ontario town. Founded in 1925, Cranbrook will soon celebrate its 100th anniversary. Ted who himself is approaching retirement describes the congregation as “one of the aging congregations” within MCEC. Indeed, it has experienced shrinking attendance over the past years. The church is located about two kilometers from a newly developed subdivision where 900 homes have been approved for construction. To date, about half of those homes have been completed. Growth however in the community has not translated to church growth. According to Ted, “the church hasn’t gotten to know new people moving into town very well.” He believes his family situation is “fairly typical” in that he knows “neighbours two doors down and across the street” but is unable to name everybody who lives on the street. Ted and his family have resided on the street for 10 years.

Ruby is the solo pastor of Lakeside Mennonite Church, a congregation founded in 1961 primarily by Russian Mennonite and Old Colony folks. She has served 30 years as a pastor including 3 years internationally. Ruby has served as Lakeside’s pastor for 14 years. Lakeside is located next door to a school, across from senior’s housing, and down the street from a low-income housing complex. The congregation has a few famers and many self-employed business owners. The community is based on agricultural industry. Average weekly worship attendance at Lakeside is “between 30 and 70” depending on the day.

Reflecting upon change and the impact of change Ted recalled a ministry experience from a few decades previous in a different pastoral context related to a major building project. He noted that “the culture in that community was very pro-church and people went to church and the word that we heard sometimes was ‘if you build it, they will come.’” Upon completion of the major addition, the church did experience significant growth. This stands in contrast to Ted’s present community’s culture which he described as “not pro-church attendance.” He noted that weekly worship attendance is now “either optional or regular has been redefined in ways that would not have been understood” when he began in ministry.

Anna said Sprucedale Mennonite was founded to address “times of change” and a “changing ministry context.” At the time of its founding, “young people were moving to the city of Sprucedale and there was no Mennonite church, so people saw that as a need.” Sprucedale’s beginnings are significant to the congregation’s story and DNA. This stands in contrast to the congregation she grew up in which emerged as a “monolithic immigration story.” Anna senses a “laid-backness” in the congregation connected to its beginnings. “Change” has been part of the story of the church and is currently impacting Sprucedale’s identity.

According to Anna, a long-standing community ministry partnership with “Gather at the Table” has been a huge part of Sprucedale’s identity. When Sprucedale’s formally structured relationship with the community ministry ended about 10 years ago it left “a bit of a gap in terms of identity.” Currently Sprucedale is asking: “Who are we now in the community? What’s our next thing to do or next way to be in the city?... Is there some new calling that could emerge that we don’t know how to grasp onto because we live spread cross so many communities?” Anna also noted that as “some of our larger projects and partnerships have been released in the last few years we’re sort of trusting that something new can emerge.” As some partnerships have ended

new energy has been unleashed. The congregation is in a liminal space as they wait on what will be.

Wanda noted a shift in congregational demographic, a “tipping” from intergenerational demographic toward seniors. Wanda is most aware of this shift at funerals noting, “how few of the children or grandchildren of these seniors are present at our church.” Further she noted almost “all of the families involved in Sunday School are not families who have grandparents in our church.”

Ted, Wanda, and Ruby, responding to questions about neighbourhood engagement discussed church buildings and properties.

According to Wanda the Avalon congregation had conversation a number of years ago about a building addition including gymnasium for the purpose of serving the community. Plans did not proceed as “it didn’t seem like a good use of resources.” The congregants most interested in the project were “parents who were worried their children were drifting away and thought a gym would help keep the children.” Avalon has also engaged in conversation about ways to make the best use of their building, facilities, outdoor space, and church house which is leased to an affordable housing ministry. Some ideas that have emerged: opening space for an after-school program; hosting low German speaking programs; and the dream of creating a public park as a gathering space in the community. Wanda noted, “connection with the neighbourhood is interesting because it’s not very intentional but it happens in a variety of ways.” Wanda identified “perfectionism” as a hurdle to navigate with expanded community use of the building. She noted there is a “critique of anything that is not maintained to the level of perfection.... the people who have been caring for the building for decades and decades have maintained the building so there’s fear around what will happen if we open the doors too much. Things will get messy.”

