

Cornelius Mennonite Church

Cornelius Mennonite Church is a 40-year-old congregation of about 100 people. The church was founded in Richmond, a town of 15,000 people. Frank is in his seventh year as pastor of the congregation. He loves the congregation and the people appreciate Frank's caring and gentle manner. Though the congregation had experienced deep conflict prior to Frank's arrival, Frank has invested significant time and energy to help each household in the congregation understand that they are an important part of the church.

Having graduated from High School, a young member of the congregation, Ken, moved halfway across the country with a friend. After a couple of years in dead end jobs, Ken joined the army and served in the military for four years. Upon receiving an honorable discharge, Ken married and moved back to Richmond to start a family. When Ken moved back he accepted a good paying job as a recruiter for the local National Guard Armory. Ken and his family attend church regularly. He understands the views of his congregation and does not publicly oppose the church's teaching about peace. While his new position raised a few eyebrows in the congregation, little was said. A year ago, a young woman in the congregation became engaged to Mike, a young man in Ken's unit.

On September 11, 2001, the World Trade Center was bombed and the President of the United States declared a war on terrorism, explaining the terrorist behind the tragedy as "those who hate freedom and democracy." Over the next number of months, Frank noticed that the tone of the congregational sharing time had changed dramatically. One Sunday, members of the congregation were invited to a prayer vigil for peace at the town square. Another Sunday, a member shared his repugnance for a speech made by the President. Yet another Sunday, someone shared her fear about what would happen if the terrorists won and what would have happened if Hitler had not been stopped. Pastor Frank began to dread the times of sharing knowing that he would have to address the pleas of his people in the pastoral prayer that followed sharing.

Six months later, the local Guard unit was deployed to Iraq. Mike and his fiancée came to Frank asking to be married immediately. The troops were to report to the Armory on Friday evening where they would stay until they shipped out on Sunday afternoon. On Sunday morning the Armory delivered the troops to their local congregations for worship dressed in their fatigues and they were picked up at the conclusion of the service.

The tension in worship that morning was palpable. Pastor Frank opened the sharing time by acknowledging the two members present that morning in their uniforms. He acknowledged the congregation's commitment to peace. He called the congregation to prayer and to the support of their wives, both of whom were not employed. He led in prayer asking that Ken and Mike would have a sense of God's Spirit with them as they went to Iraq.

When the service was over, Ken followed Pastor Frank out of the sanctuary and asked if he could stand with Frank and greet everyone as they left worship. Frank was surprised at what he heard out of one ear as congregants said their goodbyes to Ken. Some said, "While I don't agree with what you are doing, I will pray for you and pray that you will be safe." More members than Frank imagined said, "We are so very proud of you..."

1. What ways of knowing shape the various understandings at Cornelius Mennonite Church?
2. What needs to be modeled and demythologized in this situation?
3. What should the leadership of this congregation do in sorting out "the powers?"
4. Where is repentance needed and how do "the stories" need to be re-read in this situation?
5. How can leadership development in the congregation increase the congregation's competency in facing situations where members disagree on foundational commitments?