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WITH ALL OUR STRENGTH:
READING THE BIBLE WITH HEART, MIND, AND SOUL

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ABSTRACT

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Reading the Bible with Heart, Mind, and Soul

In their denominational convention in 2011, the delegates of Mennonite Church USA chose Christian formation as their highest priority and asked the denomination to provide resources for biblical engagement. As one of the denomination's responses to this request, this thesis develops a Bible study process that is formational in its pedagogy, focusing on four concerns: group process, strategies for helping lay people read a biblical text closely, varieties of "right brain" activities for engaging with the text, and worship to round off the study process. Appendices include the Bible study leader's guide, a sample order of worship, and results of a survey administered to participants in congregations who field-tested this approach.

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Situation Description

Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) is the Anabaptist Christian denomination of the largest group of Mennonites in the United States. It has 109,000 members grouped into 21 area conferences across 44 states.¹ While Mennonites in the US have traditionally considered themselves less vulnerable to wider social forces than the mainline denominations, the data in the most recent Church Member Profile show that “Mennonite Church USA is now facing virtually all the same challenges amply documented among the larger Protestant denominations.”²

After its release, the church member profile generated considerable conversation at congregational, conference, and denominational levels about how the church could live faithfully in changing times. One result was the presentation for delegate approval, during MC USA’s most recent convention in Pittsburgh on July 4-9, 2011, of seven priorities outlined in a “purposeful plan”³ to guide the denomination’s work. These priorities included Christian Formation, Christian Community, Holistic Christian Witness, Stewardship, Leadership Development, Intercultural Transformation, and Church to Church Relationships. Delegates at the convention chose Christian Formation as MC USA’s

first and highest priority [which] commits us to fashion and mold our lives after that of Jesus Christ. As the sent One of God, Jesus sends us into the world. As missional communities, our congregations, conferences, and agencies will ensure that people are invited to make a commitment to Christ, disciplined in the way of Christ, taught to engage with the Scriptures, helped to develop Christian identity from an Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective, and given the capacity to cultivate their vocational calling.⁴

¹ “About Mennonite Church USA,” <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/Home/About/tabid/55/Default.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2012)

² John D. Roth, in the forward to Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2007), 9.

³ Ervin R. Stutzman, “Desiring God’s Kingdom: A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan for Mennonite Church USA,” <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=EcqlkzDN9IE%3d&tabid=55> (accessed January 13, 2012). Stutzman is the Executive Director of MC USA.

⁴ “Priorities adopted by Mennonite Church USA to guide our work together,” Mennonite Church USA, <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/Home/About/SevenPriorities/tabid/1788/Default.aspx>, (accessed January 13, 2012)

Though the delegate conversation about Christian Formation might have begun at several points, leaders invited group dialogue to focus on three questions about the Bible and its use: How has your faith been shaped by the Bible? What are the challenges our churches face in teaching the Bible? How could we change the ways our congregation(s) use Scripture?

The notes from the table groups detail the wide variety of ways people's faith have been shaped by the Bible: Bible study, youth group gatherings, memorization, Scripture songs, family devotions, etc. The delegates also recognized that their experiences were not (or were no longer) normative in their congregations or in the denomination: their assessment was that biblical illiteracy is not only an issue for youth but "also a condition of the church at large today."⁵

In addition to lack of knowledge about or experience with the Bible, the delegates also named several other challenges to engaging the Bible in meaningful ways. The first was decreased involvement of home and school in the Christian formation of youth which has left "the bulk of the formation activities up to the church. This reality has caused people to feel inadequate and draw back from reading the Bible alone as well as [from] volunteer[ing] to teach it in Sunday school classes."⁶ In addition, the quantity of activities vying for the time and energy of people of all ages "fills our lives to a degree which does not allow us to go to the depth of studying the Scriptures [that] other generations did."⁷ Furthermore, the polarization of north American culture predisposes people to "rush to an understanding of Scripture which fits one of the polar ends, rather than stand in the mystery,"⁸ so that Bible reading becomes contentious, a particular challenge in conflict-avoidant Mennonite culture. Finally, delegates noted that "Scripture has been used in ways in the past which are abusive and harmful, further alienating a

⁵ Terry Shue, "Pittsburgh 2011 Delegate Session #10 Christian Formation summary", August 15, 2011, 2. Shue is the Director of Leadership Development of MC USA and a member of the MC USA Executive Board.

⁶ Shue, delegate summary, 2.

⁷ Shue, delegate summary.

⁸ Ibid.

generation from [it].”⁹ This sense of the Bible as violent, racist, and patriarchal creates “difficult barriers for modern readers.”¹⁰

The conversations at Pittsburgh left little doubt in the delegates’ minds about the truth of the Church Member Profile’s conclusions regarding the role of the Bible in Mennonite homes and congregations. While the number of Mennonites who read the Bible daily (32%)¹¹ is higher than among other American Christians (21% for conservative Protestants and 14% of mainline Protestants),¹² it is hardly adequate from the standpoint of the Christian tradition’s claim that the Bible is “the formative text for the Christian.”¹³ Mennonite sociologist and pastor Conrad L. Kenagy names the “chasm between frequently speaking our own words to God but rarely listening to God’s words”¹⁴ as a sign that Mennonite spirituality in the U.S. is not much different from run-of-the-mill postmodern American spirituality in which people seek to encounter God on their own terms and at their own convenience. For Mennonites, who have long understood the church as a contrast culture shaped by a communal reading of the Bible and living in the example of Jesus, this is a devastating assessment.

Kenagy’s research demonstrates that like many of their contemporaries, Mennonite Bible readers have a “tendency to disconnect the biblical narrative from [their] lives and experience and in the process to be uninspired and unimaginative in [their] interpretation and application of the Scriptures.”¹⁵ Yet simply creating a link between the biblical text and people’s lives will not solve the problem of disconnection. The issue is a more fundamental one: the world view out of which readers are operating and their willingness to have that world view transformed.

⁹ Shue, delegate summary.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kenagy, 90.

¹² Ibid, 102.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 15.

¹⁴ Kenagy, 108.

¹⁵ Kenagy, 90.

The consumer culture focuses our attention on the consumer (reader) and evaluates the product's (biblical story) "usefulness" or "applicability" by the extent to which it gives the consumer what he or she wants. Thus, whether consciously or not, many readers shaped by consumer culture (and many of the Bible studies available commercially) approach the Bible looking for ratification of *their own* ideas, thoughts, beliefs and positions. This approach to the Bible encourages readers to do "what [they] must never be encouraged to do, although all . . . are guilty of it over and over [:] . . . to force Scripture to fit [their own] experience. [Individual] experience is too small; it's like trying to put the ocean into a thimble. What [is needed] is to fit into the world revealed by Scripture, to swim in this vast ocean."¹⁶ The temptation is to approach the Bible as "an object to disagree or agree with, . . . a science book to be held up to empirical evidence, . . . a list of commands to be checked off as done or not done, or . . . ammunition for . . . ongoing theological debates."¹⁷ Viewed in any of these ways, however, the Bible has little or no power to form Christians—people who are primarily shaped not by the values of consumer culture but by the values of the reign of God.

From the time Christian Formation was identified as a top priority by the delegates at Pittsburgh, denominational offices noticed "a constant weekly stream of persons interested in what [it] was doing in this area."¹⁸ The Executive Board believes that "promot[ing] the consistent use of the Scriptures, where the story of the Bible is explored, studied and discerned in the context of a faith community is . . . [key] in shaping the future of our churches. . . and our denomination"¹⁹—and the idea seems to be catching on. While there are no quantitative data available about the number of congregations or leaders looking for new, or renewed, ways to

¹⁶ Peterson, 68.

¹⁷ Kenagy, 90.

¹⁸ Terry Shue, e-mail message to the author, March 21, 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

engage with the Bible, “several dozen pastors from a variety of settings have asked [those in denominational leadership] when there might be something ready. . . [and others] have been eager to tell . . . what they are already doing.”²⁰ Several area conferences (including Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference and Central District Conference, the regional conferences in my geographic area) have intentionally incorporated promoting engagement with Scripture in their regional gatherings, at pastor resource days, and in mailings sent to congregations. My own conversations with a variety of people (seminary students, conference ministers, pastors, and lay leaders) confirms both the hunger for and the buzz surrounding lively biblical formation, and I’ve had repeated inquiries about Bible-reading initiatives in which I’ve participated and requests that their findings and processes would be made more widely available.²¹

In order to move forward on providing resources for congregations and conferences in a systematic way, the Leadership Development Office of MC USA launched several initiatives following the Pittsburgh convention. The first was the effort to gather a “Bible dreaming team” composed of professors, pastors, and church leaders who would help to brainstorm ways the national office might inspire congregations “to more fully engage the Bible together.”²² The second initiative, headed by Terry Shue, is called the “Twelve Scripture Project.” It invites people to reflect communally on the “top twelve” Scriptures without which they cannot live. Twelve is both an arbitrary and a modest number—and its arbitrariness and modesty help focus

²⁰ Shue e-mail, March 21, 2012.

²¹ Over the last 10 years, I’ve participated in, planned and lead, and written about a variety of ways to engage with the Bible, including a Bible immersion “summer camp” for junior highers; Bible study and worship planning with junior and senior highers; a continuing education week for pastors at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in January 2010 focused on reading the Bible; and several Lilly-funded initiatives at AMBS under the “Engaging Pastors” grant, including faculty-pastor Bible study groups, pastor-faculty colloquies, and retreats for pastors and conference ministers.

²² Terry Shue, e-mail message to the author, August 30, 2011. I and a dozen others met several times via conference call to suggest possible resources to be released immediately, within the next six months, and within the next two years. The Twelve Scripture Project (initiative 2 above) is in the “immediate” category; my thesis work in the “within the next two years.” Other leaders have picked up additional pieces to be released either in print or electronic format, or have made themselves available to travel to congregations for retreats or concentrated teaching sessions.

significant conversation about the Bible and its role in the lives of Christians both individually and corporately.²³ Additional initiatives consisted of projects by a variety of leaders to help individuals and congregations engage with the Bible. These included an invitation to me to develop a Bible study approach (as opposed to a particular curriculum around specific texts) firmly rooted in and enacting core Anabaptist Mennonite ecclesiological and hermeneutical convictions, and flexible enough to be used in the variety of congregations which comprise MC USA.²⁴ This request forms the core of my thesis work.

The delegates may have been somewhat rosy in their assessment of the good old days when the most exciting thing in the small communities in which most US Mennonites lived was the well-attended Wednesday night Bible study and the type of Christians it supposedly produced. Yet even if that's the case, they appropriately noted the gap between what is—the Bible as one source of reading material among many—and what they want to see: vibrant Christians reading the Bible in a manner that transforms their lives and the lives of those around them.

Their immodest goal is my own as well. My hope in carrying out this project was first and most of all to help people engage with Bible in ways that “immerse [them so fully] in scriptural narrative that its language and metaphors become the primary shapers of [their] imagination and practice.”²⁵ I have had success in leading this kind of biblical engagement myself; my aim in this thesis project is to articulate for and pass along to other leaders the

²³ Shue adapted this project from the work Professor Mary H. Schertz did in seminary classrooms, Jennifer Davis Sensenig did in conference pastoral education with bi-vocational immigrant pastors in California, and I did in congregational settings with adults and youth in Sunday school and retreat settings. See <http://mennoniteusa.org/2012/03/22/the-twelve-scriptures-project/> (accessed August 8, 2012) for an introduction to the project as Shue conceived it. http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/12_Scripture_Selection1.pdf (accessed August 8, 2012) provides directions for leaders.

²⁴ Shue e-mail, August 30, 2011.

²⁵ Sara Wenger Shenk, “Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Proposal for Tradition-Based, Critical Education” (presented at the Annual Meeting of the Religious Education Association, Philadelphia, PA, 2002), 6.

dispositions and practices necessary for reading the Bible this way. In addition, I'd like to begin assessing the extent to which this approach might have the desired transformational approach in a wider and more diverse population than the one I've worked with.

Several practical challenges need to be addressed. The first is to create an approach that is flexible enough to be used productively in the social and cultural range represented in MC USA. While the majority of Mennonites in MC USA are of European-American descent, nearly 18% of Mennonite congregations are comprised of minority populations, of which the largest proportion is Latino (46%) followed by African-American (35%), Asian (11%) and Native American (8%).²⁶ Most Bible study materials for adults that have been produced by and for the denomination are firmly rooted in White, middle-class, educated ways of seeing and knowing. Are there ways to engage the Bible productively that are flexible enough to be usable in rural, cradle Mennonite congregations as well as urban immigrant congregations, for example? In addition to being flexible enough to be used in a variety of congregational systems and cultures, is this approach holistic enough to invite everyone into transformation no matter what their starting point? Is it rooted firmly enough Anabaptist Mennonite hermeneutics and ecclesiology to have something to offer the denomination without getting mired in historical parochialism?

The second practical challenge is to articulate an approach specifically and clearly enough that others can carry it out. This is always the task of writers of curriculum and how-to manuals. It's particularly daunting in this case because of the interdisciplinary nature of what I

²⁶ "About Mennonite Church USA," <http://www.mennoniteusa.org/Home/About/tabid/55/Default.aspx> (accessed January 13, 2011). While "racial/ethnic" is the official term used for all minorities in MC USA, it is problematic since it obscures the social construction of race as well as the fact that race and ethnicity are not the domain of minorities only. I use the term minorities instead, with the understanding that I mean minority in terms of numbers, power, and representation and not as a value judgment.

think is being called for: a flexible blend of a Christian formation worldview, a biblical and theological foundation for pedagogy, and a final product with an Anabaptist coloration.

Research

Christian formation is an interdisciplinary way of thinking about human development, learning, and growth in faith that integrates theology, psychology, developmental theory, and the educational practices of the church. Christian formation attends explicitly to the whole person, emphasizing not only beliefs (mind) but also maturity (spirit) and action (body). While a traditional Christian education approach focused primarily on transferring Christian information, a Christian formation approach emphasizes training for transformation toward full-orbed Christian maturity. Christian formation does not separate worship, education, and the church's helping ministries, but sees them as integrated practices that reinforce and deepen each other. Taking a Christian formation approach to Bible reading has a number of pedagogical ramifications that differ from what usually happens in Sunday school or small group settings. A formational approach also supports and reinforces several key Anabaptist distinctives that make particular sense in MC USA congregations.