Ruby is thinking about ways the church property and buildings can be repurposed. On Ruby’s mind: “who’s going to be here in 10 years unless something shifts?” She believes the “church is at a transition place,” and must be looking ahead with cultural awareness. Currently, the city of Lakeside is experiencing a housing crisis which was brought to the fore for Ruby the year before when a homeless man began living on the church property in his truck. Holding the needs of homeless persons, scarcity of affordable housing, and the lack of a local shelter alongside the congregational resource of sizeable church property, Ruth wonders what the church could be doing to set themselves up so that in 10 years they are meeting the needs of the homeless. She does not want to “create a ghetto” but wonders about the possibility of building 10 units and two of them supportive integrated housing. This risk-taking leader is adamant, “we have to think differently.”

Ted noted that at Cranbrook “there is some talk about what it would mean to tear down our 100-year-old building and put up something that would be multi-purpose, responding to housing need of our community.” Recognizing “the future of the church is going to look different” has created space for imagination, dreaming, and discernment.

Networks of relationships are core to Ted, Wanda, Anna, and Ruby’s ministries.

Wanda's 175- year-old congregation is a "multi-generational congregation rooted in a small village." Historically, because "people lived within a reasonable distance of the church there wasn't always a super strong sense of outreach." Congregants were friends with neighbours, relationships grew organically, and at times people would "come to the church based on people they knew who were here." There was no real overt engagement with the community and over the years almost all of Avalon's mission energy was "directed into two very specific relationships." One relationship with a first- generation congregation and the second an international educational ministry. The Avalon congregation values, "wanting to be deep and long and cautious," recognizing these relationships happen "slowly and gradually over time." Commitment to relationships long term is of greater value for the congregation "than moving on to the next shiny new thing." Wanda asserts it is a congregational strength to be committed "to deepen and strengthen relationships rather than drop them just because something else presents itself."

Further Wanda added that Avalon has "been defining ourselves as a congregation that doesn't talk to people about our faith or that doesn't talk to the community, doesn't want to impose anything. So, we just expect our living, our lifestyle, our lives to communicate everything." Wanda connects this to Anabaptist theology: "being in but not of the world."

Ruby, whose spiritual roots sprouted nearby Avalon and Cranbrook affirmed how historically relationships grew organically. Congregants "were responding to people who were in their gardens and in their yards." Wanda agreed that "those were very beautiful origin stories of these partnerships."

In her ministry context, Ruby is intentional about building collaborative relationships with community partners including city mayor, community service agencies, and ministerial colleagues to address community issues. Formational for this pastor's outward ministry thinking and actions has been a missional leadership learning cohort made up of three MCEC colleagues. Ruby has been a cohort member for six years and values mutual accountability, setting adaptive challenges, and sharing stories related of neighbourhood engagement. She is also attentive to personal relationships including a neighbour, a single mother who struggles with poverty and the homeless man who lives in the church parking lot. She added that congregationally "we are really just trying to figure out what it means to walk with people in our community and not fix them." Loving neighbours and extending welcome, rather than giving money is a shift of focus for Ruby and her congregation.

Ted emphasized the value of personal relationships saying "even as missional ideas come and go it is the personal relationships that are at the heart and we often use the word community."

At a time when "missional" is a major focus denominationally, participants reflected upon mission and their current context. Ted's congregation has "been talking about what it means to be a missional church" and is currently shifting their "understanding of what it means to do mission." Cranbrook has "a lot of wealth and one of the ways that they have stewarded that wealth is in supporting a lot of para-church organizations" which are removed from the

immediate community. Wanda said that as Cranbrook, Avalon too have “always entrusted our mission work to others.”

Cranbrook has re-purposed its congregational “Mission Commission” structure in order to think “new thoughts about what it means to do mission locally.” Two local initiatives have emerged. Cranbrook’s associate pastor works one half a day per week at the local arena. The second initiative involves collaboration with community churches to host a “Food Truck program” which consists of Food Trucks being invited to different church parking lots on summer Friday nights. Ted describes this project as “wildly successful” far beyond his imagination. Hundreds of people show up and it has given the congregation “opportunity to host the community on our geography here in our parking lot.” With intentionality to connect with community, “the Mission Commission has arranged for a team of “minglers” to engage with attendees.

