

*Gary Harder, June 15, 2014*

**Being Church #2 – Embracing the future  
This “visioning” thing**

Texts: Scattered texts from the Book of Acts (Read Acts 6:1-7, and Acts 10: 9-16 for worship).

Introduction: We usually don't make too much of Father's Day. Father's Day isn't really all that big in our culture. Maybe a cheerful “happy Father's day” from one of the kids. Once – only once, there was a “Greatest Dad in the world” card. But this year I have done some reflecting, almost soul-searching, around father's day. No, I'm not resolving to be a better father – none of that. It's far too late now. I can't try now to erase the mistakes of the past. No, my reflections have a different root.

A few weeks ago one of my sons said, “Dad, I know almost nothing about your dad, my grandfather. We have known and loved grandma. But not grandpa. I'm missing that. I feel I need that. I need to understand that part of my heritage, of my identity, of who I am. It feels like I'm missing a part of my roots”.

You see, my dad died 50 years ago, long before any of our children were born. I grieved his death and thought much about him and knew how important he was to my becoming who I am. But it never really occurred to me to see to it that my children also knew who he was. And so I am pondering how to communicate who my dad was to my children, and especially to my grand-children- one of whom is being baptized this morning in the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church. How do I pass on that identity shaping heritage, those roots, and that rich faith, to those I love most? My son was right. “Tell me who your dad was”.

And so on this Father's day I want to make that commitment to my children and my grandchildren. “I will try to find a way to give you a picture of who my dad was, and how that has shaped me – and you.

Today is kind of a “visioning” day here are MFM. What has that got to do with father's day and a son wanting to know who his grandfather was? Quite a lot, actually. Visioning starts with identity, with knowing who we are. We spent the first hour today exploring that. In its simplest form it is knowing who we are. It is knowing the stories that have shaped us. In its deepest form as a church, it is being rooted profoundly in the bigger story – God's story and the Jesus story. That is

where this hour, this sermon, is rooted. In the next hour we will ask, “So what does that mean for our future?”

Yes, in one sense we do have to let go of the past before we can really embrace the future. And we have, in the past year put a lot of thought and energy into letting go of the things that have held us back – our conflicts, our hurts, our angers, our “culture of critique”, our patterns of engagement and relationships that seemed to be hemming us in. We needed to let go of stuff before we were ready to embrace a more hopeful future.

But we also have to ask, “what of our past identity, values, traditions, and faith do we need to hold onto in order to have a solid home base on which to build our future?”

Are we now ready to meet that future with hope and with joy? What will help us be the church we want to be and that we think God is calling us to be? And in our conversation after lunch we want to ask the basic questions: “What are our hopes for the future?”, “who is our neighbour?” why are we here”? How do we plan for a hopeful future for MFM?

And so we need to do some “visioning”, some planning, some dreaming about what we could yet be and do and become in the future. But I have a bit of a confession to make. I always feel a bit ambivalent about visioning and planning exercises. Every time any of the churches I have been a part of goes on a visioning and strategizing binge I feel a bit conflicted, a bit uneasy, a bit ambivalent.

One part of me shouts yes. We need to do this to refocus our sights, our goals, our hopes, our identity, our reason for being. So I shout yes to dreaming about and planning for the future. I shout yes to exploring what we could still be and what we could still do and what God might still have in mind for us. After all, how can we let go of old ways and patterns that we get stuck in if we don’t have a plan and vision for the future as an alternative? How can we let go of the old if we don’t have something new and better to replace it with?

My own personality profile gets excited when a “visioning” time comes. I am, after all, a very strong “J”, or “judger” in the Myer-Briggs scheme of things. That is, I like order, I like plans, I like things organized, I like routine, I like to know where I am going. Just ask Lydia when we go on a trip and somehow we haven’t planned carefully enough and we get lost. Or the many detours confuse us. Like it happened in Quebec City last September. I did get all uptight. I get all uptight if I

don't know exactly where we are going and when and how we are going to get there. Lydia, on the other hand, kind of likes the adventure of being lost. Being lost opens new possibilities to explore things that weren't anticipated. Yes, we do sometimes have some conflict at this point in the journey. Visioning meets my need to map out the future so that I don't feel lost.