A Formational Approach

A common refrain in the synoptics is Jesus' command that those who have ears hear (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:23; Luke 8:8). Like many teachers, leaders, and parents before and since, Jesus recognizes that there's a crucial difference between having the "equipment" for hearing and being transformed by what one hears. While our hearing is clearly shaped by a great variety of things (culture, class, race, age, education, etc.), those of us in the developed West share one particular form of hearing "loss" which spiritual directors and spiritual teachers call the

“false self:” the “pervasive structures of self-referenced being . . . [that] resist . . . our true self, that self that is actualized through radical abandonment to God”²⁷—in other words, that makes our own language and metaphors, rather than those of the biblical narrative, the primary shapers of who we are.

Most Bible reading in the Protestant tradition, including most Mennonite Bible reading, leaves the false self intact because it works out of, rather than challenges, the perceptual frameworks of readers. A Bible-reading approach rooted in Christian formation, however, would remove readers from center stage and refuse to stop with information without moving into transformation. As pastor William T. Chaney, Jr. writes, Christian spiritual formation is “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the gracious working of God’s Spirit for the transformation of the world.”²⁸

Chaney’s compact definition highlights three important distinctives of a formational approach. First, Christian formation is a lifelong *process*. Since all things are forming us, the primary question becomes not whether we will be formed, but how.²⁹ Formation may and probably will include both education and effort, but aims more holistically than either.³⁰ Second, Christian formation is about being conformed *in the image of Christ*. “Genuine spiritual formation reverses our habitual expectations for gratification to a posture of patient, open-ended yieldedness . . . [and brings about] a fundamental shift from being our own production to being

²⁷ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1985) 22.

²⁸ William T. Chaney, Jr., “Spiritual Formation is not Optional – It is Essential!,” *Making Disciples in an Emerging Culture*, September 17, 2007, <http://makingdisciples.wordpress.com/2007/09/17/spiritual-formation-is-not-optional-it-is-essential/> (accessed January 12, 2012). Chaney expands Mulholland’s definition of Christian spiritual formation, which reads: “Christian spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (Mulholland, 25).

²⁹ Mulholland, 25.

³⁰ Its full-orbed approach could be articulated in a number of different ways: head/hands/heart, attitudinal/cognitive/moral, ontology/epistemology/ethics, orthodoxy/orthopraxy/orthopathy.

God's creation."³¹ Finally, Christian formation is *not for ourselves alone*. In a culture dominated by what Eugene Peterson calls the "unholy trinity" of "my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings,"³² a key shift, even for many Christians, is understanding that not only our spirituality but also our lives are finally not "about us." While the early work of Christian spiritual formation is becoming disciples ("the struggle to get our lives together"³³) maturing Christians dare not stop there but will need to move into "generative discipleship:" "the struggle to give our lives away."³⁴

Robert Mulholland, professor of New Testament at Asbury Seminary, names six objectives of formational Bible reading: focusing on the quality of reading rather than the quantity read;³⁵ sinking into the text rather than skimming its surface for a quick "sound bite" to take away;³⁶ rather than mastering the text, "allow[ing] the text to master you;"³⁷ treating the text as "the *subject* of a reading relationship"³⁸ rather than as an object to control; approaching the text lovingly and receptively rather than from a posture of distance or defensiveness;³⁹ and reading with an openness to mystery rather than out of a problem-solving mentality.⁴⁰

While Mulholland provides a vivid and inspiring picture of what it looks like to read the Bible formationally, he does not outline any specific strategies for doing so nor does he address the various concerns of doing this kind of reading communally. In addition to some suggestions for attending to group dynamics, leaders in congregations need both a simpler rubric and greater specificity to put into practice what he's suggesting.

³¹ Mulholland, 27.

³² Peterson, 31.

³³ Ron Rolheiser, "Spirituality and the Seasons of our Lives," *Radical Grace* 23, no. 4 (December 2010): 12.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

³⁵ Mulholland, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 56.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

³⁸ *Ibid*, emphasis added.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

It's entirely possible that someone, somewhere, is conducting formational Bible studies. But I have not found curriculum that reflects the approach Mulholland suggests, or read about, or heard descriptions of people experimenting concretely with formational Bible study in either full-orbed ways or the congregational settings I'm interested in. *Lectio divina* and its many variations come close, yet its primary "delivery system" is side-by-side rather than communal in its hermeneutic or practice. Bob Ekblad's Bible studies with poor, undocumented, and often imprisoned men are fascinating and thought-provoking, but he does not write about how one might translate what he's doing into congregational settings.⁴¹ Walter Wink, on the other hand, has experimented with and written about right-brained approaches to biblical engagement for specifically communal and congregational contexts.⁴² Yet though his approach is very promising, both his writing about it and his way of enacting it seem to rely so much on the depth of his scholarship and his expertise in reading biblical texts in their original languages that no pastors and leaders I've talked to have been able to imagine how they might follow in his footsteps.

I also suspect that part of the reason I've unearthed so little is that the concept of a Christian formation approach as opposed to a Christian education one is relatively recent. What such a conceptual shift might imply for engagement with the Bible is barely on the radar in most congregations, Mennonite or otherwise. Thus concrete, do-able resources from a formational perspective are few.

One of the most promising possibilities of which I'm aware comes from AMBS Professor of New Testament Mary H. Schertz. Schertz has developed a three-fold pattern of engaging with Scripture: we read the text, we allow the text to read us, and we worship with and through the

⁴¹ Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁴² Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, 2nd ed. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989.

text. She describes these movements less like distinct actions and more like layers of translucent cloth laid one on top of each other, each time allowing what has come before to “shine through” and come into conversation with what is happening in the present moment. What this means, for example, is that the second movement (allowing the text to read us) is “far more than finding an application of the story to our lives. [It] is recognizing that this story is alive even as we are and letting the life of this story intertwine with the stories of our lives.”⁴³

Professor Schertz conceived of the first “layer” of her Bible reading approach (careful reading of the text) in seminary Greek classrooms. The depth of communal exegesis filled both her and her students with a longing for “ways of continuing this”⁴⁴ beyond the classroom. The third “layer” of her approach, worship, emerged in conversation with a good friend and co-worker, Barbara Nelson Gingerich, who incorporated into a Maundy Thursday service what she had gleaned from reading an academic paper Schertz had written. “There was something very completing, something integrating, about taking exegetical work into worship,” Schertz recalls.⁴⁵ This led Schertz to invite Nelson Gingerich to help her plan and lead an AMBS-sponsored Bible study for women pastors that included both exegesis and worship. Schertz’ second “layer,” writing the text (later enlarged to “artful response”) emerged last of all, in conversations with AMBS dean Rebecca Slough about the St. John’s Bible project⁴⁶ and with me about the way I had used “body sculpting” in my work with junior highers.⁴⁷

⁴³ Mary H. Schertz, “Reading the Bible Confessionally” (Keynote address presented at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Pastors Week, Elkhart, IN, January 25, 2010), 7.

⁴⁴ Mary H. Schertz, personal interview with the author, October 12, 2012.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ <http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/>, accessed January 2, 2012.

⁴⁷ One of the field trips I took with the junior highers in the congregation I served was to a set of larger-than-life metal sculptures of the stations of the cross. As we listened to the story of the passion, which we had previously studied together, I invited the students to either pick one sculpture and place themselves in a similar pose or to choose another wordless pose as a way of responding to the text. This experience was the result both of practical considerations (lots of masculine energy that needed some kind of embodiment) and my desire to experiment with what I’d seen Walter Wink do when he was the guest speaker at an AMBS Pastors Week while I was a student there.

I had the pleasure of being part of the initial Bible study Schertz conceived. It was clear to me that all those who participated deeply valued the experience and were changed by it. As Schertz herself later noted,

What the . . . Bible studies did for me . . . is, simply put, help me know Jesus. I have reclaimed, with some bemusement, the language of personal relationship with Jesus Christ. . . . [I]f we want to know Jesus better, we have to be where he is. That's true of any relationship. We get to know one another by hanging out together. Where is Jesus? Lots of places, of course, but there are some we know for sure. We know he is where two or three are gathered in his name. We know he is with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. We also know that he is in the pages of the Bible.⁴⁸

My own question during that Bible “study” was whether this way of reading might be transferable to a congregational setting.

The main obstacle, it seemed to me, was the time constraint of church life: how might one sink into these three movements in the brief time available during the Sunday school hour or in small group settings? Christine Blair suggests a logical though seldom-used solution: instead of “using up” a text in one session, return to it several times.⁴⁹

Pedagogical Considerations in a Formational Approach to Bible Study

Having thought of a way of moving from a monthly retreat-type time-frame to a weekly congregational one, several practical considerations still remained for me. Professor Schertz' keynote address at the 2010 AMBS Pastors' Week laid out the general approach she was interested in, but didn't give any specifics about how others might live into it. Part of this was the correct assessment that another technical fix was not what was needed. In addition, my sense is that Professor Schertz had little interest in or time to spell out the specific pedagogic implications

⁴⁸ Schertz, “Reading the Bible confessionally,” 3-4.

⁴⁹ Christine Eaton Blair, *The Art of Teaching the Bible: A Practical Guide for Adults*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001).

or strategies that flowed from her theoretical work. She knew how to do what she was doing and was happy to tell us about it, but her main concern was not replicating her process in other settings. This was, however, exactly what I was interested in, first for my own practice, and later, in the course of my thesis work, because I wanted to find a way to include as many others as possible in the riches of this approach. In addition to a deeper exploration of Professor Schertz' three movements of Bible study, it seemed to me that a crucial consideration was the relational and pedagogical context that needed to be created for these movements to make sense. Since it is the foundation for everything that follows, it's here that I start.

An environment of hospitality. In order to enact Professor Schertz' Bible reading approach, it is necessary to create an environment that is congenial to the kind of work it entails. While educator Parker Palmer doesn't use these terms, what he articulates in *The Courage To Teach* is the formation of environments that are hospitable to the subject, hospitable to the students, and hospitable to the teacher. The focus on hospitality provides an antidote to the "culture of disconnection that undermines teaching and learning [and] is driven partly by fear."⁵⁰ Palmer goes on to say that disconnection is the result of a Western "commitment to thinking in polarities, a thought form that elevates disconnection into an intellectual virtue."⁵¹ As he and others make clear, welcoming rather than polarizing is a spiritual task.⁵²

Key in the formation of hospitable environments is the attitude of leaders, who need to figure out how to work with their anxiety not only for their own ability to stay present to the process but because their functioning sets the tone for the interactions of the groups they lead. Alban Institute consultant and author Peter Steinke has noted that the "leader's 'presence' can have a calming influence on the reactive behavior;" conversely, a lack of presence, or of helpful

⁵⁰ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 61.

⁵¹ Palmer, 61.

⁵² Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus* (Boston, MA: Shambala Publications, Inc., 2008), 171-182.

presence, is a “major factor in anxious times.”⁵³ Steinke goes on to name a number of specific ways leaders can, and need to, function to influence the group’s “emotional field” for the better: recognizing that resistance is a normal reaction to leadership, being patient with how long it takes an anxious system to settle down (especially when anxiety can spike almost immediately!), and learning to tolerate anxious moments in order to “use them as opportunities for creative responses.”⁵⁴

Working with fear is also an issue for group members, since our chronically fearful culture has a pernicious effect on learning. Anxiety “replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty, stiffens our position over against another’s . . . [and] floods the nervous system so we cannot hear what is said without distortion or cannot respond with clarity. . . .”⁵⁵ When they are anxious, people engage in what social scientist Brené Brown calls vulnerability-avoidance. In so doing, however, they cut themselves off from connection, since vulnerability is also “the birthplace of joy, possibility, and faith.”⁵⁶ Brown’s comment that “Faith minus vulnerability equals extremism”⁵⁷ clarifies how crucial it is to make room for vulnerability in our conversations around the Bible. Moving toward rather than retreating from God, the text, and each other requires each person, and groups as a whole, to find ways to manage anxiety and take small steps toward becoming more and more transparent, including to the text which “must have power and freedom to utter its own voice as a real voice in the conversation”⁵⁸ if engagement with it is to have any transforming effect.

⁵³ Peter L Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁵⁶ Brown, “The price of invulnerability,” TEDxKansas City, August 19, 2011.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Walter Brueggeman, “The Preacher, The Text, and The People,” *Theology Today* vol. 47, no. 3 (October 1990), 240.

Reading the text. Since many groups that gather to study the Bible don't want to "waste" group time reading the Bible, perhaps the most radical move of Professor Schertz' first movement is to actually read the text. What Professor Schertz noticed is that she and her students benefited far more from texts they translated because they read them so much more carefully. Reading slowly doesn't need to be the preserve of those who read in original languages, however. A variety of practices can help lay leaders and group members slow down their reading.

The majority of the group time in the first movement is then given to conversation that the leader launches with one of the following open-ended questions: What one or two things did you notice? What puzzles you, or what would you like to know more about? What do you want to argue with? What keeps drawing your attention? If this is a story, who do you feel drawn to, or do you want to push away? What in this text reminds you of another biblical text, or of something in your life or in our world? And, always, *why*? All of these questions invite careful attention to what is actually on the page, and to readers' interaction with it.

These questions are likely familiar to those who have practiced *lectio divina*. Usually a leader need ask only one or two to get things started, keeping the rest in reserve to help open up the conversation as needed. All of them get at the same thing: how is the Spirit speaking today and in this context through this Scripture?

Being read by the text. Since most leaders and participants in Bible studies are schooled by their culture and context to think of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world, many Bible studies include a focus on application, on making the Bible "relevant." The second movement in formational Bible reading instead invites groups to discover that the reign of God is the fundamental reality and that their task is to make themselves and their world relevant *to it*.

Practically, allowing the text to read us involves two things. The first is to spend more time than usual with the text so that we can release our grip on our ideas about the text and allow another (in this case, *The Other*) to get a word in edgewise. The second is to engage the text with our bodies and our right brains to get ourselves out of the driver's seat of our usual way of being and thinking.

