October 26, 2017  ***No pain, no gain***  Milepost 222

Most of us at some point have intentionally chosen short term pain or inconvenience (counseling, surgery, formal education, exercise, kitchen remodeling, etc.), knowing the effort will result in something better. Deciding to pursue such a plan can be a challenge for the individual. It’s a bigger challenge when 2 or 3 have to decide together. When a congregation makes such a decision, it’s exponentially challenging. A wise congregant observed many years ago regarding transition: “I don’t want ever go through it again, but I’m glad we did.”

Back in June, 2016, many recognized the need to improve structure and communication. The entire transitional process was a workout for everyone who participated, and an unwanted distraction for those who didn’t. But the communal pain, resulted in communal gain: direction and greater unity emerged. If your shoulder isn’t too sore, pat yourself on the back! As in exercising, sometimes we feel better immediately; sometimes we don’t, but we know it’s an investment in long term health.

The bad news: living into the new vision and structure involves more inconvenience. Yes, another cycle of short term challenges, to achieve long term health and stability. Yes, some are tired of change. Some have scarcity anxiety: fear of limited resources.

The good news: some have experienced renewed energy and possess a hopeful orientation of abundance. When the Spirit calls an individual or congregation to a new task, the Spirit provides what is needed to accomplish that task. The vision calls for spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines and greater vulnerability. Some in the congregation have been waiting years for their gifts in these areas to be recognized. Some have recently been recognized, and some continue to be hidden in plain sight. And…the Spirit has recently sent new folk to Shalom, to model vulnerability which is encouraging others in this direction.

In this final (oversized) milepost, I want to make one point clear: when a congregation organizes around spiritual gifts, EVERY PARTICIPANT’S ROLE **IS** EQUALLY IMPORTANT AND VALUED.

That’s where Jesus’ church started 2000 years ago. 300 years in, it started getting off track by increasing the gap between clergy and laity. When it got abusively off track, various renewal movements (Anabaptists and many others) over the next 1700 years radically reduced this gap. Mennonites today talk of pr*iesthood of all believers,*

but in reality, have embraced a pecking order: pastors on top, then elders, then council, then committee members…leaving the bottom rung for all the Rodney Dangerfield’s who get no respect because they are not on a committee. A common response to “Are you aware of your spiritual gift?” is evidence: “I’m not on a committee.” Contrary to New Testament teaching, spiritual gifts have become equated with having a title.

Congregations have called the task of filling positions “gift discernment” now for three decades, but I see little change in the pecking order approach.

*While calling an ongoing Pastoral Team is important, the future health of Shalom is based more on the extent to which every participant’s passion and spiritual gift is clarified, and their unique calling pursued, than on who is on the Pastoral Team.*

Shalom’s new structure is designed to enable this to happen *over time*. This first year’s effort won’t get everything right, because a small minority have completed the intentional work of discerning passion, spiritual gift and calling in a small group context. But among the 15+ who have, I observe excitement, new energy and willingness to serve. *This time next year* (Gen. 18:14), a majority will have completed this work, and the benefits will be evident throughout the congregation. In three new small groups which have just started, another 15 are engaging in spiritual gift discernment.

Another way equality will be enhanced in the new structure: THE FIVE NEW COMMISSIONS HAVE A DIFFERENT FUNCTION FROM THE FORMER EIGHT MINISTRIES. In the past, the bulk of work was done by ministries (Worship, Fellowship, Outreach, Building/Grounds, PET, Education, etc.). The Commissions’ primary work is NOT ministry. It is instead: oversight, keeping all ministries in their area in sync with the vision, coordinating, communicating, and calling many additional persons to actually do ministry. The Commissions are intentionally small, so the majority of the congregation free to do ministry.

Spiritual Gift Discernment Team (SGDT) has attempted to call people to Commissions who are gifted for and feel called to do the oversight work described above. SGDT is intentionally keeping track of many others who they see as gifted to do actual ministry. These recommendations will be passed on to respective commissions, who will discern, call and empower many to do the work previously done by various ministries.

When Commissions have been called, SGDT will then begin their most important work which is ongoing: encouraging and providing opportunities for everyone to discern their gifts through small group experiences. Their goal: no member left behind.

In secular employment, oversight teams (Commissions) are above the workers (Ministry). It’s what they do. Not so in Jesus’ church where though roles are different, they are all equal in importance. Every follower of Jesus has a unique and essential call (Mt. 11:28-30). Jesus’ church has no walls, so there’s no need for a ladder.

It won’t happen overnight. But steady progress is being made. The Vision and Accountability Team is up for the task of keeping all this on track. They, along with the Pastoral Team, will lead this effort from this point on. Pray for them, and keep listening and discerning for your unique call, in or through Shalom Mennonite Church.

May God bless you, and keep you; may God’s face shine upon you, and give you peace. -Gary Martin