Ruby shared that a congregational bequest has financed two new staff positions. One staff position is focused on community outreach. She wonders how long funding may last. Reflectively Ruby noted theological diversity within the congregation and asked, “what is the faith we’re inviting people to join with us in sharing?” She named a tension, wondering if congregants have a common way of articulating their beliefs at a time when “we’re asking people to risk and connect with their neighbours.”

The long reach of Anabaptist nonconformity and separateness from the world emerged also emerged for Ruby. Ruby lives in the tension having grown up in the Mennonite church which firmly held, “the church is in the world but not of the world” (Romans 12:2) alongside the need for community financial support to fund vital neighbourhood projects. She said, “separation from the world is huge in our theology. We don’t partner with.” Further she added, “It’s one thing to work with our neighbours. It’s another thing to get funding from our neighbours to fund programs for and with our community. That’s a huge shift.”

Avalon’s Ministry Team have loosely discussed engagement in an intentional focused process of forming disciples and community engagement as supported by the denomination. In response she said, “we are just sort of on this cusp of still being healthy enough that we don’t need that sort of thing even though we would benefit.” Giving leadership to a non-traditional worshipping community emerged through conversations with people in her home neighbourhood in response to their expressed needs. Worship attracts “a mix of people.” For some, worship is in addition to regular engagement in established congregations and for those who do not “attend church anywhere else this is probably their only formation.”

Ted, Wanda, Ruby, and Anna each named congregational values that ground communal life. Anna identified intergenerational relationships, openness for a multiplicity of voices, and shared leadership as congregational values. She noted the presence of these values when young people have “preached their first sermon.” While sermon content may be uncomfortable for “a lot of people in the congregation” support remains strong for the individual.

Wanda suggested that building on the assets of congregational members and a multiplicity of voices provides space and freedom for congregants to run with ideas without

“needing to jump through a ton of hoops and bureaucracy.” Releasing gifts frees people, ensures ministry is not “all pastor- driven.”

Ted notes a “great sense of community in the congregation.” He believes Cranbrook’s “experience of community is a double-edged sword.” Community is a strength and at the same time Cranbrook is “having such a good time in our own Christian community we haven’t learned what it means to open the door to people who may be interested.” With awareness to cultural loneliness and alienation he wonders how to build bridges with society. One bridge he identified is “creation care,” a significant “theme that generates a lot of interest in our congregation and in popular culture.”

Hospitality was named by Anna, Wanda, and Ted. According to Anna Sprucedale would say: “we are very hospitable.” An “open door notion” is expressed in this way: “well, here we are, and we’ll welcome you as soon as you come.” Anna added, “we know we can’t wait for new people to walk through our door. but we don’t want to presume to go out and invite anybody in.”

Wanda echoed Anna’s response saying, “We expect the risk taker to be the visitors.” The statement stood in contrast to the congregation’s self-perception of being welcoming.

Noting a wide spectrum of people belonging to the congregation and the presence of theological diversity Ted said, “some of the most rewarding experiences in ministry that I’ve had in this church is hosting Sunday night faith exploration groups and I think being in the home and experiencing hospitality is part of.” He believes joining together in a non-church setting and discussing current issues has “built the church.” It has also been “a way to engage people on the fringe.” He added, “I don’t have all the answers but there’s something about that dynamic that I think holds potential for some meaningful program and meaningful ministry.”

Asked if they experience hopefulness in their congregation, Wanda acknowledged she “does not sense high anxiety.” Anna senses hopefulness in that Sprucedale is “in a season of having lots more kids than the congregation really remembers having.... That gives lots of people hope that this church might be here” after they are gone.

Ted also identified hope which he holds in tension with the “realization that the future of the church is going to be different.” As Cranbrook re-imagines it’s future including re-purposing its 100-year-old building, pastorally, Ted holds hope “for the new shape for the church of the future.”

