

PROVOCATIVE CHRISTIANITY

Formed in Christ: Who is our community?

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21; Hebrews 10:23-25; John 15:12-17

Last Sunday we launched this series on Christian formation by asking the question, “What has shaped us?” Barbara shared in her sermon a number of personal reflections on the traditions, the rituals, the communal events, and the unexpected interruptions of life, that formed her as a follower of Christ.

Among the things she cited, were some Mennonite communal traditions that many of us—
if we grew up in a traditional Mennonite community—could readily identify with. Farm life, two-week long Vacation Bible Schools in the summer, summer camps, youth gatherings, and I could add such things as attending a Mennonite school, going to Sunday and Wednesday evening church services, where everyone (*including* us young people), took turns presenting a devotional, or a topical talk, or having missionaries come through with their slide shows. and on and on.

But I’d be willing to wager that many or most of those things I just named, and the things *you* would name, if you’re over 40, have either gone by the wayside completely, or are in serious decline.

How many *churches* do you know of today, that have services on Sunday and Wednesday evenings? or 2-week-long half-day Vacation Bible Schools? or where most of children in the church work hard on their family farm?

Mennonite farm children,

even in *this* agricultural community, are a rare breed.

With the exception of the Old Orders.

And Vacation Bible School programs, while they still *happen* in many churches, have been radically redesigned, or reinvented, and *still* struggle with getting out the numbers. And every summer camp program I know of, is dealing with major declines in enrollment, and are trying to survive by reinventing themselves.

It is simply the case, that the family-based and church-based formational practices and programs of the past generation . . . are exactly *that*—of the *past* generation. They no longer hold any power to deeply shape our faith and shape our community today.

Which raises the question of the morning, “Who *is* our community?” All of us have connections. And all of are being *formed* by those connections. But who *is* our formational community? Are we choosing that community carefully and deliberately? Are we being clear about the communal values we embrace? Are we allowing that community to shape our lives, to order our desires, to help us determine—in the words of Ecclesiastes 3—when to embrace, and when to *refrain* from embracing, when to throw away stones, and when to gather stones together when to love, when to hate, when to plant, and when to pluck up what was planted.

Who is our community that we consciously choose to be our primary formational community as persons seeking to be formed in Christ?

There’s never been a more important time to ask that question, than *now*. In light of the continuing decline

of traditional church-based programs and practices
it behooves us to ask, “If not *that*, then *what*?”

I believe we must think consciously about this.
We must consider carefully who our formational community is.
Because, in the absence of these traditional programs and practices,
we are now being shaped and formed by *other* practices
that have filled the vacuum,
without any conscious choice on our part.

I talked some months ago, inspired by the writings of James K. A. Smith,
about the many cultural liturgies that are out there already,
practices that we are exposed to or directly engage in daily,
secular, cultural liturgies, intended specifically to shape our desires,
liturgies that form us for greed, for power-grabbing,
for physical pleasure, for material consumption.
Smith argued that we need to be intentional
about creating alternate liturgies and practices
that shape our desires *instead* toward the Kingdom of God
and its values.

Local pastor Harvey Yoder writes a regular blog,
and a few days ago he posted some thoughts from Dr. Sut Jhally,
of the University of Massachusetts,
who said that the question to ask
about how any given advertisement *affects* us
is *not* how much it influences to buy a particular product,
but how advertising as a *whole* affects
our buying into a set of values
counter to the ones we profess to believe.
Advertising, Jhally says, promotes a magical way of thinking,
makes fantastic promises about what certain products
will do for us—
whether cars, or hair products, or medication.
You don’t even have to know what’s being *sold*,
to have the ads impact the way we think about material things.
These *things* will give us incredible happiness,
gain the admiration of all kinds of desirable people,
and transform us into an instant, spectacular success.

Consumerism becomes a kind of religion
that replaces the faith we actually claim to live by.
In other words, these are competing liturgies.

These are the liturgies
that promote self-oriented satisfaction of desire,
that sexually objectify women and girls,
that openly glorify violence and manipulation of others,
even in the pursuit of the good.

We have choices to make about which liturgies to *participate* in.
And which liturgies to *resist*.
And a big part of that is choosing wisely
the communities where those liturgies reside.

As Harvey wrote, and I quote,
“We need to teach ourselves and our children
to talk back to the blatantly false messages
we’re all hearing on television and other media every day.
Or better yet, just unplug ourselves
from the barrage of untruths we’re being bombarded with
and read or tell them some good messages of our own.”

So, again . . . who is our community
that is actively supporting us in this difficult, upstream journey?
Who will help us tell the *true* stories that unmask the *false*?

What does that kind of community look like, exactly?
Is it *this*? Is it Park View Mennonite Church,
and our particular package of well-thought-out and well-executed
programs of worship, and education, and fellowship, and mission?
Are these programs we operate
robust enough to form us for life in Christ,
when we are swimming upstream every day?

I *doubt* it.
I seriously doubt that regular church attendance *itself*—
here, or at any church you know of—

or *add* to that going to Sunday School regularly,
and a small group meeting once a month—
as important and meaningful as those activities might be—
I seriously doubt that’s enough.

I wonder, *rather*, whether the answer lies
in something that exists among us now,
but that we cannot *ever* program or legislate
or implement from on high.

