

## ***Remembering who we are from generation to generation***

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There is a familiar story that epitomizes for many of us the challenge of managing continuity and change—Fiddler on the Roof—told first on Broadway, and then in film. Tradition helps one to keep balanced and the fiddler on the roof symbolizes that balance. The central drama is in finding an appropriate match for the three eldest daughters of Teveye and Golde. It is set in a Jewish Russian village. Each match introduces a greater degree of change from the established tradition.

Teveye, after reluctance, decides to let his eldest daughter Tzatal marry Mazal, a poor tailor she loves from the village rather than the rich man the village matchmaker had arranged for her to marry.

He then even more reluctantly gives his blessing to his second daughter when she and her radical intellectual friend from out of town decide to get married, asking only for Teveye's blessing, not his permission.

And when his third daughter pleads for her father to accept her and her new "gentile" Russian Orthodox husband, we listen to Teveye arguing with himself out loud.

"Accept them? How can I accept them?"

Can I deny everything I believe in?

On the other hand, how can I deny my own daughter?

On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try to bend that far I'll break.

On the other hand. . . . . There is no other hand! No. No. No!"

And there is the painful scene of his turning away from his own daughter, leaving her weeping in the field.

What does it mean to remember who we are, generation to generation? Who are we? Why would we want to remember? How is remembering made possible? How do we both remember what is essential to our faith and adapt to new realities? These are far too many questions to adequately answer this evening. But in the few minutes we have to reflect on it, I'd like to begin by providing some depth perception; several observations of who we were just a generation, two or three ago.

I've long known about a published travelogue my grandfather, A D Wenger wrote about his trip around the world 100 or so years ago. I never met my grandfather; nor have any of my family, including my mother. He died when my father was 17 years old, while he was serving as the second "president" of what is now Eastern Mennonite University. My dad made sure each of his eight children got our own copy of his father's book entitled Six Months in Bible Lands: Around the World in Fourteen Months, published in 1902. It is reported to have sold very well in Mennonite circles in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as A D

was a well known evangelist and educator in his day. However, I didn't have any particular interest in reading it **until** my young adult son Joseph said that, out of intrigue for this daring, adventurous great grandfather, **he** had begun to read it.

And so, as a 50 year old, with fear and trepidation (because I didn't think I'd like what I'd find), and with an intensity of interest that surprised me, I finally read the book myself. It seemed like a rare opportunity to hear a story in great detail from a young adult of 100 years ago about his encounter with the religious and cultural plurality of his day and to compare it with how today's young adults make sense of the plurality of their "global village." How did A D Wenger at 31, (still a fairly young adult when he ventured around the world), nurtured in a particular faith community and thoroughly immersed in the biblical narrative, interpret the world of his day and how might that give us depth perception about where we've come from and how we might move into the future?

This led me to reflect on the contrast between AD Wenger's way of looking at the world and today's young adults—100 years later. I applied for a research grant from the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People of Faith—forming a research team of 8 young adults who then interviewed 56 of their peers. What we discovered is reported in the 2005 publication, [Thank You for Asking: Conversing with Young Adults about the Future Church.](#)

During the team's orientation and training, I shared excerpts of A D's travelogue with them during our first session together. What followed was a fascinating "intergenerational dialogue" offering an intriguing comparison between their experience with narratives and practices and A D's experience. A D's travelogue provided a way for us to hear about another young adult who is not SO far removed that we can't identify with him, and yet clearly represents an earlier time.

There's a lot in A D's world view to make us moderns and post moderns uncomfortable. Those of us shaped by sensitivities raised after World War I and II, the Holocaust, the devastation caused by Colonization, the Civil Rights movement can readily see some racism and ethnocentrism in A D's appraisal of his world. In retrospect, the limitations of some of A D's perspectives provide us with sober reflection on how we also are shaped by the prevailing narratives and ideologies of our times.

And yet I was pleased and surprised at the integrity of A D's core motivating vision which runs throughout his travelogue. I would describe that vision as his confidence that: a few faithful Mennonites could "wield a wonderful influence for the betterment of the human race" if they remain true to "the humble teachings of Jesus, and thus be a great power for good to the world." And that there is no higher calling than to live for "the temporal and eternal good of others." He was eager to convince his fellow Mennonites of the need to reach out of their isolated and comfortable Mennonite enclaves to share the good news of Christ with peoples of the world with whom they had no acquaintance or affinity. He was hoping to build new connections between cultures with the desire to share both spiritual and physical resources with others who seemed at times in great need.