Part of why some kind of embodied or “artful” response is helpful in allowing the text to read us is that it helps practitioners relax the usual-Bible-study tyranny of their left brains and access the contributions of their right ones. While the left hemisphere “processes information sequentially in a linear, orderly fashion,”⁵⁹ the right is more adept at “the synthesis of wholes, the grasping of meaning-in-context.”⁶⁰ “Our problem,” writes biblical scholar Walter Wink “is not that we have been too intellectual, but that we have been half-wits! . . . We must get our whole selves involved with [the text], right brains as well, and struggle to let it endow us with a fuller share of our available humanity.”⁶¹

Worshiping through the text. The final movement of Professor Schertz' approach, worshiping in and through the text, has the biggest range of expression and is the most difficult to talk about, since communities vary widely in the ways in which they worship. Yet the point is a simple one: not to leave the text before having encountered it in devotionally. Prayers that are shaped by the concerns or even the words of the text, response actions that flow intuitively from it, and songs whose themes or emotional tone allow participants to enter affectively into the world of the text are all important—and are rarely featured in traditional Bible study models.

Not only does worship emphasize relationship with God and with the community of believers, even more fundamentally it “reveal[s] what it is that [humans] ultimately value, what

⁵⁹ Wink, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wink, 31.

is most important to them. As the Hebrew prophets remind us, people worship what they trust for their security. . . . They worship what they organize their lives around and what they are willing to die . . . for.”⁶² Thus Bible study without worship neglects a key component of formational Bible study—the conversion that occurs over and over when we are reminded who, and whose, we are.

Biblical Foundations for a Formational Approach to the Bible

The biblical witness doesn’t speak explicitly about Bible study as twenty-first century people understand it. But it does provide a disposition which makes formative engagement with the Bible not only possible but compelling. The Gospel account of the feeding of the five thousand is especially useful in enlarging and refocusing the attention of both leaders and participants in this kind of Bible reading so that a holistic approach to the Bible makes sense.

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is the only one recorded in all four gospels (Mark 6:34-44, Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9: 10-17; and John 6:1-15).⁶³ Late in the day in *a deserted place*, Jesus urges the disciples to feed the crowd *themselves* (the emphatic is clear in the Greek). In the face of their incredulity, he takes stock of the available food (five loaves and two fish) and organizes the crowd to *recline* on the *green grass* in eating- or perhaps *banqueting*-groups (συνπόσια).⁶⁴ Then he does four characteristic things: he takes the bread, gives thanks for it, breaks it, and gives it. This cluster of verbs (λαμβάνω, εὐλογέω, κατακλάω, δίδωμι) appears in all the gospel accounts of the feeding of the five thousand; in the account of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; and in the story of the breaking of bread at Emmaus at the

⁶² Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and mission after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2009), 7.

⁶³ John R Donahue, *The Gospel of Mark, Sacra Pagina*, v. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 207.

⁶⁴ *Common English Bible: A Fresh Translation to Touch the Heart and Mind* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2011), 43.

end of Luke; the words of institution in I Cor. 11 substitute the close synonym εὐχαριστέω for εὐλογέω.

While commentators agree that the feeding of the 5,000 is not a Eucharistic meal, casting the emphasis on what this meal *is not* misses an important point about what it *is*. There appears to be something characteristically, memorably Jesus-y about taking, thanking, breaking and giving—and something equally distinctive about the result of those actions. Of course they are the normal, daily tasks of a head of household when people gather to eat. But it’s also true that “[t]he symbolism of fellowship around the table reflecting a new kind of communion or community runs through [all of] Jesus’ ministry.”⁶⁵

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 resonates not only with the life and practice of Jesus and the habits of the early church, but also points backwards to Israel’s history and forward to an as-yet-unrealized eschatological banquet. God’s miraculous nourishment is a reality Israel recognizes in the stories of the prophets (I Kings 17; II Kings 4)⁶⁶ and most quintessentially in the provision of manna in the wilderness. The purpose of these miraculous feedings is of course to provide people with needed food. The manna story is also explicitly about *more* than simply keeping people fed: its aim is “to establish a relationship between God and the people.”⁶⁷ This relationship is built on Israel’s “wilderness school”⁶⁸ lessons of learning to trust God to protect and provide;⁶⁹ the manna miracle gives the newly formed people daily practice in thinking and acting out of a mindset of sufficiency.

⁶⁵ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26, Word biblical commentary* v. 34 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 341.

⁶⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary, Hermeneia—a critical and historical commentary on the Bible*, v. 43 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 319ff.

⁶⁷ Collins, 322. Exodus 16:12 puts it this way: “ ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; *then you shall know that I am the LORD your God*’ ” (NRSV, emphasis added).

⁶⁸ Erlander, Daniel, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God’s Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* (Minneapolis, MN: Daniel Erlander Publications, 1992) 7.

⁶⁹ Alan Kreider, *Journey Towards Holiness: A Way of Living for God’s Nation* (Scottsdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1987), 45.

The manna miracle is surely a past reality which Israel preserved in its hymnody (for example Psalm 78:24) and its Passover storytelling.⁷⁰ In addition, it also points toward the future. “[W]hen Jews speculated about the eschaton, which they often imagined as a new exodus, they frequently looked for a renewal of the gift of manna.”⁷¹ In one important way, however, the anticipated banquet differs from the remembered one: unlike the enough-for-the-day manna, the eschatological banquet is marked by the abundance (Isaiah 25:6-8)⁷² which is also featured in the feeding of the 5,000 and the 12 baskets of leftovers collected by the disciples (Mark 6:43).

Theological Underpinnings for Formational Bible Study with an Anabaptist Coloration

Because this project is designed for use primarily in MC USA congregations, it needs at the very least to be consonant with the denomination’s theological heritage and at best to deepen and enact it. Sara Wenger Shenk, current President of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, proposes several distinctives from the Anabaptist legacy that are particularly relevant for education and formation, both personal and communal. While she is writing in the context of Christian higher education in general, much of what she says is also suggestive for how Christians in congregational settings might productively read and appropriate the Bible. She names three important “clusters of critical retrieval” from Anabaptist history: discipleship, the hermeneutical community, and a missional ecclesiology.⁷³ The first highlights the necessity for Bible reading to affect the way disciples not only think, but also act—Bible reading cannot only be about information. The second emphasizes the conviction that the Bible can only be correctly interpreted in community—Bible reading cannot only be about “experts” passing on their

⁷⁰ Central Conference of American Rabbis, *A Passover Haggadah*, ed. Herbert Bronstein (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1974).

⁷¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., *The Anchor Bible* v. 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 419.

⁷² Collins, 326.

⁷³ Wenger Shenk, 5.

knowledge. The third understands the church as existing not only “for itself” but also an example and testimony for “the world”—Bible reading cannot only be oriented toward the formation of insiders.

Discipleship. In contrast to both sixteenth century Catholics and Reformers, Anabaptists defined the church not “by baptism at birth or parish district but rather by faith exhibited in discipleship within and accountable to a believing community.”⁷⁴ Since “Anabaptists . . . stress that Jesus is both the Son of God by whom we are saved through faith, and the Lord who has exemplified in his earthly life and ministry *the way Christians are called to live in this world*,”⁷⁵ Bible study in the Anabaptist stream can never be only an intellectual exercise whose effects are confined to a specific time (the Sunday school hour) or a specific location (within congregational walls). Bible reading that leads to discipleship cultivates not only habits of thought but results in actions that recall Jesus’ own: trust in God’s provision, servanthood, love of enemy, the sharing of material resources, etc. This emphasis on obedience, however, must be seen “as a predisposition and an essential corollary of interpretation”⁷⁶ rather than a kind of legalism that undermines Christian freedom and isolates believers in insular communities, things that have characterized Mennonites in the past.

Community hermeneutic. In addition to an emphasis on discipleship, Wenger Shenk and others note that “designating the local congregation as the ‘locus of interpretation’ was arguably the most important and distinctive Anabaptist contribution to sixteenth century hermeneutics.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 228.

⁷⁵ Marlin E. Miller, in Richard A. Kauffman and Gayle Gerber Koontz, editors, *Theology for the Church: Writings by Marlin E. Miller* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1997), 144-5, emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Hartshorn, 53.

⁷⁷ Wenger Shenk, 6, summarizing Stuart Wood Murray’s conclusions in “Spirit, Discipleship, Community: The Contemporary Significance of Anabaptist Hermeneutics,” a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The Whitefield Institute, Oxford, July 1992, 420-22.

This egalitarian approach to biblical interpretation resisted the division between “professional” and ordinary readers and emphasized the contributions, and indeed necessity, of both.⁷⁸

Especially over time, one of the legacies of this privileging of “ordinary” readers has been an undercurrent of suspicion of “professional” readers (scholars, pastors with seminary training) by people in congregations.⁷⁹ At the same time, as many Mennonites in North America have become more educated and professionalized and routinely turn to experts for medical care, car repair, tax preparation, and the teaching of their children, they have also increasingly deferred to professional readers for biblical interpretation. Both impulses (suspicion of or deference to experts) have marginalized some readers, all of whom have crucial contributions to make to lively scriptural interpretation. Thus Bible reading with an Anabaptist coloration will of necessity focus on group process and functioning, finding ways of “discerning the spiritual meaning, relevance, and practical application of the text to specific situations.”⁸⁰

Missional ecclesiology. Finally, Wenger Shenk notes that ecclesiology, in the Anabaptist stream, is missional. The first generation of Anabaptists viewed the church as a “contrast culture,” both distinct from society and having something to offer it. While this original understanding gave way to sectarianism, a needed retrieval of a more generous ecclesiology sees the church as the community that “is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes in the world.”⁸¹ It is “in the fullness of its *life practices*—not primarily its arguments—that the church draws others to consider the Christian faith.”⁸² A Bible

⁷⁸ Hartshorn, 45.

⁷⁹ I am currently doing spiritual direction for a woman who has been called into pastoral leadership from within her congregation. While both she and her congregation want her to receive further training, they are deeply worried that taking seminary classes will cause her to “lose her faith” and thus hamper both her personal Christian walk and her ministry among them.

⁸⁰ C. Norman Kraus, *Using Scripture in a Global Age: Framing Biblical Issues*, Institute of Mennonite Studies Occasional Papers (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2006), 48.

⁸¹ Wenger Shenk, 9.

⁸² *Ibid*, emphasis added.

reading approach that is practice-oriented will focus less on extracting nuggets of knowledge or theology from a text and more on engaging in sustained conversation in the company of fellow explorers with the tradition the Bible preserves and especially the God to whom it points.

Theoretical Framework

The 2011 MC USA biannual convention delegates chose Christian Formation as their first priority, committing themselves to “fashion and mold their lives” (and the lives of the people in their congregations) after the life of Jesus Christ. They identified engagement with the Scriptures as a key component of this shaping. As they turned their attention to how this shaping might happen, however, the delegates identified a number of challenges: biblical illiteracy, over-busy schedules and irregular church attendance, and a cultural tendency toward polarization which turned Bible studies into debates rather than communal enterprises.

In response to the vote on priorities, denominational leaders promised the delegates resources for engaging with the Bible in new ways within the next two years. Within a few weeks, they contacted pastors, professors, and other leaders (of which I was one), asking them for any materials which could be made available to congregations and conferences in the short, medium, and long-term. While a formational approach to the Bible was not an explicit request from either denomination or delegates, it was congruent both with the delegates’ priorities and my own long-term interests, so it is this approach that has shaped my work on this project. The Bible reading approach I’m suggesting pays close attention to group dynamics (welcoming each person’s voice rather than simply letting the most vocal do all the talking), begins by actually reading the text rather than launching immediately into a discussion about it, engages both left-

brained (linear and thought-oriented) and right brained (embodied, artistic) teaching/learning strategies, and brings all this study together in worship steeped in and growing out of the text.

A formational approach to the Bible addresses a number of the challenges the delegates identified. Bible reading that takes the slow organic process of growth seriously will not worry about what a person does not yet know but will see each encounter with the Bible in community as an opportunity to know more. Bible reading that gives itself to the text, treating it not as an object to be used but as a subject with which to engage, will allow readers to genuinely encounter the text as other and give themselves to it. Bible reading that shapes individuals and communities in the image of Christ will keep asking readers to move emerging hunches or convictions into the lived reality of their lives, and will orient conversation with fellow Christians around deepening their actual following of Jesus. Bible reading that is for others will take seriously not only the community of reading but will enlarge both the generosity of spirit of individual community members and community life as a whole for the sake of the world.

The Bible read formationally also provides a crucial addition to the practice of Mennonite congregations for whom the Bible has often served exclusively as an “instruction book” for ethical living. The tendency to read the Bible as a “to do list” is one manifestation of the shadow side of the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship, *nachfolge*—literally “following after.” While such following is clearly crucial for genuine Christian maturity, disconnected from relationship with God it quickly becomes a particularly deadly form of perfectionism and works righteousness. The genius of a formational approach (to Bible reading as well as other aspects of congregational life) is its shift in perspective—a shift in perspective that is grounded in relationship with God and with each other. Within this new framework, mistakes or roadblocks become opportunities God can use to make something new possible. The good news is that

“grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15) is both lifelong and life-giving.

Anabaptist theological distinctives also have important contributions to make to a re-invigorated engagement with the Bible within MC USA. An emphasis on discipleship that sees obedience as both a predisposition for and an essential corollary of interpretation will help readers take the text seriously without getting mired in deadening legalism. An emphasis on the hermeneutical community will highlight the importance and necessity of the contributions all readers have to make to the processes of reading the Bible, and give theological freight to gathering in groups around a text. And an understanding of the church as a contrast community that has something to offer the world through the fullness of its life will help people construct a way of life that is shaped by the Bible rather than constructing a series of propositions extracted from it.

A formationally-oriented Bible-reading approach that is meant to be performed in groups and to form Christian community over the long haul can respond not only to the theological variety within MC USA but also strengthen Anabaptist Mennonite understandings of what it means to be the church, how to read the Bible, and what the point of the Christian life is. As Jesus did in the feeding of the 5,000, this Bible-reading approach starts with what is: the actual people, in all their variety and contexts in MC USA—all the things they know and don’t know, the actual places they are in their life of faith, and the relationships within which they are imbedded. It gives thanks for what is, focusing on what (and who) is present rather than what (and who) is missing—paying attention to God’s Word, the people gathered around it, and God’s own Holy Spirit which is freely given to those who are willing to receive it. It breaks open the Scriptures, reading them carefully and with the expectation that there is something there which is

of value, on which the readers' lives depend. And it shares at all kinds of levels, entering into spiritual transformation in the company of others, expecting and benefiting from the contributions of each person in the group, and living out what is learned not only within people's individual lives but in their communities (family, church, neighborhood, world).

