

A Circle Ever Wider – SCN Conference
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Faith after Inclusion: Where has it brought us? Where will we go?
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Note: This talk is significantly influenced by conversations with my partner Ken White and our good friend David Weaver during an extended weekend in Vermont.

I have a pair of cream-colored cargo pants. They're durable—you can hardly tell they are ten years old. Numerous pockets accommodate all I want to carry. A place for everything and everything in its place.

It was kind of like the church I grew up in. We all had a pocket—well defined. We were all held together by the same durable (white) cloth.

But my pants no longer quite fit. A lo-carb, vegetable-intensive diet changed me—and the pants that once fit so well now fall off my waist. I can only cinch them up so far before they—and I—begin to look silly. But when we considered using them for paint pants, I had a hard time letting them move on to a new purpose. I love those pants. And I don't really have anything to replace them.

The church many of us grew up in no longer quite fits.
It falls in crucial places.
It can only be cinched up so far.
But it is familiar. And we don't see a replacement.

The church is in a state of change—not abrupt but not smooth either. We are undergoing a transition, the stages of which might be comparable to those in a rite of passage.

Rites of passage generally move *individuals* from one role in society or stage in life to another. But groups go through transitions too. It may be helpful to think intentionally about the work in those stages by comparing them to the tasks in a rite of passage.

We tend to think of church history in terms of continuity or ordered change, as movement from an established *here* to a defined *there*. In Anabaptist tradition, the *Martyrs Mirror* presents the Anabaptist movement as the logical expression of a long line of faithful discipleship. But it was more complicated than that. Change is seldom smooth and, when we are in the midst of it, it generally feels or appears ambiguous.

I suggest we have entered such an ambiguous time in the church. The foundations have been shaken. Not one stone seems left on another. But we have yet to figure out which rejected stone will become the cornerstone.

Our situation is not unlike the second stage in a rite of passage—a stage between the familiar past and unknown future.

In a rite of passage, one first symbolically leaves one's former role and context—one "puts away childish things." Then one moves—often by symbolically stepping across a threshold—not immediately into a new place but into a formative space, a creative location, what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner termed "betwixt and between." Finally, one emerges in a new place, reintegrated into the world. But we are not there yet. The

church is now “betwixt and between.”

We are no longer the church we were.
We are not yet the spiritual community we shall be.

In order to embrace this formative state, we must first relinquish the past. We must appreciate and acknowledge what we leave behind. It may be helpful to ask:

- What is precious but no longer fits?
- What have we held on to that has betrayed us?
- What may be good but binds us?
- What feelings accompany the leaving?
Grief? Rage? Joy? Resignation? Bewilderment?

At this point, I asked the participants in our gathering to take part in a small ritual. We had gathered initially in an area at one end of the meeting space, outside the circle of chairs that we usually used for presentation times. I asked them to consider the entry to that circle a threshold.

Participants were given a small piece of paper and asked to spend a few moments contemplating what they were leaving behind in the old church.

Participants could then write a word, phrase or symbol on the paper and leave it at the threshold as they entered the circle.

I then continued the presentation in the circle.

The time betwixt and between can be a time full of creative potential. It can be a time of testing. It can be a time of risk. It can be a time of discovery.

What characterizes this betwixt and between time the church inhabits currently? I can speak only from my experience among a small segment of inclusive-minded churches.

In the church of my childhood, faith was something one had. It was defined by beliefs. The catechism book I used before joining the church was titled *This We Believe*.

Although church/community membership symbolically was tied to confessing specific beliefs, no one really questioned them. The true boundary markers were ethnic, cultural, and moral. If, like my father, one had the “wrong” last name, one could still earn at least honorary belonging to the community over time if one participated in all the right ways. Those with the right last name, of course, belonged regardless. You could diminish your standing by certain transgressions. For example, if the baby came eight months after the wedding, a confession before the brotherhood was required and, with an appropriate dose of public shame, one could regain status.

