

Finding God in the Wilderness – Part Four

I Corinthians 12:1-31 The body

When you think about it, our bodies are absolutely amazing. They are complex machines that don't just function – they are creative. They can laugh. And often they can heal themselves when we have colds and scraps.

Just take the simple act of catching a ball. A lot of parts have to work together perfectly. When a batter hits a ball, the eyes have to track it. What direction is it going, how far and how fast? Then our bodies have to move toward where it will land – which means, our legs with its many parts have to move in the right direction and with the right speed. Then as we get near the flying ball, we have to raise our arms and put our hand up in the exact right place to catch it. And we have to be aware of the fence as well as another player going for the ball. I think one reason we like sports – both to play and to watch, is the wonder of how we can make something complicated, that involves all kinds of muscles, nerves, joints, eyes and our brains, into something simple but marvelous.

When we think about church – we have the challenge of working together like the parts of our bodies working together. It doesn't always happen smoothly. Sometimes congregational life becomes difficult. For many reasons. Bad leadership. The challenges of society, culture and politics changing around us. Spiritual failures. Resistant followership. The body parts compete with each other instead of assist each other. But often, usually with our Creator's grace, the church body works amazingly well.

So we are ending this sermon series on our history, looking at facts and stories, as well as my own impressions. These show how the North Star Mennonite Church body has worked together in our history & in more recent years.

First, it's clear the church formed and exists to follow Jesus. In the early days people needed the stars to find their way around at night as they walked or rode on horses. This led to the

idea that the church was to be a guide for people's spiritual lives. That's where the name North Star came from. Believing and following Jesus has always been the main key.

Second, the history of Drake Village is not complete without the Drake Mennonite Church. These run parallel and are intertwined. Both had men and women of great faith and vision and courage. More recent projects like the hockey rink, curling rink and community centre – gym received the eager help of people from the church. The government initially reserved land in Drake for Mennonites for settlement, so many came through here and many stayed.

An example of being open to non Mennonites is there have been a number of United Church member's funerals in the church sanctuary by a United Church pastor. This reflects a considerable lowering of the old "wall between the Mennonite and non-Mennonite community.

Since I've been here I've observed how many church members have been involved with Drake committees and regional boards.

Rhoda Jantz, in her history of North Star wrote, "The church's relation to the non-Mennonite community has changed to a large extent over the years. The wall that separated the two worlds has now broken down and they are able to interact. The church as it used to be was very separate from the rest of the community and didn't really associate with the other world. Adapting English probably started this."

"The change continued with commercial activities like the Credit Union Board, the Wheat Pool committee and the Co-op board. (We could add Pound Maker). It wasn't just the community pulling the church toward it; the church did its share of breaking the barrier as well. Women's groups encouraged community women to join. Rev. Henry Funk is named as one pastor who was very good relating to the whole Drake community."

And Rhoda writes in her conclusion: “During some of the time of the life of North Star, the church was considered more liberal than some of the surrounding churches. Traditions change; this is shown through many of the alterations in the constitution. Understanding that change, rules, traditions, etc, so they can be better applied to today’s society, is very important for members to remember as time passes them by.

She continues. “However, it is a blessing that some of the founders, and first North Star members, aren’t around today because they would find it extremely hard to fit into a much altered and in many ways, untraditional church. They would never feel at home among us now because we live so differently.”

In a **third** category we need to mention congregational life. Rhonda shares this: “The Congregation has had a focus of Spiritual life and Spiritual guidance for many hundreds of people. These years of history are not the dead story of a dead past, but they are living, interwoven stories of real people...of joys and sorrows, of the hopes and aspirations of the victories and failures of real people. (p 3-4) (Rhonda Jantz A Congregational History of the Drake North Star Mennonite Church. 1987)

There were many church groups and clubs, Sunday School programs, Young peoples group and so on. More than I know & their influence on people’s lives more than I have stories for. Many community children who did not attend North Star did attend Boys Club and do attend Girls Club. Sunshine Sewing Circle turned into wayfarers and then Pioneer Girls. Women’s groups for all ages have been the back bone of the church. Without them many congregations would close, including probably this one.

Here is one person’s memory. In the “old days” Laverne Jantz suggested a boys club in our church. I was about 14. I think this was a bit controversial since it was not Mennonite material! Christian Service Brigade. This was a boys group. No girls! Dan Laskowski, Harry Froese, Myrven, Laverne and others were the

1st leaders. I was a boy’s group leader. It took place in an old grocery store, and then moved to the town hall, which is now a Drake Meats building, then to our present hall/gym. This happened for many years from October to May.