Objectives, Strategies, and Implementation

The objective of this thesis is to provide a way for leaders in congregational settings in MC USA to add a biblically-oriented resource to their formational toolbox. The strategies for carrying out this objective included creating a leader's guide that is formationally oriented, pedagogically sound, and informed by Anabaptist Mennonite theological convictions, and field-testing both the approach and the leader's guide in three congregations within MC USA that are representative of the denomination's ethnic, social, geographic, and theological range.

The first strategy I implemented was to write the leader's guide, which can be found in Appendix A. The introduction to the leader's guide is the place where my research is made most explicit, both in naming a formational rather than utilitarian approach to the Bible and in highlighting professor Schertz' three layers of Bible study as well as Walter Wink's emphasis on the pedagogical implications of brain research. The rest of my research is imbedded in the suggestions for leaders and strategies for implementing these suggestions. The leader's guide serves two functions. It lays out the approach so people can understand what it is and how to carry it out. And it makes a case that this way of approaching the Bible provides an important complement to the usual way Bible studies are conducted in most congregational settings. Aware of my reading audience, I wrote it in the popular, non-academic style I use in my other writing for the denomination.

The second section of the leader's guide includes additional details about the four parts of this Bible reading approach. I discuss issues related to creating an environment of hospitality for text, students, and leader. I spell out a variety of practices that help slow down reading so that people are actually encountering the text itself rather than their imagination or memory of it. I detail ways to engage with the text with the right in addition to the left brain so that participants can relax their grip on controlling the text and allow *it* to "take the lead" in engaging with them. I suggest why it matters that we return to the text devotionally, and offer possibilities to help people do so.

Almost half of the teacher's manual is an example of a five-week Bible study. It includes a focus on social location (Week 1: who are we as readers of the text?); a close reading of the text and some questions to guide that process (Week 2: Reading the text); time for "artful response" to relax our control over the text and allow it to speak to us (Week 3: Being read by the text); suggestions for engaging the text in worship (Week 4: Worshiping through the text); and a session that structures a group conversation about this approach to the Bible in the style of examination of consciousness, so that not only the biblical engagement but also its evaluation would be rooted in a formational mindset and formational practices. After leaders tried this approach with a text I provided (for some uniformity across which to makes useful comparisons between groups), I encouraged them to try it another time with a text they chose themselves. My hope was that the second time through would help leaders and participants attend to something other than the novelty of the approach, and that a chance to construct the sessions from scratch would yield a more profound ownership of the process by all involved.

In order to field-test this approach (my second strategy), I looked for potential test congregations that fell into several categories: both urban and rural, from the range of Mennonite

population centers (Indiana, Pennsylvania, Florida), and one “minority” congregation. Given the time limits of this project, the congregational ecclesiology of MC USA, and the fact that many congregational programs slow down or come to a stop during the summer, I thought field testing this program in three congregations was as ambitious as I could get. The sample size is obviously very small and can’t possibly be fully representative. But a modest start was both achievable and able to suggest possibilities for further refinements both of the process and its evaluation.

Having established broad categories for suitable congregations to approach, I prioritized congregations with which I had some kind of connection, either personal or denominational. One of the things I’ve learned in my denominational work is that outside requests are low priorities for many congregations, so it was unlikely that a congregation would be willing to serve as a test site unless they had some kind of relational investment in me and/or the project—and preferably both!

One lay leader in a small congregation in Indianapolis had been following my work for the last several years, and as the person who normally led her congregation’s Bible studies, was eager to give this a try. I had a much more difficult time finding a traditional Mennonite congregation in Pennsylvania. I spoke with several pastors and congregations who for one reason or another weren’t interested. Through word of mouth, I eventually found two women pastors, from different congregations, who were intrigued enough to talk to me. Only one was able to work within the time frame I had available.

Finding a minority congregation willing to engage in this work proved most difficult of all. While I had a number of contacts and relationships locally, I preferred a congregation either from Florida or the West coast, two of the places where MC USA Latino congregations are growing most quickly. Through denominational connections, I eventually made contact with a

woman pastor at a large multicultural Latino congregation in Tampa. She assured me of her interest and said she'd be back in touch with me by the end of the summer with her assessment of the program.

I sent each of these teachers the leader's guide I had created, setting up phone conversation with them before they began in order to answer questions, offer encouragement, and clarify expectations. I was able to follow through on this plan with the Anglo leaders; after several phone conversations setting up the process, the Latino pastor sent me an e-mail saying that she was too busy for a phone call but didn't need anything further, and would contact me when she'd finished the field testing. When I didn't hear from her, I made numerous phone calls and sent regular e-mails, but never reached her in person or received replies to my messages. By this time, it was too late to find another test congregation. Since I suspected that lack of face-to-face relationship was one of the issues in her non-responsiveness, I asked several Latino students at the seminary where I teach, and with whom I *could* meet in person, to read and comment on the leader's guide. I was especially interested in their flagging the things they thought would be barriers for their own congregations or the congregations they were familiar with. An obviously poor second to field testing the approach in a Latino congregation, I thought this would at least highlight red flags within the curriculum itself that would need attention.

I communicated entirely by phone and e-mail with the Pennsylvania pastor, and was able to meet twice in person with the Indianapolis lay leader. In addition to these Mennonite leaders, one of the Presbyterian pastors in my Doctor of Ministry cohort also expressed interest in leading a Bible study using my materials. Because of his schedule, we communicated by email before his experiment and had one conversation by phone to debrief after the Bible study experiment in his congregation was complete.

In addition to conversations with leaders of the Bible studies, I asked participants to take a before- and after- inventory, which can be found in Appendix B. The ten-question forced-choice instrument asked people to comment in five areas: the extent to which the Bible had something to say to contemporary life, the extent to which biblical engagement was necessary for being a Christian, the extent to which communal readings of the Bible were valuable, the extent to which they read the Bible expecting to be changed in some way, and the extent to which reading the Bible nurtured their relationship with God.

Responses from leaders. Martha, the leader of the Bible study in Indianapolis, was the person who both worked with this process most extensively and gave the most feedback. The normal Bible Sunday school teacher in her congregation, she offered this mode of Bible engagement as one of three adult education options on Sunday morning. After finishing with the study of the text I'd suggested, she used a session for a group conversation about this Bible-reading approach, then led two additional cycles of textual engagement with Scriptures she chose and with which she'd previously worked.

Martha was both excited and nervous as she started out, "probably more nervous since it is so different from my normal way of teaching a Bible class."⁸³ As she reflected on her experience, her comments focused on three general areas: group process, the relationships between the reader and the text, and the experience of leading or teaching in this mode.

In the first round of the Bible study, she struggled with the use of the singing bowl which I'd recommended as a way to encourage careful listening to each other rather than the usual opinionated speech that's a part of many Bible studies. "I thought [it] would be a good way to make people pause between speakers; in practice it felt awkward, and I'm guessing that's one of

⁸³ Martha Yoder Maust, personal e-mail, March 1, 2012.

the things the group won't want to do again," she said.⁸⁴ She disliked this unnatural-feeling process, and felt frustrated with the way the change in pace made many in the group, including her, feel self-conscious and awkward. She and the group abandoned the use of the singing bowl in rounds two and three of their text study, as they missed the sense of give and take they'd previously enjoyed. Slowing down the conversation was simply "too much of a drag."⁸⁵

One of the biggest revelations to Martha was the way this process changed her own connection with the biblical text. Early on, she commented on how strange it felt to view the text as a conversation partner. "I had previously thought about investigating the text, having it be an object of study. [This was] different because there's not just a meaning in there that I'm supposed to find, but that somehow it's a relationship."⁸⁶ To her surprise, she also found that she loved the artful response though she thought of herself as "not artistic." And worship with the text, particularly leading the worship, taking on the "priestly role"⁸⁷ of serving bread or inviting people to anoint themselves with body glitter in the example of Moses whose face shone after encountering God, caused the text to "penetrate me like this sort of thing never has before."⁸⁸

Most difficult for her as a leader was "letting go and not being in control of what's going to happen."⁸⁹ This approach's emphasis on *group* process, the open-endedness of the questions, and the long silences all meant that she had to collaborate more with the group than when she was instructing people. In addition to her own discomfort, she experienced that a number of her Bible study regulars didn't respond very warmly to the invitation to, or necessity of, collaboration. "I'm used to having a good turn-out for my Bible studies," Martha said. "We

⁸⁴ Martha Yoder Maust, personal interview, March 22, 2012.

⁸⁵ Yoder Maust, personal interview, May 26, 2012.

⁸⁶ Yoder Maust, March 22.

⁸⁷ Yoder Maust, May 26.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Yoder Maust, March 22.

started out with a full room [about 18] and dwindled down to eight. So it was a lot smaller than usual.”⁹⁰ Some people drifted away after the first session; after the second round, several more people left saying that they “just weren’t getting anything out of it.”⁹¹ She wondered if valuable and needed biblical instruction was being short-changed. “I’m not convinced this should replace regular Bible study. There’s content I want to communicate,”⁹² she said. Yet she couldn’t help adding, “It grows on you, so it’s too bad to only try it for one round.”⁹³

The second test congregation was Methacton Mennonite Church, a rural congregation in Pennsylvania. Pastor Dawn Ruth Nelson led a five-week bible study for the regular weekly *lectio divina* group (no other groups were meeting during the summer). Thinking about who they were as readers of the text was a totally new idea to them, and their recognition that they were all congregational leaders came as something of a surprise: the group of eight includes two pastors, a retired pastor, the widow of a former pastor, a chaplain at the local retirement community, and the chair of the congregation. All were over sixty, all had at least college degrees. They were more homogeneous than most other groups in the congregation.

For Dawn and her group, the pace of the sessions was not a problem. Since they’d been meeting for *lectio* for six or seven years, they were used to both silence and reflective conversation—in fact, they added *more* silence than the leader’s guide called for. But Dawn was quick to point out that comfort with silence hadn’t always been the case. “We couldn’t do this at the beginning. It took forever to get into this mode.”⁹⁴ One significant difference from *lectio*, however, was lingering with one text for five weeks, since they were used to reading a different text each time they met.

⁹⁰ Yoder Maust, May 26.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dawn Ruth Nelson, personal interview, June 20, 2012.

The group discovered that their composition (congregational leaders) and their repeated returning to the text caused them to carry this text and their reflections on it into other contexts, especially contexts in which they were ministering. Their sense of the Scripture speaking *to* them both individually and as a group was very strong. “Every single time we read the Scripture, 3 or 4 people would only hear Jesus’ command to the disciples to come away. [This contrasts to] Mennonite spirituality [which] is so utilitarian and action-oriented that the usual call we hear is to discipleship, and we always hear it with judgment.”⁹⁵

Like Martha, Dawn was surprised by how helpful and enjoyable the artful response session was. “I was really concerned about how this was going to go, especially since that day was such a bad one for me. In addition to nice paper and colored pencils, I had brought along pipe cleaners, and I made five loaves and two fish. I needed something to hold on to, to carry with me. It worked—I couldn’t believe it!”⁹⁶

Also like Martha, Dawn received this text in a deep way. This text “arrived” at an especially fortunate time, when she was aware of all the lack in her congregation: the lack of resources for attending to youth, for incorporating visitors, for connecting the preschool and the congregation. “Instead of being overwhelmed, I was inspired by the message to ‘Go and see;’ to ‘Notice what we have,’ to focus on what we have, not on what we don’t have. . . . Staying with one Scripture helped me over a longer period of time to see the Scripture coming alive and relating to my daily life.”⁹⁷ Worship with the text, especially one of the suggested hymns (an old Mennonite favorite often sung at communion, “Break thou the bread of life”) “was amazing!

⁹⁵ Ruth Nelson, personal interview, June 20, 2012.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Dawn Ruth Nelson, written notes, July 17, 2012.

When I think of the meetings I need to lead,” Dawn said, “this is the one that give me energy” for the other ones.⁹⁸

Mike Selburg, the pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in rural Illinois, opened up the Bible study to the whole church. Those who came were the six people “who typically sign up for Bible studies,” a group about evenly divided between men and women, all white, three of whom are retired and all of whom are over fifty.⁹⁹ The retirees are financially stable and “the other three are always worrying about money—this came up in the original session [‘Who are we as readers of the text’] and also in connection with the text [the feeding of the five thousand].”¹⁰⁰

Mike found the opening breathing exercise helpful as a way of gathering people from their previous activities. “And having people focus on the middle was good because it allowed me not to be a jerk about [making sure everyone could talk] but it made people aware, and some of the people in the group are definitely controlling in conversation so this brought balance.”¹⁰¹

Like Dawn, Mike found repeated returning to one text intriguing. Coming back more than once “was good for me,” he said. “It helped me see that we [usually] read the Bible trying to figure out what it says but [not] how it relates to us. This allowed the text to connect to us, to speak to us over and over, and to realize that we don’t know the story after all. I never really saw the text as deeply as I did.”¹⁰²

Mike admitted that this was the first Bible study he’d led in a while—he’d given up on them because of low attendance. “But my own thesis work is convincing me of the power of small groups—that even little groups are worth my time.”¹⁰³ This familiar story that emphasized

⁹⁸ Dawn Ruth Nelson, written notes, July 17, 2012.

⁹⁹ Mike Selburg, personal interview, September 19, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

that “God can do a lot with a little” was also a helpful word for people who think they don’t have much and can’t do much. “I actually used this text in the church regarding finding our own vision—allowing God to utilize us.”¹⁰⁴ He’d be interested in doing something like this again and delving deeper: “I played to the safest possible options the first time around,”¹⁰⁵ choosing more conversation rather than artful response of some kind. “I could see doing a Scripture of the month, incorporating it into the worship services. We used the prayerbook thing—people really liked that. Worship offers a deeper experience.”¹⁰⁶

Group responses. Given the overall enthusiasm of the leaders, I was surprised by how little the individual before and after inventories revealed.¹⁰⁷ Part of the problem was that several of the questions were poorly worded. I meant question 10, for example, as a genuine question, since I’d heard more than one person say that they find the Bible irrelevant to their life as Christians. However, in this “official” format, it received the same answer from every single person: of course the Bible is crucial for Christian life. And while a few people noted a significant change in an area or two,¹⁰⁸ most individual results show little change, or are counterbalanced by others in the group who moved in the opposite direction: in other words, this assessment did not indicate in any statistically significant ways that this Bible reading approach changed people’s attitudes toward engagement with the Bible. Two possible areas that might merit further investigation are a slight *decrease* in finding a communal Bible-reading process valuable¹⁰⁹ and a light *increase* in openness to being transformed by the text¹¹⁰ over the course of the experience.