In that world, the Bible (and the church's traditional interpretation of it) pretty much ended any argument. A little ambiguity might be tolerated under the rubric of “seeing through a glass darkly” but not much.

In inclusive-minded congregations, faith seems tied to personal spiritual experience and/or relationships in community. Belief is secondary—if not irrelevant. I am probably one of a handful of Germantowners who holds to the virgin birth—and I wouldn't begin to argue it historically or scientifically—I just can't quite give up a certain option for mystery. But where one stands on the virgin birth is irrelevant to faith in our context.

The inclusive-minded church values relationship over defined institutional boundaries. By-laws at my congregation still define membership by core beliefs—but sometimes that seems more barrier than invitation. Even the most rudimentary language of belief can be a stumbling block to people raised in environments where that language was largely a language of social and spiritual manipulation and oppression. So the meaning of membership becomes uncertain. Participants who refuse membership may be more active and central to church life than some who choose it. In many respects, community commitment is much more thoughtful and chosen than when I grew up, which strikes me as more Anabaptist. But it is also more individually defined—which is probably not.

Where I hang out, scripture and church teaching hold little inherent authority. (Just try ending an argument with me by quoting a Bible verse!) Church minutes, confessions of faith, the amendment to the COB 1983 paper on sexuality, and MCUSA teaching positions do not define truth for us. Authority is more “he-taught-as-one-with-authority.” It arises from authentic resonance with experience. Indeed, scripture and theological language have been so abused that they may be toxic in the social circles that inclusive-minded churches relate to. Authority may lie in questioning, debating with, or even rejecting scripture passages.

Moreover, the Bible is no longer a shared story in the way it was in my childhood. I grew up in a language environment soaked with biblical references: ““here I raise my Ebenezer,” wrestling with angels, etc. When I preach or write, I can no longer assume allusions to scripture will be understood without explanation. Many church participants did not grow up in a verse-memorizing, Bible-story-repeating environment.

Awareness of how power dynamics determine scriptural interpretation and application make us wary of authority. The Church of the Brethren’s recent Special Response process provoked not trust but deep anxiety among the people I saw writing about it—admittedly I’m a non-Brethren outsider listening to mostly LGBT voices. The reiteration of an anti-gay position at the subsequent Annual Conference confirmed that their anxiety was not unfounded. We find ourselves skeptical of simplistic appeals to “church discernment.”

In sum, as an inclusive-minded church, we leave behind belief as we understood it, community as once we defined it, and authority as we knew it.

Where this will take us is not clear. But I venture to say that willingness to embrace the ambiguity is a hallmark of the inclusive vanguard in the church. It isn’t always comfortable, and we live in difficult and even dangerously unstable times. Still this feels like a moment of creative opportunity. We seem ready to put a finger in the spiritual winds and explore where they are blowing.

Where might we start exploring?

First, our worship forms. How do they touch common experience and heighten spiritual senses?

Ken and I once led a ritual honoring gay elders. As a group of gay men, we gathered around a bonfire. We began by “calling the great cloud of witnesses.” We invoked gay mentors, companions lost to AIDS, martyrs by bashing, and friends unable to be present. As men in the circle named them, they cast symbolic fagots into the fire, touching the common history of persecution, sacrifice, and leadership shared by all of us. At the close of the ceremony, we passed wisdom in the form of a candle flame from age to youth and from youth to age. And when the utterly still night air was stirred by a single breeze that flickered but did not extinguish all flames, not a man present did not know we had been visited by the Spirit.

(Note: A copy of this ritual may be found at <http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~linsch/Sages1.pdf>)

What are the shared experiences of our people in the inclusive-minded church? How do we touch our common history, ritualize our shared struggles and triumphs? What needs to be honored or simply spiritually acknowledge in our common lives?

Second, in a less boundary-defined community, we seem to be moving toward a compassion- and relationship-oriented ethic?

In this relational approach, it seems we are called to honor people in their decision making processes. The call to accountability is no longer about calling people to the “right decision” but rather about calling individuals to make decisions with integrity.