“I still have many pictures and many terrific memories from those years. From winter camping to backpack trips to soapbox cars to our weekly meetings. In so many ways this shaped my life. I became a Christian during those years. Praying with only men happened for men there. At Christian Service Brigade conferences we met so many other men and almost no other “Mennonites”. Boys did so much Bible memory and the leaders had to stay ahead of the boys. I think a lot of local Drake men who were boys back then would still have the same memories I do. This was a men’s only group I have good memories of!”

Other programs and activities included Christian Endeavor which started way back 1909. I don’t know when it ended or melded into some new program. There was a Bible Exposition week in the winter – every day. Morning and afternoon. Sunday to Friday.

One historical tidbit is: There was opposition to a youth Bible study / prayer meeting on Sunday afternoon. Why? Because it was not initiated or led by one of the ministers. But I guess it occurred because the record indicates that many who were involved went on to pastoral missionary and church related work.

And we must briefly mention the ladies groups. There has been Ladies Aid, Senior Ladies Aid, Good Will Society a second lady group. The Cheerful Mission group started 1954. Then a Tuesday group became too large so divided into Fellowship Circle and Koinonia. Nah Verein was the name of a group of the oldest ladies. Plus today the ladies play in important function in the church by providing food for funerals. Much more could be shared here.

But there is no mention of any men’s group, except today’s morning coffee. One person

shared with me that they can't remember any men's groups. They and I wonder why that was and is? The person went on to say they are envious when a friend continually tells them about their men's group that is happening right now still. They think about this & wonder why a men's group can't get going today?

There is recognition that the church men think differently. And it's sometimes easier to visit with some non church men. Also I heard a story of a small committee with two men on it and one woman. What was interesting about it is the two men didn't talk to each other so they each continually contacted the woman to question the other man or arrange stuff for both of them. The concluding comment was: "We are becoming such a small group that every thing is somewhat difficult."

This is simply one person's experience, so I'm not so sure we should label all men this way. But why isn't there a group of men today, or even several groups who pray and do Bible study together on a regular basis? Why have the women in the church had such a history of such groups but not the men? This is worth reflecting on and changing. We have two great men Sunday School teachers so why don't more men attend more regularly?

The church has had a fantastic history of programs and innovation, and going beyond strict traditional Mennonite historical practices. Are we continuing this pattern today? As one person said, we are both liberal in practice and conservative in theology. Is that our history?

Another area to mention is music. Besides the liberal thinking and practice, or forward thinking, of using non Mennonite material and ideas compared to other Mennonite churches, it was a delightful surprise to discover the church had a Brass Band in 1906. It only played on special occasions. It lasted till 1932 when it disbanded, but over time added violins and became an orchestra. This along with the many choirs over the years has been a blessing to this congregation.

The church has a rich history of different choirs and special music. The years of the men's choir with Wayne Kehler, that did some traveling, is remembered as a wonderful bonding and worship time. It helped the men express their faith. The devotional time after practice is remembered with gratitude.

On top of this, I heard the first church building had a piano and maybe a pump organ. So even though music has been an issue at times, and some conflicts between people around music has occurred, recognizing the value of music, as well as non Mennonite programs and organizations has helped nurture the lives of many people.

Fifth, the church has supported many outside programs. It's important to mention North Star felt strongly about connecting and being part of its national body. So we hosted 7 of the Canadian Mennonite Conferences from 1908 to 1953. I believe we hosted some of the annual Provincial conference meetings also. I heard the last time we did this was in 2007.

Drake sent quite a few people out as volunteers to Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations like camps; a few ministers, and two missionaries, both to Japan - Ferd Ediger and Anna Dyck. More recently there has been great support for Vic & Chris and their regular involvement in Brighter Horizons.

Plus we need to mention that we recently have sponsored two more refugee families with other local congregations. And we don't have time to go into detail how we can take appropriate pride in our support of the Thrift Store, the Canadian Food Grains Bank, Rosthern Junior College, Mennonite Saskatchewan Camps, Dallas Valley, Canadian Mennonite University, and so on. Even though Swift Current Bible Institute is closed, it received a lot of support and heavily influenced us. So we have had a broad investment in a wide variety of church related organizations including camps. In return we have been blessed by them in more ways than I have stories for.

The **sixth** category to consider is church discipline. The practice of church discipline was to be in harmony with Scripture. I haven't heard many stories of church discipline. The constitution is relatively strict but discipline has generally not been strictly enforced. However, two areas stand out where discipline was carried out. These two reactions were not unusual for their times.