¹⁰⁴ Selburg.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See appendix D.

¹⁰⁸ See CED’s responses to question 9, from “Things I read in the Bible *rarely* change my attitudes, ideas, or actions” to “Things I read in the Bible *usually* change my attitudes, ideas, or actions.”

¹⁰⁹ The answers to questions 2 & 8, when averaged out over the three groups, showed an 8% decrease.

Spoken group comments on the process indicates both things that people appreciated and struggled with, the two ways I framed the reflection questions.¹¹¹ Each group commented positively on the ways staying with the text and slowing down their reading allowed the text to sink in deep. Reading a text more than once “yielded surprising benefits.”¹¹² “Letting the text speak to us is how the Bible and I *should* interact, but it took a while for that to sink in—that it’s not just study, but what God is saying to me”¹¹³ said a participant in Martha’s group, a sentiment that was echoed in Dawn’s and Mike’s group as well. The pace of this approach was also more congenial to introverts who often find themselves drowned out by the big talkers in group settings.

Some people really appreciated the invitation to artful response and were surprised by what it opened up for them. One person even commented that a highlight was a poem written by someone else in the group, something that grew out of “a movement exercise that had not meant much to me.”¹¹⁴ For all the groups, worship with the text was a high point, and in the groups using ritual action or song, these embodied experiences spoke especially powerfully.¹¹⁵ One participant spoke more than once during sharing time in congregational worship about how important the worship component of the first text study had been to her.¹¹⁶

Martha’s group struggled most with the slow pace recommended in the leader’s guide, and three people left the group explicitly because they found the conversation too stilted and

¹¹⁰ The answers to questions 5 & 9, when averaged out over the three groups, showed an 8% increase.

¹¹¹ See pp. 62-3 in appendix A. Because the Bible reading approach I was using was formational, I decided to use a formational “evaluative” tool as well—examination of consciousness.

¹¹² Ruth Nelson, July 16.

¹¹³ Yoder Maust, email to the author, March 26, 2012.

¹¹⁴ Yoder Maust, March 26.

¹¹⁵ Yoder Maust, May 26 and Ruth Nelson, July 16.

¹¹⁶ Yoder Maust, May 26. Martha noted that this was an unprecedented event in congregational life: what happened in Sunday school had never made a big enough impression to be mentioned not only once but twice in congregational worship.

ponderous.¹¹⁷ Some people expressed frustration with the normal coming and going that happened from Sunday to Sunday, wishing they could “do it all” in one hour so they wouldn’t miss things if they were gone.¹¹⁸ While people in Mike’s group appreciated coming back to the text more than once because it helped them see new things, they also found the repetitiveness “kind of annoying.”¹¹⁹ One person in Dawn’s group, a woman in her nineties, disliked the artful response and said that she preferred “the simplicity of our usual lectio process,”¹²⁰ though the rest of the group found that this approach to the text allowed it to “come alive with animation and color.”¹²¹

Comments from Latino readers. Because a growing number of MC USA congregations are Latino, and because Latino congregations are the fastest-growing congregations within the denomination, it seemed especially crucial to gain some sense of whether this approach might be usable in Latino contexts—or at least wouldn’t put roadblocks in the way of these congregations.

The two seminary students I interviewed, Martin Navarro and Cristina Rodriguez, both pointed out that Latino culture in the US isn’t monolithic—and thus that different Latino populations might receive this approach, or different parts of it, rather differently. “Some of us come from Catholic roots, where hierarchy is more prevalent. So we’re emotionally dependent on our leaders,”¹²² says Navarro. His assessment is that this group-focused approach would be very challenging in his home congregation in Chicago, where leaders are expected “to read the Bible, interpret Scripture, and tell people what to believe.”¹²³ In addition, anything that doesn’t come through the senior pastor would be met with suspicion. “Our culture, our context, our

¹¹⁷ Yoder Maust, March 26.

¹¹⁸ Yoder Maust, May 26.

¹¹⁹ Selburg, Sept. 19.

¹²⁰ Ruth Nelson, July 16.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Martin Navarro, personal interview, September 11, 2012.

¹²³ Ibid.

experience all make us not trust people outside the church.”¹²⁴ While Navarro himself can see some value in this approach, he doubts that it would find much purchase in his congregation.

Rodriguez, on the other hand, can imagine her congregation using this curriculum—in translation, of course. While the use of a talking stick or a singing bowl to slow down the conversation might make people uncomfortable or be limiting to some, it would help “women [who] don’t get as much chance to speak or people who feel they don’t have enough knowledge to talk.”¹²⁵ In her congregation, however, the invitation to silence might be a challenge. “We’re not Pentecostal, but we are charismatic, so we expect emotion and energy—in worship and in our leaders.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, there was nothing that would make this approach unusable in her context.

Evaluation

This project, and its execution, yielded some modest fruit. The leader’s guide did make it possible for someone other than Professor Schertz or myself to lead this kind of biblical engagement, and to some good effect. This approach seems to provide both space for and welcome to people who are reluctant to speak or offer their wisdom in the usual style of Bible study. This way of reading the Bible also appears to engage leaders in some important self-reflection and self-awareness, although it’s hard to tell whether this was because of the approach itself or because leaders were being asked to reflect on their experience rather than simply do what they normally did.

I learned a number of important things in the process of creating this “curriculum,” enlisting congregations to field test it, formulating an instrument to measure its “effectiveness,”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Cristina Rodriguez, personal interview, September 27, 2012.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

and assessing the results I received. Whether or not this Bible reading approach would “work” in Latino or other minority congregations in MC USA, I would have needed to have far more relationship, and likely face-to-face interactions, with both leader and congregation. In good frugal Mennonite style, it never crossed my mind that I should book a flight to Tampa—but I think I should have. I’m under no illusion that this would have solved all my problems, but in spite of my supposed “formational mindset” I operated out of Anglo patterns of efficiency: e-mail or call, and that will take care of it. Clearly, in the case of Arca de Salvacion, this approach was not compelling.

I also learned something I should have already known, from my own practice in fact: people appropriate things in their own way regardless of what the written curriculum or leader’s guide say. I confess I was surprised by the very different ways the three leaders engaged with this process—different from each other, and different than I’d envisioned when I wrote the leader’s guide. All this variety made it difficult to assess what was “effective” and what wasn’t—and thus what belongs in a leader’s guide and what doesn’t.

Both individually and as groups, some of the things some people found especially helpful or important were exactly what got in others’ way. Was this because of the leader’s personality? Lack of conviction about the practice? Discomfort with the process? Lack of understanding about what was central and what was peripheral? Or did it have more to do with the group’s personality, or the personality of individuals within it? With their habit or expectation? With their trust of the leader, or the process, or their willingness to give themselves to something unfamiliar?

It also occurred to me that a formational approach, because of it grows out of a different world view than is in operation for most congregational Bible teachers and Bible study leaders,

may very well be something that one has to see in action before one is able to carry it out. If this is the case, the leader's guide I created would be helpful to those who've experienced this kind of Bible engagement but inadequate for those who haven't.

The final thing that was clear to me is that the horizon for measuring change that I'd set for myself was much too short. Real change of any kind—from learning a new skill to losing weight—takes time. Five one-hour encounters (and that's if a person was present for all of them, which was rarely the case) couldn't yield significant transformation. It's here that the transfer from the retreat setting in which professor Schertz was working makes itself felt most acutely. I suspect there's something about the “stacking up” of the three “layers” of engagement in one afternoon or one weekend that yields rather different fruit than is possible in three forty-five minute periods. By this I don't mean that this can't be translated into congregational context. I still believe it can. But it will take much longer—perhaps months or even years—for it to yield noticeable fruit for most people. An epiphany is of course possible. But it seems wise not to count on one.

Two things bear further investigation. The first, of course, would be to actually field test this approach in a Latino Mennonite congregation—or perhaps more than one, since Latino congregations are no more monolithic than Anglo ones. The second would be to investigate whether this approach is more congenial to women than to men. This was a question I didn't think to ask at the outset, but it was raised by the difficulty I had in enlisting male pastors or leaders to try this. While it's possible to explain this reluctance in more than one way, it was striking to me that most of the men I approached found this too complicated, or had serious reservations about its lack of emphasis on orthodoxy, and they referred me on to women, who were quick to pick it up. My own experience is that men seem to appreciate and benefit from this

approach as much as women do—though my impressionistic take is that they are slower “converts” than women. But the issue of gender, and maybe particularly gender and culture, would bear further investigation, both at the level of leaders and participants. It’s certainly suggestive that both the developers of this approach (Professor Schertz and me) and the majority of the “early adopters”—or at least the “early experimenters”—are all women.

The next step for this project is publishing the teacher’s manual under a creative commons license on the MC USA website, which will happen before the next MC USA biannual in July 2013. Rather than limiting the use of a resource under conventional copyright restrictions, a creative commons licence allows users to remix, tweak, and build upon its work even for commercial purposes, as long as they credit the author and license their new creations under identical terms.¹²⁷ My interest in “publishing” in this way is to make this resource as widely available as possible, to invite collaborators to experiment with and suggest additions to this material, and to model the worldview of abundance out of which this approach grew: the generosity and synergy not only of God’s Spirit in the creation and ongoing interpretation of Scripture, but also the generosity and synergy of relationships between students and teachers in seminary classrooms, colleagues in seminary and congregations, and group of various ages in congregational settings.

In addition, I have been invited to lead several workshops for Bible study leaders (both youth and adults) at the convention in Phoenix. While professor Schertz offered a very well attended workshop at the 2011 convention in which people experienced the approach, no resources were made available to them to try it in their own congregations. My hope is that the

¹²⁷ Creative commons licensing is often compared to “copyleft” (as opposed to “copyright”) free and open source software licenses. For further details and the legal code, go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>

addition of the teacher's manual and conversations about pedagogy and logistics will make this way of reading the Bible available to many rather than the domain of a few.

Significance

Early church hermits and desert communities; medieval monks; Reformers, Counter-Reformers and Radical Reformers; Wesleyans and Pietists; New Monastics and congregations at worship have all embraced, to one degree or another, and in one manner or another, the value of the Scriptures. So while this project is designed to have particular relevance and “fit” for Anabaptist Mennonite communities, it draws on the work of those in other Christian streams and could be useful to them as well. No one faith tradition has a corner on engaging with the Bible in life-giving ways, nor on hunger for relationship with God and neighbor. A Bible-reading approach that highlights these characteristics could therefore be broadly useful in a variety of Christian congregations.

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Appendix A

Reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it

A common refrain in the synoptics is Jesus' command that those who have ears hear (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:23; Luke 8:8). Like many teachers, leaders, and parents before and since, Jesus recognizes that there's a crucial difference between the physical act of hearing and the transforming power of really having heard. Hearing (and not hearing) is clearly shaped by a variety of things (culture, class, race, age, education, etc.)—different people hear differently, and hear different things. Yet no matter how different we are, many of us share a particular form of hearing loss wise Christians have called the “small self:” the habit of interpreting everything with ourselves at the center of the universe; the conviction that we are the most real, the most vivid and the most important person in existence. Much Bible reading (like all early-stage religious practice) leaves the small self intact because it doesn't shift us out of what long-time pastor Eugene Peterson calls the “unholy trinity” of “my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.”

The Bible-reading approach that follows seeks instead to live into, and out of, the *Holy* Trinity of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Rather than a fool-proof technique or a set curriculum, it is a disposition, a way of living into relationship with the Bible, the Divine to which the Bible points, and each other. There are of course crucial practices that make this possible, or more likely, but even in using these techniques it's important to remind ourselves of what they make possible rather than thinking of them as a quick fix. This Bible study approach is only a *container*. What matters is whether it's able to deliver the worthwhile *contents* of people who love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. The point of reading the Bible this way is therefore not only what we know (information) but in our

lifelong “grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15)—formation.

Reading as if our lives depend on it starts with what is: the actual people who gather around the text, and all the things they know and don’t know, the actual places they are in their life of faith, and the relationships within which they are imbedded. It focuses on what (and who) is present rather than what (and who) is missing—paying attention to God’s Word, the people gathered around it, and God’s own Holy Spirit which is freely given to those who are willing to receive it. It reads the Scriptures carefully and with the expectation that there is something here which is of value, which we cannot do without. And it shares at all kinds of levels, entering into spiritual transformation in the company of others, expecting and benefiting from the contributions of each person in the group, and living out what is “learned” not only within people’s individual lives but also in their communities (family, church, neighborhood, world). It is characterized by the following actions, attitudes, and practices:

- We focus on the quality of our reading rather than its quantity
- We sink into the text rather than skimming its surface for a quick “sound bite” to take away
- Rather than trying to “master” the text, we enter into relationship with it; in other words, we treat the text as the *subject* of a reading relationship rather than as an *object* we control
- We approach the text lovingly and receptively rather than out of a posture of distance or defensiveness—we read it like a love letter
- We read the text with openness to mystery rather than out of a problem-solving mentality.

Strategies

Four general strategies help us read the Bible as if our lives depend on it: creating an environment of *hospitality*, *reading* the text, allowing the text *to read us*, and *worshiping* with

and through the text.¹²⁸ These are not distinct actions that we do and are done with. Rather they are like layers of translucent cloth that we lay one on top of each other, allowing what has come before to “shine through” and come into conversation with what we are doing now.

We gather in ways that welcome each person, the biblical text, and the action of the Holy Spirit. We read the text carefully, out loud, treating the biblical passage as if it were a person who has joined our Bible study circle. Then we allow the text to “read us,” not being satisfied with a simple application, but bringing the text into conversation with our lives, noticing where our life and the text’s life intersect, question, or comment on each other. We finish by worshiping with and through the text, listening for the echoes of the previous conversations in our singing, our prayers, our response actions, and the last reading of the Scripture passage.

Creating a communal space that is hospitable to the Bible, students, and the leader, and that attends to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. An environment of hospitality includes the physical space, the way the group interacts, and the posture of the teacher. Since it’s not uncommon for group Bible study to be characterized by either informal socializing or opinionated discussion, a key practice is to invite the group to focus on deep listening and thoughtful speaking for the well-being of all.