Ruby identified “there’s a lot of joy in the church when we try something new or different and it works.” Lakeside can laugh at itself. There is a “real willingness to experiment” whether it be grade 7 and 8 boys summer camp or senior’s event which involved “re-jigging” the sanctuary including moving pews. Ruby said shifting and learning just six years ago “would have caused chaos.” Lakeside “is shifting” and having “fun trying some new things.”

As focus group participants conversed, it became evident that ministry is located in a liminal space. Anna’s congregation is waiting and trusting something new will emerge following the release of a number of ministries. Ruby said Lakeside Church “has come to terms with

having less attendance or attendance being more irregular.” In response, pews have been rearranged in the sanctuary “so it doesn’t matter how many people are there.” There is awareness that the congregation is not made up of the same folks “every Sunday.” Recently a male congregant told Ruth what the congregation need is for her “to tell the congregation what she sees,” to help the congregation be aware of the tensions and issues. Further Ruby noted that “one thing that is changing is that people don’t have the answers anymore.”

Anna has also experienced shifting attendance patterns. Currently few young adults attend worship. However, Anna has a very large email list of young adults who are from other communities and have made some small connection to reach out to Sprucedale. Anna stays in close contact through emails and meets young adults regularly for coffee. She is learning new ways to connect that extend beyond Sunday morning and she includes non-attendees when she tells people “about the size of our church.”

Each one of the focus group participants ministers from a place of deep pastoral awareness whether it be hopefulness for the future church, confidence that new congregational ministry opportunities will arise, or upholding the value of relationships. The final words were offered by Ruby who is navigating a tension, feeling called to be deeply engaged with local initiatives while at the same time aware of her limitations. While it is not possible to take the time to attend every community meeting related to mental health or affordable housing, she acknowledged she recognizes the value of taking risks and getting “out of the office.” Growing in community awareness Ruby said, “I think we have to lead by example in being aware of what’s happening in our community and also invite the congregation, or just say this is what I’m doing what do we need to do together?” In closing she said, “working for change is something that has to be intentional by the pastor and the leadership in the congregation.”

Focus group time quickly came to a close and participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to reflect together on their ministry experiences. Honest and open sharing was valued by all.

Appendix G: Summary of MCEC Environmental Scan (2014)

The MCEC Environmental Scan was carried out by Arli Klassen through listening, via surveys and interviews. Research questions were developed together with MCEC staff.

Key Research Questions:

1. What are the major challenges and opportunities that congregation will face in this next decade?
2. How does your congregation understand its missional agenda and purpose? What do you think is required to help your congregation live more faithfully into its missional calling? How might MCEC best support pastors and people to participate in God's mission in the world?
3. How might MCEC as an organization best resource your congregation as well as all the other MCEC congregations?

General Observations from the Data:

The process of tabulating responses was not a rigorous method that would meet social science standards. The number of people who gave each response was counted.

1. More people named trends in the church than named trends in society.
2. More surveys identified aging congregation as the biggest trend (61%), whereas more interviews identified declining attendance as the biggest trend (52%).
3. In response to these trends, the interviews prioritized reaching out to the community (40%) and adapting structures (28%), whereas the survey prioritized revisioning (30%) and reaching out to the community (22%).
4. Interviewees were much more explicit about whether they did (56%) or did not (44%) have an understanding of being missional, but this could be because the researcher pushed them on this question.
5. 80% of interviews indicated that local community involvement is a crucial part of being missional, whereas only 25% of surveys indicated the same thing.
6. Both interviews and survey prioritized pastor training and support as one of the most important things that MCEC does.
7. Important roles for MCEC identified which are not program-intensive or cost-intensive: experiment, connect, be with us, stories, set identity.

Emerging Themes:

1. People are very worried about the future of the church and the future is now. There is broad recognition that change is needed.
2. Some people are looking to MCEC to provide their congregations with the right tools, staff, or programming to be able to solve their issues.
3. Some people are looking for lots of changes in the way church is done and are seeing encouragement and blessing from MCEC to experiment.
4. Many people don't like the word "missional" (insider language) but there is much enthusiasm for the idea that every congregation needs to be integrally involved in service activities in their local community, and that every member should be able to talk about their faith in their own sphere of influence beyond the church.

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