One was military service. This has been and is a Anabaptist / Mennonite / pacifist distinctive. No one joined the military during WWI. Those who joined the military in WW II, because of conscription, probably knew they automatically lost their membership. I don't doubt this rule caused some hard feelings as well as some leaving the church. I've heard at least three church members were in Conscientious Objector camps during the war. One was commissioned by the Canadian Conference to serve as Chaplain to C.O. men in the Alberta camps. I've read only one story of a man – Gordon Laskowski, those who registered as conscientious objector and did a variety of alternative service jobs in various places. We do know three men lost their lives in the war.

The other discipline issue was marriage to someone without the same Mennonite faith and tribe. This led to excommunication. From 1928 to 1953, 25 members automatically lost their memberships for marrying outside of Mennonite faith. This left hard feelings among a number of families. Many could not see the significance of this law. How many left North Star and even the Christian church?

In 1969 with the new constitution, a complete revision was made about this rule. Then in 1986 it was thought that this rule brought an unnecessary hurt toward Brothers and Sisters in Christ. So a letter of apology was sent to 22 of the couples that could be found. It included an offer of reinstatement of membership. (page 46-47 Rhoda). Herman J. Wiebe was the pastor at the time.

This letter of apology and reconciliation idea came from a Canadian Mennonite Conference where a Mennonite Brethren leader asked for forgiveness for the hardship caused when their members were excluded from their congregations for the same rule. They didn't think it proper for MB's to marry GC's – Mennonite Brethren to marry General Conference Mennonites. The rule was, you could only marry within your specific religious tribe!

I don't know what year this took place but the ground work part of this process, was laid with a 1980 paper by Dr. David Schroeder and then a paper by Rev Henry Funk about the nature of marriage and extra-marital relations. Both involved congregational discussions.

Those former Drake members appreciated the request for forgiveness and granted this request of the NSMC. This is a good story. It's the body of Christ trying to find a way to heal itself, its history and the people involved. Reconciliation is our work.

We know what's amazing about our bodies is that they can mend, often on their own and often with help. So also it should be in the church. History and current events reveal many difficult issues. Hard choices. Sometimes we respond rightly. Other times we respond wrongly. Sometimes we still aren't sure what was best. And sometimes we have to hold two opposite truths in tension or balance.

But sometimes changes do not always occur! In response to one of my questions: What, when and why did committee sizes adjust? One person noted: "From the 1906 minutes the trustees were a group of 3. This committee size has not changed in 114 years!"

But when change is required, or doctrine is challenged, or pushed on us, it can be embraced but it's often painful and hurts relationships. We need to remember that just because some one hurts, that doesn't mean they are right. There is usually the dynamic of wanting to be faithful to Christ and tradition. As one person

shared: “A major O.T. theme is “Remember.” Remember how God has brought you out of many wilderness situations. And we are to pass this on to our descendants the stories of God’s faithfulness.” Often we can rejoice that we did this well and other times we need to face that we didn’t do as well and caused pain.

This is what I’ve been trying to do through these Wilderness, Grace and Covid sermons. In tough times its’ important to consider who we are and what our Creator has called us to. This helps steady us and gives us a base for future decisions. It’s important to name those victories and confess our failures. When Israel and the church has forgotten this, or fought too fiercely over issues and changes, it usually has lost its way. It’s lost who we are called to be.

So we need to remember those – God sightings. At one congregation meeting, an issue was up for serious discussion and one member spoke strongly against the motion. In due course the motion was passed. Then that member rose and stated that although he had opposed the motion, now that it was passed by the congregation he would support the decision. What a beautiful way for Christ’s body, the church, to work together.

Congregations age. Most congregations have rich histories and patterns. And as our individual bodies become stiffer and less flexible, and our energy wanes, the body of Christ has the power of the Holy Spirit for renewal and creativity. Let’s remember we are given spiritual gifts, the mandate to work together in unity, each one of us is part of the body, and we have the more excellent way – Jesus and love. What’s next in our congregational life is probably our work for the next few years.

This coming Tuesday, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan is hosting a web meeting to help us reflect on what comes next as we recover from the coronavirus. I encourage you to attend. Just think – you can do this from your comfortable spot in your house! I hope to get the time and information to you so you can log

on. It’s titled, **Dreaming Church Beyond Pandemic**. Asking, what does church mean in the new normal? How is God beckoning us onward? If you would like to participate in this town hall, please email Josh at churchengagement@mcsask.ca to register.