One way to enact this is to sit in a circle and to have participants speak to a simple visual center. Speaking to the center rather than to the previous speaker keeps reminding individuals and the group as a whole of the way both words and silences contribute to a full-orbed reading of the Scripture text and to the cultivation of community life. First attempts at this kind of speech are often clumsy: it may take some time to sink into the attitude of receptivity and non-judgmental curiosity that characterizes this kind of interaction, so the process may feel artificial

¹²⁸ Mary H. Schertz, professor of New Testament at AMBS, articulated the three-fold movement (reading, being read, worshiping) of what she calls “confessional Bible study” at Pastors Week at AMBS in January of 2010.

or tediously slow at first, and the leader will have to encourage people to stick with it. It may be helpful to pass a “talking piece” that clarifies who the designated speaker is. Another useful practice is ringing a singing bowl after each speaker finishes talking; the next person waits to speak until the room has sunk into silence. Once habits of speaking and listening have been well-established, groups can dispense with these practices if all is going well. They should also feel free to heighten the level of “formality” of the conversation if any person in the circle feels like the group is moving away from communal conversation and into something more private, partial, or opinionated.

A key to pulling off this kind of Bible reading is the attitude of leaders, both in their conviction about this process and in their willingness to give themselves to it. Any kind of collaboration between leader and participants requires leaders to release their hold on “getting it right,” leaning instead into trusting both the Holy Spirit and the group. This is often uncomfortable. Every time I’ve led Bible study in this mode, I’ve had at least one moment during the gathering when I thought to myself: “This was a huge mistake. I don’t know why I ever thought this was going to work.” I’ve learned to let these feelings of panic alert me that it’s time to internally lift my eyes and shrug my shoulders in an “I’m not sure what you’re up to, God, but I’ll go with it” gesture, discovering little by little that God is generous beyond my imagining. This is the case even if things do, in fact, flop. As we know from the rest of our lives, we often learn just as much by our mistakes as by our successes!

Leaders need to figure out how to work with their anxiety not only for their own ability to stay present to the process but because their functioning sets the tone in the groups they’re leading. Leaders can influence the group’s “emotional field” for the better by recognizing that resistance is a normal reaction to leadership, by being patient with how long it takes for anxiety

to dissipate (especially when it can spike almost immediately!), and by learning to tolerate anxious moments in order to use them as opportunities for growth. The need to work with fear is particularly acute in 21st century North America because our culture is so chronically fearful.

Anxiety, the old fight or flight approach to any perceived threat, gets in our way because it tightens our thinking, decreases our ability to learn, replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty, makes us think in polarities (either/or), and floods our nervous systems so that we find it difficult to actually hear what others are saying or respond rather than reacting. Moving *toward* God, the text, and others instead of retreating requires each person and groups as a whole to find ways to work with their fear and take small steps toward becoming more and more transparent, including to themselves.

In addition to becoming vulnerable to God and to others, people also need to find ways to become vulnerable to the text, allowing it to be itself, independent of their ideas about it. If what we're aiming for is relationship, the biblical text needs to be able to say *its* piece rather than what we want or need it to say. We're most likely to allow the text to be itself when we're able to invite and tolerate a variety of ways of interpreting the text rather than needing to nail down one "truth" in a hurry. Especially if the group does not arrive at more than one interpretation on its own, or if it's rushing toward an interpretation that shuts things down rather than opening them up, leaders need to insist on two things: that people point to something *in the text that they're studying* as the basis for their comments, and that the person (or the group) come up with at least three different ways of interpreting the text or a part of the text. Even if some of those interpretations seem (or indeed are) stupid, they jolt us out of assuming that our instinctive reading is the best one. In addition to allowing the text to speak for itself, these practices level the playing field between people with varying degrees of biblical literacy, keep the group's

conversation focused, remind readers that Scripture is patient of many meanings, and call the group's attention to what it's actually doing: discerning together how God might be speaking through this text.

Reading the text together. Most groups that gather to study the Bible don't want to "waste" group time reading the Bible—yet we can't hear the text unless we *hear it*. Leaders can help themselves and group members slow down their reading by doing the following:

- using their computer and on-line resources, leaders should *import the text into a word-processing program*. A good place to get biblical texts is www.biblegateway.org. It includes not only several translations of the text but also several languages to pick from. If they are reading only in English, they should look at two translations or more, so that they have some idea of where the translation and interpretive issues may lie. If they know another language, reading in this language will also de-familiarize the text enough to help leaders pay close attention to the text as they prepare.
- *break the text into clauses*. Seminary students often learn to do this in Greek or Hebrew class; it also works well in English. A clause usually has a subject and a verb: an action and someone or something doing the action. It doesn't matter too much if the leader isn't a wonderful grammarian: the main point is to divide the text into smaller units of meaning. Re-arranging things helps both leaders and the group members who will receive this text see the passage differently, gives everyone space to doodle or draw lines or underline things, and slows down first the leader's, and later the group's, reading.
- *read it out loud*. Reading out loud is a good way to pay attention to the text. This is especially useful in communal settings because it helps the group slow down, makes it possible for poor readers to join in by listening, and engages those who learn best by hearing rather than seeing.
- *use a pencil*. Circling, underlining, drawing lines between similar or dissimilar things, making notes in the margins are all ways to notice specifics about a text. Repeated words may be worth paying attention to. Noticing gaps (where time passes, where additional information might be needed) is also useful. Paying attention to pace—things may be moving along quickly in line after line, and then they slow down for reflection—opens up fruitful avenues for reflection. Teaching one's Bible study partners in the congregation to gather information is especially important since it helps them see that what looks like the magic of "experts" (commenting on patterns, etc.) is actually learned behavior—and something they too could learn to do. One additional pencil-practice is to break the text into sections and title them. The easiest way to do this is to pretend you are filming a movie of this text, and then to ask yourself when the angle of the shot ought to change or when you should move in for a close-up. This exercise is most fruitful when you makes note of *why* you've divided the text as you have.

The leader needs to prepare for the group's gathering by breaking the text into clauses (and making copies of this clause layout for the group), reading it out loud or in several versions, and doing a little commentary research, if possible looking at several commentaries. For those without access to extensive libraries, many resources are available online. For texts that appear in the lectionary cycle, www.textweek.com is a great place to start. Preparing to lead in the way suggested above is more time consuming but also more productive than using ready-made resources because it gives leaders a kind of investment in the text that's impossible to achieve by simply reading through a prepared leader's guide in the ten minutes before the Bible study begins.

Group time should begin with some way of releasing what could get in the way of full participation: achy bodies, long to-do lists, worries and regrets—not to mention spirits of competition, envy, insecurity, pride, and doubt. This first action of gathering could involve deep breathing, a guided meditation, or movement, and should include a spoken prayer that picks up on some of the themes in the text. Some specific suggestions for the above are listed in the weekly guide below.

Following the opening, the leader invites volunteers to read the text aloud as a reader's theater (narrator, characters in the story). After this initial reading/hearing, the leader makes a few introductory comments based on his or her own study, giving members of the group just enough information so that they don't stumble unnecessarily over things that could easily be cleared up but not so much that a divide between "ordinary" and "professional" readers is created. *Each person* needs to deepen his or her knowledge base over time and take responsibility for her or his own learning. Any addition to our Bible reading "toolbox" is

available from then on, and as this toolbox starts filling up, the additions begin to pay wonderful dividends.

The majority of the group time in the first movement is given to conversation that the leader launches with one of the following open-ended questions: What one or two things did you notice? What puzzles you, or what would you like to know more about? What do you want to argue with? What keeps drawing your attention? If this is a story, who do you feel drawn to, or do you want to push away? What in this text reminds you of another biblical text, or of something in your life or in our world? And, always, *why?*

These questions are likely familiar to those who have practiced lectio divina. Usually a leader need ask only one or two to get things started, and then keep the rest in reserve to help open up the conversation as needed. All of them get at the same thing: how is the Spirit speaking today and in this context through this Scripture?

Allowing the text to read us. Since most leaders and participants in Bible studies are schooled by their culture and context to think of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world, most Bible studies include a focus on application, on making the Bible “relevant” to “real life.” The second movement in reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it invites groups to discover instead that the reign of God is the fundamental reality and that the task of readers is to make themselves and their world relevant *to it*.

Practically, this involves two things: spending *more* time with the text than we usually do so that we can release our grip on our ideas about the text and allow another (in this case, *The Other*) to get a word in edgewise; and engaging the text with our bodies and our right brains to get ourselves out of the driver’s seat of our usual way of being and thinking. Both of these

practices rely on individual and group silence, which are an important way to cultivate both an outer and inner attitude of receptivity. We know in ordinary conversation that we can't hear another person if we aren't quiet long enough for them to speak. The same is true in Bible reading. First, *we* read: we engage the text in ways that make sense to us. While they may enlarge our Bible-reading practice, they leave us as the actor or initiator of the conversation. So we need to be quiet, to *listen*, so that we too will be read. Without back and forth, there can be no conversation.

Leaders can help groups give themselves to being read by the text by doing the following:

- *embody the text*. With a narrative text, ask for volunteers and/or assign parts (many biblical stories include crowds of one sort or another) for each character, and then simply act out the story as it is read. “Re-hydrating” the story wordlessly and viscerally, in our own bodies, allows it its own voice. . . and often clarifies where the Spirit is calling us to grow or change in ways words may have trouble doing. It's worth acting out the story more than once, with people taking different roles or solving acting “problems” in different ways. The group will likely be tempted to talk about what's going on—moving into the realm of words and evaluation feels much more comfortable to most of us. Refrain from doing so for now.
- *move to the text*. People could also move to the text using four kinds of movement: thrust, shape, swing, and hang. The value of these movements in the context of Bible “study” is that they allow us to engage with the text in embodied ways—and they don't require narrative texts that we “act out.” To lead the group in moving to the text, first teach the group the four kinds of patterns (demonstrate each in turn, inviting people to “move like me” before you go on to the next kind of movement). Then invite people to turn *away from each other* to ease their self-consciousness about what they're doing and how they look and to move to the text as you read it, using any (or all) of these movements. Breaking the text into several sections, and leaving a pause between them, will suggest the possibility that one might switch the kind of pattern used; there's no need to specifically say this is what you're doing, however. As in the practice of “acting out” the Scripture, move to the Scripture more than once to encourage people to relax their grip on their evaluative mind. For a video demonstrating the 4 movement patterns and a group using them to move to Scripture, see <http://youtu.be/wizPDX-NqsA> and <http://youtu.be/oPMNcGXmDzI>
- *use story figures*. For a more reserved form of moving to the text, consider using story figures, as Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart suggest in *Young Children and Worship*. Some Mennonite congregations already have story figures as part of their children's education or children's church supplies. If your congregation doesn't, invite volunteers to

“pose” as story figures; one person can move them around and “place” them as the story is being read. Even though people are embodying the characters in the story, they are doing so in a very low-stress way which might be more congenial for folks who don’t consider themselves actors. This approach may also be helpful for those who have restricted physical mobility.

- *engage in “artful response.”* In spite of the fact that anything with the word “artful” in it might strike terror in the hearts of self-proclaimed non-artists, artful response is not a means of generating a piece of art but instead a set of practices to help people *lounge with* the text. At its most basic level, it can involve writing out the biblical text, in silence, in a group setting. Writing the text is a good place to start with artful response because supplies are easy to come by and vulnerability is modest. Begin by mentioning the purpose of writing: not simply copying (although there may be some benefits to that too, since if we engage our bodies we are more likely to remember words) but writing the text over and over until our linear mindset relaxes and something else emerges. The end product doesn’t really matter—and it doesn’t even matter if there is no “show-able” end product. Artful response could find expression in a prayer or journal entry, a commentary on the text, an inner or outer dialogue that finds its origin in the text (for example, in a healing text, a conversation between “you” or Jesus and whatever needs healing within you), an illustration of the text or a visual response to it, an “illumination” of one or several letters or words (in the style of illuminated manuscripts), etc. Other artful responses could include collage, work with clay or fabric, pipe cleaner sculptures, etc. Start with paper and colored pens, pencils, and paints; add additional refinements and supplies as people develop some facility and imagination.
- *memorize the text.* Release people into spaces where they can pace and speak aloud—something that can be done in a large church fellowship hall if it isn’t being occupied by another group, or, if the weather is decent, in the church parking lot. The process of allowing ourselves to learn biblical words *by heart* inevitably brings them alongside our regular lives and speaks into them long after the hour of Bible study is over.
- *talk reflectively about the text.* Because conversation tends to leave *us* front and center, this is the least desirable route to go. . .but it may be where you as a leader and/or the group you’re working with needs to start. If so, invite the group to ruminate on the following questions: What in this text speaks to your life? How does your life speak to this text? What “vibrates,” be it character, theme, problem, word or phrase, action, tone, conversation—or what do you find yourself fighting with or resisting? What movement of the mission of God is the Spirit calling you to through this text—how does this challenge you or the groups to which you belong (family, friends, workplace, neighborhood, congregation, etc.)? This phase will work especially well if the group can tolerate some silence so that the conversation is more meditative. Leaving thirty seconds to a minute of silence between speakers (a singing bowl can help with this), coupled with an invitation to the group to spend the silence receiving the testimony they have just heard, will help enlarge how people think so that their reflections can engage heart and soul as well as mind.

Part of why wordless engagement is helpful in allowing the text to read us is that it helps us relax the usual-Bible-study tyranny of our left brains. The left hemisphere of the brain specializes in cause and effect relationships, speech, and logical analysis. The right hemisphere, by contrast, thinks more in terms of wholes, of information-in-context—and seems especially important in engaging the affections, a key component in relationship. “Our problem,” writes biblical scholar Walter Wink, “is not that we have been too intellectual, but that we have been half-wits! . . . We must get our whole selves involved with [the text], right brains as well, and struggle to let it endow us with a fuller share of our available humanity.”¹²⁹

It may be helpful to tell people the reasons behind this kind of engagement with the text. Lounging and lingering feel like a waste of time, and if we are willing to engage in them, take us outside of our comfort zone precisely because they de-center the self through which we are used to interpreting and evaluating everything. Letting people know that they may find this a stretch, and encouraging them to persevere in that stretch, will help prevent the group from drawing the conclusion that’s so inevitable in our consumer culture: if I don’t *like* it, it’s not worth pursuing.

Worshiping in and through the text. This may be the movement that has the biggest range of expression from group to group or time to time, since communities vary widely in their worship practices and since worship shaped by a *specific* text will differ from worship shaped by *other* texts. The point is a simple one: not to leave the text before having encountered it in worship.