After reading excerpts from his travelogue the research team engaged with a variety of observations about A D and about themselves. Here are some of their observations:

I was impressed with the distinct sense A D had of how Christians “should behave.” He had “a powerful meta-narrative which he took with him everywhere he went”; he derived all of his interpretations of the world “through that paradigm.”

A D “took his truth with him” which he used to evaluate the world. He was “certain about his truth claims” and his “presuppositions were confirmed” in what he saw and experienced. In contrast, *now* there seems to be no “measuring stick” against which to measure the truth claims of others. We are taught “to listen to different stories” and acknowledge the truth that’s in each of them.

A D showed “no hint of cynicism.” He was “very sincere.” He “gave credence to people’s stories” but he was very clear in saying “what was right and what was wrong.”

A D finds that his “narrative holds up”; but he can also take “other stories seriously.”

For A D there was something of a “seamless existence;” everything fit together.

He shows “a lot of bias,” yes, when he’s trying to make a point. And there are “definite themes he pushes out” for his own purposes. And he shows a lot of “optimism about education” and the possibility of “progress.” I see this as a contrast with current young adults; I think the vast number of “today’s young adults are overwhelmed. A D isn’t.”

A D clearly regarded Christianity as a way to better the world; and he severely critiques the “hypocrisy of Christians” he observed in Palestine, often being harder on those hypocritical Christians than on the “heathens of India.”

He was a man who clearly valued consistency of word and deed; suggesting that “by their fruits you shall know them.” He clearly connected Christianity with “a way to better the world.”

Brenda Martin Hurst, a colleague from Eastern Mennonite Seminary, joined us for our conversation about A D. Her recent doctoral dissertation work focused on several young adult Mennonite leaders of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who significantly impacted the character and future direction of the Mennonite Church of their day: George Brunk I, A D Wenger, Menno Steiner, Daniel Kauffman and others. She described how significant change happened in the Mennonite Church in that time, much of it initiated by these enterprising young men (and women who were less prominent). Brenda said that it was young adults who reshaped the church in the 1890’s and 1900’s.

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of significant change in the United States in general; change from a largely rural, agrarian society to an industrial, urban society; along with a new, widespread emphasis on education. Brenda commented that A D and

his young adult peers were bent on “redefining what it means to be Mennonite in the world and what Mennonites’ relationship ought to be to the world.”

Why did these young men decide to embrace the Mennonite Church after seriously flirting with leaving the church to become politicians, educators, etc.? Brenda commented that it had a lot to do with John S. Coffman who was about 10 years older than them. In evangelistic meetings that he organized, he particularly tried to encourage educated young men and women, telling them to throw their energies into the church. He and others increasingly redefined what it meant to be Mennonite in the world; that you could be Mennonite and educated; you could be Mennonite and evangelistic; you could be Mennonite and bold, not just Mennonite and backward and humble. He redefined being Mennonite in a way that was attractive to these young guys and they bought it; at least some of them did, and A D’s one who did, and gave his energies to the church in a big way. The whole thrust in his work was to get young people to join the church; to make the church and the gospel message meaningful and attractive to young people.

This new group of educated young adults, Brenda said, are the ones who started creating a denomination. These young adult guys who were in their 20’s reshaped the Mennonite Church of their day. One of the research team asked Brenda, “When was the last time a group of 20 something’s significantly reshaped the church?” Brenda responded, “I don’t think it’s happened in the same way since this core of young men transformed the church at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

One of the team marveled at how “those young adults claimed their voice; put themselves out there; and that John Coffman validates them.” Now, he said, the “generation gap is incredible.” There is a lack of “those bridging people.”

So now, 100 years later, many would say we are again in a time of significant change. Brian McLaren, prolific author writing a lot on the emerging church of the future suggests that what is happening in the church in our time is comparable to an earthquake; for many years, as the pressure builds under the earth, the huge tectonic plates grind against each other. When pressures build to the point where they fracture or rise or slip—we get earthquakes; and then apparent calm returns. Human history seems to behave like the earth. We can live for years unaware of how pressures are building, and then almost overnight, our world changes so dramatically that old maps no longer fit the new reality.

We happen to live at a time of high “tectonic activity” he says, the end of one age and the beginning of another. It is a time of shaking. Yesterday’s maps are outdated; the uncharted world ahead is what he calls “the new world on the other side.” These grinding, shifting times have shaken the church. We love our old maps and wish the world still matched them. But some of us are eager to explore the new world, to create new maps.

If we have a new world, we will need a new church, McLaren writes. We won’t need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new Spirit, but a new

spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new Christian. Not a new denomination, but a new kind of church in every denomination. Yet while we pay attention to what must change, we must also be alert to what must not change.