It happens when people choose to join with a few others
in a shared life of intentionality,
of *deliberate* mutual care, mutual discernment,
mutual accountability, mutual responsibility.

That’s what happened when people in the book of Acts
first heard the Gospel of Jesus preached with power.
Individuals were being drawn into
small, living, formational communities.
As a result, the powers of the world were shaken,
God’s salvation swept through families, towns, and cities.

The emphasis was *not* on programs.
It was on people being in deep, mutually responsible relationships.

As the book of Acts reports,
these formational communities
were small enough to meet in each other’s homes,
and break bread together daily,
and share their resources with each other generously.
They could deal with conflict
by speaking with each other face-to-face,
because they knew each other’s stories deeply.
They could wrestle with huge moral and theological questions
without coming apart at the seams.
They could build a genuine family with Jews and Gentiles,
who were long-time enemies.
They were nimble enough, as an organic body,
to change patterns of leadership whenever needed.
They could open their doors,

and strangers would feel fully welcomed and at home,
without being confused by foreign rituals
and strange symbols and language.

They were doing *exactly* what Jesus commissioned them to do.
They not only proclaimed, but demonstrated,
what life under God’s reign *looked* like day in and day out.

Who is *our* community that can function in that way for us today?
Who is our community that can help us live out Romans 12,
which was read this morning?

“Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God—
what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

According to Paul, Christians are to position themselves in the world
as non-conformists.

Maybe the social context of the early church
isn’t a whole lot different than *ours*,
what with the declining influence of the institutional church,
with the church as we know it,
being on the *margin* of society, instead of the *center*?

Maybe we can take some lessons from Acts,
that would have been hard for our parents’ generation to relate to.
In the seeming “glory days” of the American church 50 years ago,
when it seemed everyone around us were Christians,
and the church stood tall at the center of the life of every town,
maybe this wasn’t so much an *issue*.

Our formational community was built into the very fabric of society.
I don’t think that’s true today.

So I think Paul’s advice in Romans 12 is relevant now more than ever.

In the body of Christ,
in this local, formational, body of Jesus-followers,
we are different members with different functions,
who need each other desperately.

“We are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.”

Members one of another!

That is a profound reality, if we stop to think about it.
It's *not* the same thing as saying
we have something in common—
that we all belong to the same organization,
that we all signed the dotted line as members
of Park View Mennonite Church.
That kind of connection has its place.
It's certainly not meaningless.
But Paul has in mind something *much* deeper and more profound.

Paul claims that, individually, we are members one of another.
We are *part of each other*,
like a hand is part of wrist is part of an arm.
The same blood courses through our veins.
And it is only because of this organic, living connection
that we can even *think* of successfully resisting the powers.
Only in this kind of deeply connected body
will we be able to live faithfully in the center of the Empire.
Only in deeply formational community,
will we be able to engage in alternate liturgies
that form us for a different way of living,
in Christ, and in the world.

I think that's what *Jesus* had in mind for the church.
Jesus modeled a small-scale communal and missional life
with his own disciples.
And he expected them to replicate it,
when they went out on their own.

His bottom-line commandment to them,
as we heard this morning in John 15, was
“love one another as I have loved you . . .”
even to the point of laying down your life for each other.
That's commitment.
Setting aside my life, my agenda, for the life of my sister or brother.

In the body of Christ, we *are*—
contrary to the self-defined, autonomous, and free individual
that our culture believes in so deeply—

we *are*, in fact, responsible for each other.
We have a commitment to be involved in each others' lives,
even to the extent that we provoke each other.
Yes, that is our calling as Christians.
To provoke each other.
In a good way of course.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says,
“Let us consider how to provoke one another
to love and good deeds,
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

That is our biblical call—to provoke each other to love and good deeds.

That's doesn't mean getting on each other's nerves,
or being abrasive or obnoxious.
As a Christian, provoking, or being provocative is a very good thing.

The word “provoke” comes from two Latin words,
pro and *vocare*.
Vocare means to “call”, as in being *vocal*, or being called to a *vocation*.
Pro is simply a prefix, meaning “forth.”
So *provocare* is to “call forth.”
That's what it means.
It is our Christian vocation, to bring out, or call forth,
love and good deeds in each other.

The Christianity we see being lived out in the New Testament,
is a provocative Christianity,
it is people in deep relationship with one another,
calling forth the best in each other,
not *letting* each other be Christian in name only.
But helping each other live lives worthy of our calling.

Every one of us who claim to want to be formed in Christ,
had better ask ourselves,
to whom are we going to get provoked?

Who is our provocative, formational community
that is “calling forth” from us
the life that God intended us to live.

Participating in the programs of the church is well and good.
But in the absence of being able to immerse ourselves socially,
in church programs or traditions that are fast fading away,
who is our provocative Christian community?

Who are the ones we know well enough,
and are committed to strongly enough,
that we dare to provoke each other to love and good deeds?

[prayer]

God who called us, and continues to call us,
into the living body of Christ in this world,
give us the courage and the will
to seek and find the community
that will help us live the life you intended us to live,
that will help us resist that which forms us
in ways contrary to your kingdom,
and that will provoke us to love and good deeds. Amen.

—*Phil Kniss, October 16, 2011*