Leaders can help groups give themselves to worshiping through the text by doing the following:

- *use the outline of the story, or the experience of a character in it, to shape public prayers.* The following prayers, written by Barbara Nelson Gingerich, grow out of the story of Jesus calling the first disciples in Luke 5:1-11.

¹²⁹ Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 31.

Prayer of (tentative) receptivity

Jesus, you have a way of showing up
when we're going about our ordinary tasks,
finishing up our chores—perhaps feeling dissatisfied
that we have little to show for our hard work.
Yes—we're ready to scoot over and make room for you,
pleased that you'd accept the hospitality of our unassuming vessel;
we're willing to be interrupted in our cleaning up
in order to listen in on your teaching.

Naming our reluctance

With typical bluntness, Simon voices his doubts.
We follow his example and pause to acknowledge
whatever makes us reluctant to heed your instruction
to push off into the deep water
and let down our nets into God knows what.

Prayer of confession

Teacher, we think we're doing you a favor
by giving you a berth in our boat,
but you proceed to ask us
to venture beyond where we're quite prepared to go,
and you presume to instruct us about how to do our work—
and then you fill our empty craft with more than we can cope with.
We confess that in the light of the abundant catch you engineer
what we notice is our inadequacy,
and in self-protective reflex,
what we want to do is push you away.

Prayer of release

And what you see exposed in us
when our illusion that we are in control crumbles
is our fear, and you address it,
reminding us once again to release it—
and everything else that would keep us
from picking ourselves up and scrambling off after you.
We pause now to name our fears—
and anything else we need to let go of
in order to be free to follow you on your fishing expedition
to restore this beautiful, broken world.

These prayers could be interspersed with a final reading of the appropriate verses of the story as well as other acts of worship.

- *engage in symbolic actions that grow out of the text's realities or concerns.* This might involve traditional Christian ritual actions (communion, laying on of hands, anointing,

etc.) or move beyond them (for example, lining a box with strips of cloth as a way of preparing a place to receive a child: the infant Jesus, Moses in his bullrush basket). Check out the Iona Community's Wild Goose Worship Group materials for additional ideas to supplement your congregation's practices; *Stages on the Way*, *Present on Earth*, and *Cloth for the Cradle* all feature a wide range of symbolic actions. They are available from GIA Publications if you search for them by title on the publisher's website. You may also find that some symbolic action emerges from your (or the group's) embodying the text or moving to it, and that it could be fruitfully adapted for public worship.

- *select and sing hymns or songs that reflect or deepen the themes of the text.* Hymnal and supplement indices are good places to look for music that may fit a particular theme or text. Or you could proceed more thematically: for example, in a service about the *unexpected* action of the Holy Spirit, select songs that are not usually sung in connection with a particular text or season but that may speak to them. Perhaps someone might want to try their hand at a new text or write words for a "zipper" song (a song in which you can easily insert new lyrics). One group used the song "Wade in the Water," inserting words from Mary's song in Luke 2 in the verses ("Hungry people filled with bread, God's gonna trouble the water, full ones emptied out instead, God's gonna trouble the water"). Or simply select songs whose themes or emotional tone allow singers to enter affectively into the world of the text and the God to whom it points.
- *share artful responses.* If the group has entered into some form of artful response, worship is an ideal time for "show and tell" for those who are willing to let others see, hear, or touch what they've created.
- a sample service from *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayerbook* is provided in this guide simply as an example of how a group could worship around and through a text. It may not fit your context, but even if it doesn't, it can serve as a point of inspiration if you need one.

Worshiping with the text is especially crucial because of how clearly it brings together the horizontal and vertical axes of reading the Bible. Since we all understand human relationships at least to some extent, it makes sense to begin on the horizontal axis in the first movement of the Bible reading process—in conversation that engages others in relationship. But if our Bible reading doesn't bring us into relationship with God, we're missing a key component of formation and falling into idolatry of the Bible or of the community rather than seeing that *both* the Bible and the community point to something far beyond either: God. Worshiping through the text with others is a way to keep twinned Jesus' commands to love God and the neighbor as oneself (Luke 10:27-8).

Groups who gather to study the Bible may very well want to worship on their own. Their worship might also be deepened by gathering with their larger community—which they can strengthen through their deep engagement with the text. In congregations where texts and themes are chosen in advance, groups could get a two week “jump” on an upcoming text, engaging in the first and second movements of reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it in the two weeks preceding a service that is structured around that same text. Worship planners and leaders, as well as pastors, may very well want to be part of such a “study” group. This would give them a chance to come to the text early on without needing to get something out of it for a rapidly approaching deadline. Whether they study with a group or not, they will be assured that there is at least one little community that is eager to receive the text, in all its resonances, during Sunday morning worship.

Spending so much time with one Bible passage will be a challenge for almost everyone, especially at the beginning. Perhaps because so much of our reading is driven either by getting the information/rule/point (nonfiction) or by moving to the end of the story (fiction), we have little or no practice basking in a text. Yet lingering in Scripture is a time-honored legacy of the Christian tradition: one aspect of *lectio divina* is contemplation, though many contemporary practitioners move on before they get there. So working with the impatience of both leaders and participants will be crucial. It may be important to name that impatience aloud and invite people to bear with it, themselves, and each other. Instead of moving on quickly to something that feels more interesting or relevant, we can see our impatience as an invitation to cultivate the trust that God is at work, even if we don't see or feel it, and to acknowledge that in spite of our attraction to quick results, what we really care about is a changed perception and the kind of life that grows out of that God-formed consciousness. As we have already learned from other long haul projects

like weight loss plans, fitness programs, learning a new instrument or skill, and loving friends and family, receiving the benefits of something may require us to stick with it even when it's not clear what benefit we're deriving from it in the moment.

Reading the Bible as if our lives depend on it

Week 1: Who are we as readers of the text?

Each person, and each group, comes to the Bible from a particular *social location* or place in society. Social location includes *internal dimensions* (gender, age, race, ethnicity, and physical ability), *external dimensions* (parental status, marital status, appearance, work experience, educational background, religion, personal habits, income, and geographic location) and *organizational dimensions* (work location, work content/field, seniority, denomination, management status). All of these things influence our perspective on all kinds of things, including the Bible and the people we read it with. Today, we'll spend some time thinking about our group social location, then we'll read the text.

Gathering

Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center. The visual center shouldn't be too complicated: a piece of cloth and a candle are just fine; if you want to, it could also include some flowers or a plant, or a piece of art (something three-dimensional will work best). The point of a visual center is to have something to look at that reminds people to speak to *the group* rather than to engage in back and forth conversation.

Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude with a prayer. Some possible options:

- *breathing meditation*: Let us begin by breathing out. As we exhale, let us release not only our breath but anything that will get in the way of our time together today: aches and pains of body and spirit, regrets about the past and worries about the future, to-do lists and the activities that have brought us to this moment, breathing them out, releasing them into God's care and keeping. . . . (*take time to release several deep breaths before beginning again*). And as we get to the end of our breath, let us breathe in, receiving not only oxygen for our bodies but also God's presence and blessing, God's own Holy Spirit filling our chests and abdomens like light or warmth, allowing it to radiate throughout our bodies and spirits. . . . (*take time to receive several deep breaths before beginning again*) So let's take a few moments to exhale and inhale, breathe out and breathe in, release and receive, together, in the presence of God.
- *opening prayer*:
You who speak to us in Scripture,
through the events of our lives,
and in the words and faces of our traveling companions,
open our ears and eyes and hearts
to receive what you have for us today.
Through your own Holy Spirit,
convict and energize us
so that we might be a part of your reign coming,
your will being done,
right here and right now.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

- *introduce the visual center and its way of speaking.* Invite the group to speak to the visual center, so that the group's attention will always be on speaking and listening that contributes to or builds up the group and its attention to the Scripture text.

Paying attention

Who are we as readers? As a group, create a brief profile of yourselves. While this exercise may seem silly at first glance (*you* know who you are!) it's important because it begins to make us aware of the lens through which we read and understand the Bible. Encourage the group to think of what it might want or need to say about itself if it were introducing itself to a Bible-reading group across the world.

- have each person suggest some observation or piece of information about the group. If you needed to introduce yourselves as a group to a group of Christians you'd never met, what would you say? Thinking about the kinds of things you'd like to know about this (imaginary) other group, and why, will help you get started. It may help to write down these comments on a piece of newsprint or a white- or blackboard.
- test your observations as a group. Does this list accurately represent the group? What more might need to be said? It may be helpful to refer to the beginning paragraph on the previous page. What relevant internal, external, and organizational dimensions of the group's identity have you missed?

Who is our biblical conversation partner?

- have a volunteer read Mark 6:30-44 out loud, inviting people to close their eyes and simply listen.
- invite people to reflect in silence about memories or associations they have with this text, then share these briefly with the group

Parting

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

Week 2: Reading the text.

Gathering

- Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
- Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.

Paying attention

- Read the text as a reader's theater. Two versions of the text in clause layout form follow. If you prefer to lay out the text yourself, see page 6 above. You'll notice I took out the verse numbers: these are later additions and they break up the flow of the "action" in a text. They're not really necessary when we're reading a small chunk of text.
- Make a few introductory comments about the text. See the many resources at <http://www.textweek.com/mkjnacts/mark6c.htm> or look in several commentaries if you have access to them. Tim Geddert's *Mark*, in the Believer's Church Bible Commentary series, may be a good one to include in your reading since it's written from an Anabaptist perspective.
- Launch the conversation with **one** of the following open-ended questions: What one or two things did you notice? What puzzles you, or what would you like to know more about? What do you want to argue with? What keeps drawing your attention? If this is a story, who do you feel drawn to, or do you want to push away?
- If people hesitate to speak, it may be useful to begin by going around the circle, allowing each person to speak in turn to get things started. Depending on how the group does with this, you may or may not want to do another round of "formal" sharing. Encourage people to keep speaking to the center rather than to enter into the back and forth of one-on-one conversation within a group context, which may be a temptation for some extroverts or strongly opinionated folks. If it seems like the conversation needs to be "launched" again, return to the list of questions above.

Parting

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE

The apostles returned to Jesus
and told him everything
they had done and taught.
Many people were coming
and going,
so there was no time to eat.
He said to the apostles,
“Come by yourselves to a secluded place
and rest for a while.”
They departed in a boat by themselves for a deserted place.
Many people saw them leaving
and recognized them,
so they ran ahead from all the cities
and arrived before them.
When Jesus arrived
and saw a large crowd,
he had compassion on them
because they were like sheep without a shepherd.
Then he began to teach them many things.
Late in the day, his disciples came to him
and said,
“This is an isolated place,
and it’s already late in the day.
Send them away
so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages
and buy something to eat for themselves.”
He replied,
“You give them something to eat.”
But they said to him,
“Should we go off
and buy bread worth almost eight months’ pay ^[a]
and give it to them to eat?”
He said to them,
“How much bread do you have?
Take a look.”
After checking, they said,
“Five loaves of bread and two fish.”
He directed the disciples to seat all the people in groups
as though they were having a banquet on the green grass.
They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.
He took the five loaves and the two fish,
looked up to heaven,
blessed them,
broke the loaves into pieces,

and gave them to his disciples to set before the people.
He also divided the two fish among them all.
Everyone ate until they were full.
They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish.
About five thousand had eaten.

- a. Mark 6:37 Or *two hundred denaria*; a denarion was a typical day's wage.

OXFORD NRSV

The apostles gathered around Jesus,
and told him
all that they had done
and taught.
He said to them,
“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves
and rest awhile.”
For many were coming
and going,
and they had no leisure even to eat.
And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.
Now many saw them going
and recognized them,
and they hurried there on foot from all the towns
and arrived ahead of them.
As he went ashore,
he saw a great crowd;
and he had compassion for them,
because they were like sheep without a shepherd;
and he began to teach them many things.
When it grew late,
his disciples came to him
and said,
“This is a deserted place,
and the hour is now very late;
send them away
so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages
and buy something for themselves to eat.”
But he answered them,
“You give them something to eat.”
They said to him,
“Are we going to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread,
and give it to them to eat?”
And he said to them,
“How many loaves do you have?
Go
and see.”
When they had found out, they said,
“Five, and two fish.”
Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit in groups on the green grass.
So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.
Taking the five loaves and two fish,
he looked up to heaven,
and blessed

and broke the loaves,
and gave them to his disciples to set before the people;
and he divided the two fish among them all.
And all ate
and were filled;
and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.
Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Week 3: Being read by the text

Gathering

- Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
- Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.

Paying attention

- Read the text as a reader's theater again, this time using a different version of the text than you used last time. Eugene Peterson's dynamic translation *The Message* often puts things in unfamiliar ways that can help us notice nuances that had previously escaped us. You can find it here <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%206:30-50&version=MSG>
- If you want to spend this session in further conversation, consider **one** of the following questions as a way to begin: What in this text speaks to your life? How does your life speak to this text? What "vibrates," be it character, theme, problem, word or phrase, action, tone, conversation? To what movement of the mission of God is the Spirit calling you through this text? This phase will work especially well if the group can tolerate some silence, so that the conversation is more meditative. Leaving thirty seconds to a minute of silence between speakers (a singing bowl can help with this), coupled with an invitation to the group to spend the silence receiving the testimony they have just heard, will help enlarge how people think so that their reflections can engage heart and soul as well as mind.
- Another possibility is to experiment with "artful responses" to biblical texts. At its most basic level, this involves simply writing out the biblical text, in silence, in a group setting. Writing the text is a good place to start with artful response because supplies are easy to come by, vulnerability is modest, and even those who are quick to define themselves as "not artistic" are able to enter in. If people want to, they could also paint or draw, work with clay, move to the text, write worship resources or music inspired by the text, etc. Provide colored and white paper, a variety of pens, markers, and colored pencils, scissors, glue, tape, pipe cleaners, clay, pieces of colored fabric or magazines or other collage supplies, etc. Some groups might like to begin with artful response and then move into conversation; or perhaps you will prefer to work silently for the whole time you are together, knowing that there will be time for further spoken reflection when you next gather. Tables are helpful here; if you place a ring of tables on the outside of the ring of chairs, people can simply turn toward the table to work and then back toward each other for conversation.

Parting

Close with a song and/or a prayer.