What is appropriate change? What is too much change? When must we no longer change lest we lose something core and vital to who we are; to who we are called to be by Jesus Christ?

I'm reminded of philosopher Alastair MacIntyre's definition of tradition: a tradition is a historically extended, socially embodied argument about how best to interpret and apply the formative text(s). All traditions tend to go through similar states, when inadequacies are identified in the face of theoretical or practical problems or because of challenges from other traditions. Over time, a tradition is reformulated and elaborated in order to meet these inadequacies. "The new version is obviously justified over its predecessor because it solves the problem its predecessor could not solve," he writes.

George Barna, of the Barna Institute has a recent publication in which he refers to revolutionary change. Perhaps you noticed our own Luann Austin commenting on it in her DNR column. She takes exception to Barna's term "revolutionary" but, she says, they meet in coffee shops, living rooms, chat rooms and bars. They have no agenda other than to share their lives, to support and encourage each other; they are the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Barna says, that many, many Christians intent on "being the Church rather than merely going to church," are no longer attending congregational services, but seeking alternative forms of church. This "new form of religious community" is of such magnitude that it will "reshape the religious world within the next two decades," he says. These folks want more of God and less of programmed religion. Many people are unhappy with congregational churches. Changing lifestyles and a desire to get closer to God have caused many people to seek new ways of being in relationship with God and other God-seeking people, he reports. They want more of God in their life and have had to leave a congregational form of the local church to satisfy that need. He calls them revolutionaries because they are changing the paradigm of church.

A socially embodied argument is underway about how best to be church; many, many persons feeling underserved by the established congregations are finding new places to meet, to do church. New practices are being instituted. My husband is teaching a course at Eastern Mennonite Seminary on experimental congregations and we are working with a core group from the seminary to envision a new church that will focus on table fellowship; a church that we envision will meet regularly around tables rather than in rows, entering into the Scriptures, each other's lives and "breaking bread" regularly together.

A socially embodied argument that hopes to recover core spirituality will no doubt experiment with practices, hoping to come nearer to what Jesus anticipated for his followers; and to what the early church experienced during its time of phenomenal growth. Nancey Murphy, philosopher and theologian, remarks on how creative the

Anabaptists were in the development of practices new in their days such as believer's baptism, the ban, and the rejection of the sword and of oaths.

The social embodiment of our faith is seen in practices with which we form a way of life. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra in the marvelous writing they've done define Christian practices as those things "Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world." Practices are concrete, physical and down-to-earth. Practices are the place where humans cooperate with God in caring for community. Practices bear traditions. They are gifts and have taken shape over centuries as people respond to God's presence. They are ancient and larger than we are. We use them to express our faith, but in turn they form us.

In a fascinating study entitled How Societies Remember, social scientist Paul Connerton argues that bodily social memory is an essential aspect of social memory that has previously been badly neglected in research on writing about memory. Images of the past and knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by bodily rituals and practices. Yet when traditions have been studied, the focus has usually been on the transmission of written texts. Texts, however, are detached both from their writers and from those who read them. We've assumed that such texts should be the privileged form for the transmission of a society's memories. We can't underestimate the importance and persistence of the bodily aspects of social memory, Connerton argues, and suggests that every group will entrust to bodily automatisms the values and categories they are most anxious to conserve. They will know how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body.

What are the practices that are most essential in sustaining us as Christian Anabaptist Mennonite and Brethren faith communities? What core practices have we lost in recent years? Have we reflected on what the implications are for the quality of our community life? What practices might we work to recover because they most nearly embody the spiritual and ethical resources we want to characterize our communities?

Christian Smith, sociologist at the University of North Carolina has directed the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest and most detailed study of teenagers and religion ever undertaken—just published this year as Soul Searching by Oxford University Press. Recently I heard him speak. It cannot be assumed that most US Christian teens hear or understand the basics of the Gospel, he said. Most don't have a clue. They are incredibly inarticulate about faith because they don't have practice; they haven't been engaged enough to know how to talk about it. And relatively few are practicing their faith. Anyone knows we have to practice something in order to learn it well, he said. Many of the teens he and his colleagues interviewed could say nothing about their faith, when they can easily talk about other things. Parents and other significant adults should be much more forthright in teaching youth to articulate their distinctive beliefs and practices.