But another part of me shouts a somewhat quieter "no" to all the emphasis our churches and conferences put on visioning and strategizing for the future. Partly it is just the experience of realizing that many of these ventures haven't bourn much fruit. We plan and envision all we want, and five years down the road wonder what all the fuss was about because it hasn't made all that much difference after all.

But there is a much more basic discomfort in my spirit. I've read the Book of Acts too many times. You see, the church story described in Acts is the story of unimaginable change and growth and upheaval. And almost none of that story comes because the church had visioning and planning and strategizing meetings. It came simply because they worshipped together. Think about that. Change came because people worshipped together. It came because the Holy Spirit came and messed up their certainties - and their plans. It came because those first followers of Jesus saw what God was doing and decided to go along with it. The church changed because of worship. (In the U model, worship is the "presencing" part, the "being at home" part).

### The stories of Acts

The story of the birth of the church starts with worship. Acts 2 says that a bunch of people are gathered together because of what has been reported about Jesus being resurrected. They are in no way yet a community, let alone a church. They are a bunch of individuals from all over the place – Acts 2 names a whole bunch of different countries they come from (14) and the different languages that they speak. They don't know each other. All they have in common is that they are all Jews who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and are now all curious about this Jesus story. But they are not a community – yet. They speak many different languages, have different backgrounds and have very little in common. But now something new seems to be in the air.

And then something totally unexpected, and totally unplanned, happens. The text says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire,

appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

And then Peter starts preaching. Notice the sequence here. Peter’s preaching did not bring on this Holy Spirit encounter. It had already happened. The Holy Spirit comes in its own time, always sovereign. Peter just responds to that. (We preachers do need to be very modest about the impact of our preaching). Peter reviews the whole God story, starting with things in the Old Testament, and how this already points to Jesus. And then Peter tells this story of Jesus, his life and his ministry, and then his crucifixion and resurrection. “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses”, Peter says in his sermon.

It’s kind of a long sermon, but it so inspires these listeners who have already experienced how the Holy Spirit is moving in their midst, that they respond out loud, “What shall we then do?” Peter says, “Repent (change directions) and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” And they do that – and become a community. They worship together and they have meals together and look after each other’s needs. This motely, disparate group has become a community. And it all happened because of worship – with meeting God, with being open to the Holy Spirit – not because of visioning and planning. Hmm. Change directions, which is what repentance literally means. Face the future, not the past.

But there was soon a problem. Acts 6. Somehow the Hebrew speaking Jewish followers of this Jesus forgot about or just neglected the Greek speaking members of their new community. “Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists (the Greek speakers) complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”

Well, it is now time for some planning, some “visioning”. “How shall we solve this crisis?” So the 12 disciples – they are the leaders – gather the whole community to sort it out. And they give up some of their own leadership power. “Friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, whom we may appoint to this task (of making sure the Hellenist widows are looked after)...What they said pleased the whole community.”

The Hebrew speaking Jews realize that they must include – be hospitable too – the Greek speaking followers of Jesus who want to be fully a part of this new

community. Who is our neighbour? We hadn't really thought about it, but now it obviously must include even those who speak a different language.

The next crisis is this Saul character who is going around with a vengeance persecuting these Christians and trying desperately to destroy their community. And then suddenly Paul meets Jesus on some Damascus road – that is, he has a direct worship encounter - and changes directions and wants to become a part of the community he has set out to destroy. “Can we trust him? Can we let him in? Do we let a murderer into our community?” There has to be some careful discernment here. But finally they welcome Paul too as a brother in Christ.

## Acts 10 and 15

The pattern will continue. The pattern is that God acts and the people respond. The pattern is that the people encounter God in worship, and then are called to do something – to make plans for the future that they couldn't even have imagined earlier.