Week 4: Worshiping with and through the text

- Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
- Begin with some kind of gathering activity (breath meditation, movement, song) and conclude this gathering time with a prayer which picks up on the themes of the text in some way.
- If you are coordinating your text study with your congregation's worship, simply attend worship that day and bask in the music, singing, Scripture reading, preaching, and response actions. Alternatively, it may be more convenient or desirable to worship as a smaller group.
- If you are not coordinating your text study with your congregation's worship, worship in your study group. Perhaps you want to call on those in the group who are gifted in worship planning or leading to prepare something for the group in advance. Or you might want to use an already-existing worship template, like that of *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book*. Volume 1, week 4, Monday evening (Appendix C). If it feels too print-heavy, it's very adaptable: instead of passing out copies of the whole thing, invite several people to read the Scriptures (Mark 6:30-44 and II Kings 4: 42-44) from their own Bibles, select some songs to sing in advance, and have a worship leader read the calls, perhaps asking the group to repeat some key phrases. After the Scripture reading, some time for spoken or silent reflection, or the sharing of artful responses, can enrich the group's worship. Conclude with prayer.

Weeks 5-?

You will have a better sense of the usefulness of this way of gathering around a biblical text if you do it more than once—both as a leader and as group participants. This time, choose your own text, and use the three movements again: reading the text, being read by the text, and worshiping with the text. Since you're picking your own text, you might choose something that's upcoming in your congregational worship schedule so you can worship with your larger community. How is this experience different (or not) from your usual way of entering into worship?

Finish up round two of this way of reading the Bible with a group conversation about how it went. The plan is on the next pages.

Final session

- Gather the group in a circle of chairs around a visual center.
- Begin with a *breathing meditation*, using the following words as inspiration if they're helpful to you.

Let us close our eyes and sit in a way that is comfortable for us, feet on the floor, our backs supported by our chairs. Begin by breathing out. As we exhale, let us release not only our breath but anything that will get in the way of our time together today: aches and pains of body and spirit, regrets about the past and worries about the future, to-do lists and the activities that have brought us to this moment, breathing them out, releasing them into God's care and keeping. . . . (*take time to release several deep breaths before beginning again*). And as we get to the end of our breath, let us breathe in, receiving not only oxygen for our bodies but also God's presence and blessing, God's own Holy Spirit filling our chests and abdomens like light or warmth, allowing it to radiate throughout our bodies and spirits. . . . (*take time to receive several deep breaths before beginning again*) Let's take a few moments to exhale and inhale, breathe out and breathe in, release and receive, together, in the presence of God.

- Continue with the following:

When you are ready, allow God to bring to your awareness the times during our Bible study over the last weeks for which you've been most grateful. As you become aware of them, silently give thanks for them.

Silence (allow 3-5 minutes)

When you are ready, allow God to bring to your awareness the times during our Bible study for which you were the least grateful, or when something internal or external got in your way. As you become aware of them, simply be with them in God's presence, not trying to change or fix anything. You may want to return to your breath, releasing what got in your way and receiving God's presence and blessing with you as you are.

Silence (allow 3-5 minutes)

When you are ready, come back to this place and this time, opening your eyes.

- Once you can see that everyone's eyes are open, invite people to share reflections about what was life-giving and what got in their way about this Bible reading process. As people are talking, encourage them to listen especially carefully to the person on their right, as they will be praying for this person either silently or aloud at the end of the session.
- Give yourself plenty of time to pray around the circle, beginning by praying out loud for the person on your right, and closing your prayer with "Amen" so the next person knows

they are now free to pray. When you have prayed all around the circle, invite people to offer each other a blessing: perhaps a hug or a handshake, maybe with the words, “The peace of Christ be yours” or something similar.

- As soon after the session as possible, make some notes of what people shared. What was especially fruitful for them in this time? What got in their way? These reflections may help you lead future group experiences of various kinds, and they will also suggest ways to adjust this process so that it is more hospitable to a wider range of people.

Appendix B

This is a *forced choice* inventory—it's quite possible no option will say exactly what you wish it would! Given that reality, circle the word that comes *closest* to what you'd want to say.

_____ Your initials, please (this will allow a comparison between your “before” and “after” assessments)

1. *Reading the Bible is important for my life as a Christian.*

rarely sometimes often usually

2. *I value reading the Bible in the company of others.*

rarely sometimes often usually

3. *Reading the Bible helps me love God.*

rarely sometimes often usually

4. *Bible reading is mostly an intellectual activity for me.*

rarely sometimes often usually

5. *What I read in the Bible confirms what I already thought/believed.*

rarely sometimes often usually

6. *God speaks to me through the Bible.*

rarely sometimes often usually

7. *The Bible doesn't have anything to say to contemporary life.*

rarely sometimes often usually

8. *I prefer to read the Bible on my own.*

rarely sometimes often usually

9. *Things I read in the Bible change my attitudes, ideas, or actions.*

rarely sometimes often usually

10. *The Bible doesn't matter to me; I can be a Christian without it.*

rarely sometimes often usually

Appendix C

He has anointed me

WEEK 4 SIGNS AND WONDERS

Opening sentence

Jesus unrolled the scroll
and found the place where it was written:
*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me."*

Call to praise

O God, your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
The light and peace of Jesus Christ be with us.

Psalm 66.1-9

Cry out with joy to God all the earth,
O sing to the glory of his name
rendering glorious praise.
Say to God: "How tremendous your deeds!

Because of the greatness of your strength
your enemies cringe before you.
*Before you all the earth shall bow,
shall sing to you, sing to your name!"*

Come and see the works of God,
tremendous deeds for the people.
*God turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the river dry-shod.*

Let your joy then be in the Lord,
who rules forever in power,
*whose eyes keep watch over nations;
let rebels not lift themselves up.*

O peoples, bless our God;
let the voice of God's praise resound,
*of the God who gave life to our souls
and kept our feet from stumbling.*

Thanksgiving

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High.

(free prayers of thanksgiving)

We declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night. Amen.

Song

Let the whole creation cry (H51)
From all that dwell below the skies (H49)
To God be the glory (H102)

Confession

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

(silence)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
*Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.*

Call to discipleship

Jesus said, I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.
Lord Jesus, you have the words of eternal life.

Mark 6.30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you?

Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

2 Kings 4.42-44

A man came ... bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

Silent or spoken reflection on the readings

Song

Break thou the bread of life (H360)
I hunger and I thirst (H474)
Shepherd of souls, refresh (H456, vv. 1-3)

Call to intercession

Ask, and it will be given you;
search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
*The heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit
to those who ask.*

God who gives life to our souls, we bring our prayers to you with confidence, in the name of our Lord Jesus.
In your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.

You offer us the water of life. We pray for ourselves and those dear to us.
(open prayers)
You give life to our souls, Lord;
hear our prayer.

You surprise us with generosity. We pray for our community and for our neighbors.

(open prayers)

You give life to our souls, Lord;

hear our prayer.

You are the joy of your people. We pray for the church in all places, that we may know the freedom of life in the Spirit.

(open prayers)

You give life to our souls, Lord;

hear our prayer.

Your eyes keep watch over the nations. We pray for the world and for all who care for creation.

(open prayers)

You give life to our souls, Lord;

hear our prayer.

We offer you other concerns we carry in our hearts.

(open prayers)

You give life to our souls, Lord;

hear our prayer.

Wondrous God,
who raised Jesus from death to life,
you heal the wounds that our swords inflict
and deliver us from fear to faith.
Grant us trust in your saving power,
that we might know your restoring touch
this night
and rise tomorrow to sing your praise.
Through Jesus the Savior,
in whose name we pray:

Our Father ...

Benediction

*Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith,
from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Used by permission of the publisher, from *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer Book, Ordinary Time* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2007); see <http://www.mph.org/hp/books/takemoments.htm>.

Appendix D

INIT	Group	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	A (1+10) a p a p a p a p a p	B (2+8) a p a p a p a p a p a p	C (3+6) a p a p a p a p a p a p	D (4+7) a p a p a p a p a p a p	E (5+9) a p a p a p a p a p a p
RB	Mike	2 3 2	2 3 2	3 3 3	1 0 1	0 1 0	1 2 3	0 0 1	1 2 3	1 2 3	3 3 3	2.5 3 1.5	2 2 2.5	2 2.5 0.5	0 1.5 1.5	
JFA	Mike	2 2 2	1 2 2	1 1 1	1 0 2	3 1 2	0 0 1	1 1 3	0 0 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2.5 2.5 1	0.5 2 2.5	1 1.5 0.5	1 0.5	
JM	Mike	2 3 1	1 2 1	1 0 2	1 1 0	2 1 1	2 0 2	0 2 1	2 0 2	1 1 3	3 3 3	2.5 3 1.5	0.5 1.5 1.5	0.5 0.5 0.5	0 2 1	
SH	Mike	2 2 3	2 3 2	3 3 0	1 2 2	0 1 2	2 0 0	0 0 2	0 0 2	2 2 3	3 3 3	2.5 2.5 1.5	1 2.5 2.5	1 1.5 1 1.5	1 1.5	
AM	Mike	3 2 2	2 2 3	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	0 2 1	1 1 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2.6 2.7 1.4	1.1 1.9 2.2	0.7 0.9 1.3	1.1	
LK	Martha	3 3 1	1 3 3	1 1 1	0 0 2	3 0 0	0 0 2	2 2 2	0 0 2	2 2 3	3 3 3	3 3 0.5	0.5 2.5 3	0.5 0.5 1	1 1 1	
LS	Martha	1 2 1	2 1 2	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 2 1	0 2 1	1 1 3	2 1 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2 2.5 1.5	2 1 2	1.5 1 1 1	1 1 1	
RL	Martha	3 3 2	3 3 3	1 0 1	1 3 3	1 1 3	1 0 0	2 3 1	0 0 2	3 3 3	3 3 3	3 3 1	1.5 3 3	1 0.5 1.5	2 2	
RM	Martha	1 1 2	2 1 1	2 2 1	2 1 1	2 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 2 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2 2 2	2 1 1	1.5 1.5 1 1.5	1 1.5	
JT	Martha	1 1 1	1 3 1	0 1 1	2 1 1	2 1 1	2 0 2	0 2 1	2 0 2	1 1 3	3 3 3	2 2 1.5	0.5 2 1	1 0.5 1.5 1.5	1 1.5	
CBB	Martha	3 3 1	2 2 2	1 1 1	2 2 1	1 2 2	0 0 1	1 1 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	3 3 3	3 3 1	1.5 2 2	2 1 0.5 1 1	1 1 1	
HT	Martha	2 3 2	3 2 2	2 3 3	2 0 2	2 0 2	2 2 2	0 0 1	0 1 2	2 3 3	3 3 3	2.5 2.5 2	1 2 2	2 1.5 1.5 1 1	1 1.5	
SHB	Martha	2 2 3	2 2 1	2 3 1	2 2 1	2 1 1	1 1 1	0 2 2	2 2 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2.5 2.5 2.5	2 1.5 1	1 1.5 1.5 1 1.5	1 1.5	
LJH	Martha	1 1 1	2 1 1	1 2 2	2 2 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	0 1 1	2 3 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2 2 1.5	2.5 1 1	0.5 1.5 1.5 1.5	1 1.5	
JS	Martha	3 3 3	2 3 2	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	0 2 1	2 1 2	1 1 3	3 3 3	3 3 2.5	1.5 2	1 0.5 1.5 1 1	1 1	
CED	Martha	1 2 0	0 2 2	2 2 1	2 0 1	3 2 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	3 2 3	3 3 3	1.5 2.5 0	0 2.5	2 0.5 1 0 2	2 2	
SSS	Martha	3 3 2	2 2 3	1 2 1	2 1 2	0 2 3	0 0 1	1 1 1	2 2 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	3 3 1.5	1.5 2.5	3 0.5 1 1 1	1 1 1	
MM	Martha	1 2 2	2 2 1	2 1 2	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	0 2 2	2 2 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	2 2.5	2 2	1 1.5 1 1 1	1 1 1	
BKS	Martha	2 3 3	2 2 2	1 1 1	2 3 3	1 1 3	2 2 2	2 2 2	2 2 2	2 2 3	3 3 3	2.5 3 2.5	2 2.5 1.5	1 2 2 2.5	2 2 2.5	
JDM	Martha	3 3 2	1 3 3	1 1 1	3 2 3	2 3 3	0 0 1	0 3 0	1 0 3	3 3 3	3 3 3	3 3 1.5	0.5 3 3	0.5 3 2.5	3 2.5	
BM	Martha	2 3 2	2 3 3	1 1 1	0 1 1	1 0 1	2 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 3 3	3 3 3	2.5 3 1.5	1.5 2	2.5 1 1 1.5 1.5	1 1.5 1.5	
												2.47 2.66	1.56 1.41	1.97 1.94	0.97 1 1.31	1.47
SLB	Dawn	2 2 2	2 2 2	1 1 1	2 1 1	1 2 1	1 2 1	0 1 2	3 2 2	2 2 3	3 3 3	2.5 2.5	2 2.5	2 1 0.5	1.5 1.5 1.5	1.5
MKW	Dawn	3 3 1	2 2 2	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 0 2	0 2 2	1 1 1	1 1 3	3 3 3	3 3 1.5	2 1.5	2 0.5 0.5 1 1	1 1 1	
RKW	Dawn	3 1 1	1 3 1	0 0 1	2 2 1	2 2 1	2 0 1	2 0 1	2 1 2	1 1 2	3 2 2	3 1.5	0.5 1	2.5 1 1 0	1.5 1.5	
VJB	Dawn	2 3 2	3 2 3	1 1 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 0 2	0 2 2	2 2 1	2 2 3	3 3 3	2.5 3 2	2.5 1.5	2.5 0.5 1 1.5	1 1.5	
WTK	Dawn	3 2 3	3 3 2	3 2 3	2 0 3	0 3 3	0 0 1	1 1 1	1 1 1	2 2 3	3 3 3	3 2.5	2 2 3	2.5 1.5 1 1 1	1 1 1	
												2.8 2.5	1.6 2	2.1 1.8	0.8 0.7	1.2 1.3
Average of all		2.15 2.31	1.85 1.85	2.27 2.08	1.27 1.38	1.08 1.04	1.69 1.85	0.50 0.46	1.23 1.08	1.50 1.69	2.96 2.96	2.56 2.63	1.54 1.46	1.98 1.96	0.88 0.92	1.29 1.37