The young adults we spoke with in our research project now published as Thank You for Asking brought a lot of energy to our questions about practices they do or don't consider

important. And by the kinds of answers they gave, it seems clear to me that it is high time to engage in more frequent conversations about practices; which ones we think should characterize our life together as communities of faith and why. Those of us who are middle-aged and older, remember that it isn't very long ago that church leaders, in ways that felt heavy handed to some of us, tried to enforce practices related to dress code, TV watching, lifestyle choices and more. As we came of age, we took issue with expressions of faith that seemed too legalistic. But any person (and community) for that matter, that wants to shape a quality life that hopes to counter mass culture with deeper, richer values, will need to think creatively and intentionally about what practices will characterize our life individually and together. I sense that young adults are ready for more of those kinds of conversations.

These young adults affirmed that many of the typical Mennonite faith community practices on the lists we used in the interviews are important to them as they shape their own way of life: simplicity of lifestyle, nonviolent love of enemies, truth-telling, Sabbath keeping, hospitality, meditation and prayer, community discernment, sexual fidelity, mutual care, eating together... However, they raised many questions, wanting more conversation about what each practice means and what the connection is between motivations and actions.

About "simplicity of lifestyle," for example, they wondered what the simple life really is; what it means in different contexts; how to come to terms with our many possessions and how to exercise good stewardship, experiencing "more with less."

They asked over and over that we talk in the church more often and more honestly about sexual practice.

On "sabbath keeping," they talked about not knowing what it means and about concern that it not be interpreted legalistically; while acknowledging that "rest" is important.

"Group discernment/listening to each other and the Spirit" provoked significant interest and a desire to know more of what this might be about. Several persons mentioned how they connect this with "engaging the Bible" and would welcome the church talking more about how we discern together the meaning of the Scriptures.

There were also frequent comments about "modest attire," asking for more definition, for contextual sensitivity and suggesting that we not think about it in the traditional Mennonite way. And a fair number mentioned "non-swearing of oaths," mostly indicating that it isn't important, or at least not in the way often assumed.

Prayer was among those practices that they suggested are most important to them. There seems to be a shift underway for many of them, from thinking of prayer as "asking for stuff" to prayer as "listening."

Many of them longed for a "whole" spirituality—a desire for more silence, more of the "contemplative stuff," more contact with nature, a slower pace of life; a life in which we

can stop and listen to God and to others; with a balance between a “spiritual relationship” and “social activism.”

Multiple persons, expressed their hope that the future church be involved in the local and global communities with more emphasis on service and less on doctrine; that there be “more grace” and “less drawing of lines;” that we learn to live with more diverse viewpoints with less bickering; that we incorporate more use of liturgy and rituals including frequent “breaking of bread” and footwashing; that our worship often include a Taizé type service with its mixture of silence and corporate worship; that there be more story-telling about “what’s really going on” and more hymn singing . . . .

A lot of these young adults truly believe the Mennonite Church has a distinct and vital role to play in today’s world, both among other Christians and in the broader world. With its social conscience, commitment to peacemaking and call to discipleship, it offers a unique alternative to standard evangelical American “pop” Christianity. And there is a lot of appreciation for the rich community life Mennonites have, along with the wonderful heritage and sense of identity it provides.

I was surprised that 100 years later, A D’s core vision (at least as I describe it) continues to ring true throughout most of these young adults’ stories. While today’s Mennonite-affiliated young adults use different language, have world views that allow for more complexity, talk more about contextualization than universality, don’t generally relate well to abstracted, doctrinal “truths,” speak in humble and confessional ways about their understanding of God; are embarrassed about how the United States dominates the rest of the world, and are more circumspect about how they use the biblical meta-narrative to make sense of their world, I think it is fair to say that almost all of them would agree with the young adult globe trotter from 100 years ago: that **a few faithful Mennonites could “wield a wonderful influence for the betterment of the human race” if they remain true to “the humble teachings of Jesus, and thus be a great power for good to the world.”**

What must change and what must not change?

Across the board, these young adults found the Jesus story the most compelling narrative for equipping them both with a world view that is sufficient for the questions and crises of this time and place, and for informing a way of life. And most of them want to belong to communities of faith that welcome and challenge them. My hope from the research project described in [Thank You for Asking](#) is that the stories from these bright, thoughtful, activist young adults will stir our faith communities to tap the insights and gifts of young adults, out of our mutual need and for our mutual benefit. Many young adults long to be a part of “mentoring communities” and the rest of us need their questions, their discerning minds, their creative energy to do the theological reflection required to realistically engage the complexities of our day and to shape a sustainable way of life; and to remember who we are into the coming generations.

*(Includes lengthy excerpts from [Thank You for Asking: Conversing with Young Adults about the Future Church](#) by Sara Wenger Shenk, Herald Press, 2005; and also from*

*Anabaptist Ways of Knowing: A Conversation about Tradition-Based Critical Education*  
by Sara Wenger Shenk, Cascadia Publishing House, 2003.)