So it is that Peter has his strict Jewish life turned around. Peter goes up on a roof top to pray. That is, he goes there to worship. He is hungry, but falls into a trance and sees a vision. He is told to eat foods which he has been told from childhood on are unclean and which he must never even touch.

His whole life is turned around by that prayer time, that worship, that “dream-vision” he experiences. The Spirit of God is preparing Peter to meet Cornelius, the Gentile. A whole new vision emerges. Gentiles too can be a part of the church. That is an amazing, shocking, astounding change of direction.

But, it is one thing for Peter to see and follow a new light, a new way, a new vision. Now he must lead the whole church in that new direction, and that will be an immense challenge and will require a far more rigorous debate than our Ontario political leaders engaged in before the election.

Acts 15 tells the story, of “the council of Jerusalem”. I chuckle a bit at Luke's choice of words here. “They had no small dissension and debate”. I gather that the debate was very heated and vigorous. But in the end they basically agree and the direction of the church is changed forever. The council unanimously decides that Gentiles too could be a part of the church, and that the men would not have to be circumcised in order to join. Momentous stuff.

But after the decision is made, the real planning begins in order to carry out this decision. “How do we now carry out this new vision, this new understanding of what it means to be church where all who want to follow Jesus are welcomed as brothers and sisters in Christ? Let’s make some plans. All the churches need to be informed of this decision, and encouraged to affirm it. How to do this? First of all we need to draft a letter of explanation to send to each of our churches. And we better send representatives to read and interpret this letter”.

And so Barnabas and Paul are chosen and sent, and Judas and Silas, and then John Mark, though Paul and Barnabas have an argument about including John Mark. A big argument. (The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company” (vs. 39). But the great missionary movement is launched – now amidst a lot of “planning”. And of some conflict.

What might these stories mean for us here at MFM? Or for us personally?

Lydia and I don’t have a plan for you. But we do have this challenge. The stories in Acts remind us that it all starts with worship, not with planning or visioning. It starts with meeting God. It starts with the being open to the Spirit of God. It starts, not with what I want or need or propose or desire or am convinced of, but with opening our eyes to see what God is already doing, and opening our hearts to what the Holy Spirit is prompting us to embrace. That is the only way to meaningfully change directions and set out on a new path.

It all starts with worship. As Safwat Marzouk, our guest speaker at the MCEC annual conference in St. Catharines insisted, “Worship is our mission”. Worship centers us. It puts us in touch with God’s agenda.

And then we ask, “What does this mean for our future”? How does this define who we are? How does this answer the question of why we are here? How does this inform our planning and our visioning? How does this help us set out on a new direction?

For my birthday Lydia bought me a G.P.S. (Global Positioning System). I think she is a bit tired of my bad mood when we get lost. Or maybe she just thinks that having one will free us up to risk exploring side roads and interesting possibilities (which she is much more eager to do than I am) knowing that our little box will help us get to our destination anyway.

And I thought, maybe, just maybe, the G.P.S. is a good image, a good metaphor, for this sermon about envisioning the future. You start with your home address, plug in the address of your destination, and you set off relaxed and confident. And if you decide to explore interesting side trails, or even if you get totally lost, you can relax because the machine will recalibrate and get you to your destination anyway.

Our home address, as a church and as followers of Jesus, is worship. Our true home is opening ourselves to God, opening ourselves to being guided by the Spirit of God. Our home address is being a follower of Jesus. That's where we live. From there we go on trips, we explore our community, our world. We reach out to our neighbours. We ask, "What is God inviting us to do now? Whom can we offer a compassionate moment? We live our lives out of a home base, and from there live into the wholeness which God invites us into – both as individuals and as a church. We discover a deep sense of being here for a purpose.

Of course we will sometimes get lost along the way. Of course we will sometimes forget to turn on our spiritual G.P.S. Of course we will sometimes forget where our true home is, and we will probably still sometimes wound people, even people we love.

But worship reorients us. It resets our directions. It gives us deep roots. And frees us to plan and dream and envision for the future with hope and with confidence.

So let's embrace our future with hope, with trust and with joy!