For example, we do not have uniform agreement in our congregation regarding pacifism. I honor those in our congregation who, having considered and balanced the arguments, take a just-war position. I hear the challenge that pacifism, like the resort to military means, can have unintended consequences. The call of justice challenges us in profound ways. What is our relationship to those who are affected by the failure to resist with sufficient force to prevent injustice? While I still come down on the side of nonviolent action, I understand and respect why others do not.

In the peace churches, pacifism was too often a moralistic matter of obedience to the tradition. It was bolstered by proof texting of the kind that drives me wild in the arena of sexuality. Jesus cannot simplistically be invoked as a pacifist. His disciples carried swords—he commanded them to do so. I can recite the good Anabaptist excuses for this—but at least have to acknowledge that my view does not exactly mirror that of Jesus and his disciples.

While I still understand nonviolence to be the way that I am called to follow Jesus, I seek a vision that unites my hope for a world of peace and justice with that same hope in those who seek it by other means. We are not all on the same page. But a book with just one page can be rather boring.

What are the implications for sex? I don’t want to be overly simplistic. Sexuality, its power dynamics and intricacies are as complex in the gay-male world as in the straight world—or more so. But sex carries different meanings in different social contexts. We live in different contexts with different meanings. Among gay men, sex can be a form of personal communion. Anonymous sex can be playful. Sex outside one’s monogamous relationship does not necessarily imply lack of commitment or “trouble in paradise” as it is normatively assumed to in straight marriages.

The issue of sex highlights the fact that there is risk in this relational approach. It is often easy to see all the potential dangers of sexual decision-making in alternative contexts and forget that decision-making in supposedly traditional expressions is equally full of risk. We are working out our salvation with fear and trembling. We do not know where this will lead us. We may even look back and say, “Well, that wasn’t such a good idea.” But we call each other to integrity in the decision-making process. We call each other to deep respect in relationship as we negotiate the aspects of power and pleasure between persons in our search to follow the Spirit in this arena as in others.

Third, spirituality is becoming more “incarnational.” We may be clumsy at it, but we are beginning to nurture a body- and world-positive spirituality. Bodily experience mediates spiritual encounter. The centrality of music in our tradition may be owed in part to the fact that it has been one of the few acceptable ways we physically

encounter spirit. The common vibrations of musical tones constitute a shared physical experience, Sound waves on ear drums are how we hear this, but the waves touch us everywhere.

Meditation practices have reminded us how bodily posture can open or close us. There was something to the charismatic movement's hands raised in praise, although the accompanying theology and ethos pretty much poisoned the gesture for me. The submission to power and authority that lie at the root of kneeling in prayer makes that posture somewhat troublesome. But I often find the almost fetal posture of kneeling in prayer helpful when I find myself praying in times of utter grief or desperate intercession.

Our religious culture divided us from our bodies. We have been suspicious of being too emotional or too expressive. It makes us uncomfortable. Uniting us with our bodies, teaching us the ways that body mediates spirit may be an important task for us in the inclusive-churches.

Fourth, the mantra of my good friend, Sister Merry Peter of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (a.k.a. Brad Colby) is "More joy! Less Shame!" The ability to question tradition and engage authority with some skepticism also gifts us with a sort of holy irreverence. Through playful transgressive actions we enter places previously laden with shame and begin to banish its power over us.

In the Mennonite world, the Pink Menno movement seems a prime example. The group's playful call to wear pink as a symbol of solidarity with LGBTQ people at Mennonite conventions has empowered inclusive-minded people in the denomination. Its actions can feel threatening to defenders of the status quo, because Pink Mennos dance at the boundaries of the institution in ways that lie beyond the control of authorities. How does one ban a hymn sing? How does one control the color that convention attendees wear? Attacks on the group as divisive only unmask the impotence of the anti-LGBTQ forces that defend the status quo.

In the Church of the Brethren, I imagine that the mobile booth functions in somewhat the same way. Banned from using official table space at Annual Conference, progressive groups can pop up temporarily and play on the boundaries in ways that empower the banished.

I am also reminded of a group that took on Fred Phelps. Instead of directly countering his message, they marched around with signs that said things such as "I have a sign" and shouted phrases such as "I will continue to yell as long as a sign is in my hand!!" It exposed a certain narcissistic reality that lies at the heart of Phelps's gay bashing. And they did it in a way that undermined his message more powerfully than a point-by-point debate or sign-to-sign counter argument.

An important task of the inclusion-oriented church is to promulgate a passionate spirituality of joy and playfulness to empower people bowed down under the weighty sense of obligation to respond to ubiquitous systems of oppression and domination. It is easy to become discouraged. Laughter and play can renew the spirit.

Fifth, our world has reached the limits of material, mechanical, "objective" human problem-solving. The idolatrous worship of measurement and logical manipulation has brought us to the brink of disaster. We use material economics as the measure of all good and evil. Environmental consequences are considered real only if they can be measured in dollars. Joblessness is measured in percentages. We believe we can engineer solutions by analysis. But dollars cannot measure costs to human dignity. Nor can material measurement make us truly understand what it is like to have no home and not know where the next meal is coming from. How do we analyze how the sacrifice of arts programs and education degrades the soul? The decades before the economic collapse were considered healthy because they showed economic growth—even though that growth primarily

came in terms of the flow of wealth upward to the richest of the rich at the cost of a high level of stress among displaced middle-class workers and heightened demands for “productivity” among fewer and fewer workers. We can measure the criminally high rate of unemployment in the African American community, but how do we measure the toll it takes on the fabric of community or lost gifts to the world?

The trend to measure reality in economic terms can even infect our churches. I have heard the phrase “the church is a business” more than once. Certainly it must be economically wise and attentive. But the church is not a business. Its programs may be constrained by economic reality, but they should not be driven by them. Interestingly, I have noted that, at least in my congregation, it can be business people who understand and articulate those limitations and call us back to our spiritual center.

One of our great challenges is to get back in touch with the soul. We must remind ourselves and our society of the importance of human dignity and the transcendent, spiritual roots of life.

A trend to cultivate and employ the arts permeates the inclusive-oriented churches. The arts (music, visual, theater) move us beyond purely rational analysis and help us perceive the soul of reality.

As a church, we may need to be less prophetic—less speaking out against—and more apocalyptic—more holding up a vision. Seeing a new humanity, in a new heaven and new earth before us, may ground us in the very humanity in which we were created and which God embraced in Jesus' incarnation.

Consider these random thoughts regarding the current place we are as an inclusive church movement among the Mennonites and Church of the Brethren. What thoughts do you have?

Open discussion took place at this point in the session. It ended with a closing ritual.

We are not the church we once were.
We are not yet the spiritual community we will be.
We do not know where we are going.
We cannot see fully where the Spirit is leading us.

We have a great deal yet to learn from this creative, ambiguous, liminal stage of development. Perhaps the church that emerges from this time will be as different as the early church was from the Jewish spiritualities and religion that nurtured Jesus and his disciples. It may be as different as the Anabaptist and Pietist movements were from both the Catholic and Protestant reformations that partly gave them birth. Alexander Mack and Menno Simons might not recognize it. (But who says they would recognize the mainstream Brethren or Mennonite churches today?)

The third stage in a rite of passage is one of reintegration—entry into a new role or a new life stage. For us, that new role, that new stage, is not yet fully formed. Although we have work yet to do in this betwixt and between state, we are a church of hope. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

I invite you then, in faith, as you leave this circle, to take a small stone from those assembled on this table and to place it on one side or the other of the entry as you leave. The threshold is not ready, and we are not ready to leave this betwixt and between place, but in this gathering we begin to lay a foundation of things hoped for. The start of a doorway into things not yet seen. May these stones symbolize the work we do, laying that foundation; as we strive together to facilitate the transition to a new spiritual community.

The talk given at the SCN Pastors Retreat used this document as the outline and was considerably abbreviated.