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# Scattered Seeds

Children of the Kingdom Sowing the Word

—Matthew 13



Photo by dreamstime.com

*My Father  
is glorified by  
this, that you  
bear much  
fruit and  
become my  
disciples.  
John 15:8*

## Joyfully following Jesus into the world

Thoughts on Christian Formation in the missional church

by Shana Peachey Boshart

Conference Minister for Christian Formation

Sunday School classes, Bible studies, youth groups, kids clubs--these are some of the ways we traditionally work at Christian formation in the congregation.

“Christian formation,” means our ongoing growth and development as disciples of Jesus Christ. The point of being a disciple is to learn to be like the teacher, so the goal of Christian formation is to become like Jesus.

As disciples of Jesus, we also adopt for ourselves Jesus’ purpose in the world: “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus told his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” As the body of Christ, the church is to be God’s missionary to the world. The congregation is to be a community of disciples who incarnate the good news of Jesus Christ in the world, for the sake of the world. (II Cor. 5:19)

These are the foundational beliefs that guide the task of Christian formation in the congregation.



## Implications for the formation of disciples of all ages

If this is our understanding of the mission of the church, what does that mean for how we do Christian formation? Here are just three things I think it means for us.

First, Jesus is our model and teacher. This means that at a very basic level, we focus on learning the stories of Jesus and knowing his teachings. His words and actions are our textbook. We read the gospels and ask ourselves: What are my instructions as a disciple of Jesus? What does Jesus model or teach in this story? What will this look like in my own life?

This requires spending time reading and studying the Bible. While we may begin with the gospels, we soon are driven to understand the Old Testament if we want to understand Jesus' teachings. Then, we are motivated to read the rest of the New Testament to learn from the early church as it began the journey of transformation into a community of mission.

In Christian education, a primary task for every age group is to read and understand the Bible. Curriculum for children and youth should include reading actual Bible stories; it is not enough for the lessons to be "based on biblical principles." The Bible can be understood as one long, coherent narrative, and this narrative gives meaning and purpose to our own lives' stories.

### Illustration #1:

## To read and understand the Bible

For several Sundays this summer, I used the worship guide that went along with the Gather 'Round curriculum when planning our worship services. We spent two Sundays on Jonah. In the children's times, we showed the kids pictures from a children's Bible and retold the story in a couple of ways. Plus, they must have been paying attention during the sermon and at other points in worship.

Whatever the influence, two of the children, ages 8 and 9, came to me a week or so later to ask if it was okay if they wrote a play about Jonah and got the rest of the children to perform it during fellowship time a few weeks later. Of course I said yes!

They roped two very patient adults into helping them, wrote a script, cast the parts, found costumes and stage props, set up chairs, rehearsed several times, and then performed the play—twice! It was wonderful...and in the spirit of Gather 'Round, right on track with the scripture text! After the first performance, the 8-year-old organizer came to me with a Bible and asked where to find Jonah so he could read it for himself.

*contributed by Susan Janzen*

Second, we learn by doing. It is not enough to read and understand. (James 1:22-25) The Anabaptist leader Hans Denck famously asserted, "No one truly knows Christ unless he follows him daily in life." When Jesus says, "follow me," obedience is implicit.

Jesus also gave explicit commands. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15: 12, 14)

It is now commonly understood in educational circles that the most effective teaching method is to provide experiences in which the students learn for themselves.

Jesus taught his disciples through a method of daily living and practicing. In Luke 10, we see Jesus send out 70 disciples with specific instructions. They were learning by doing. We, too, are formed into his disciples by obeying his instructions in daily life.

In Christian education, we provide opportunities for disciples of all ages to learn by doing. And once we have done something out of obedience, we cement the learning by offering opportunities to reflect together on what we have been doing.

How did this activity change me? What have I learned about Jesus? About being a disciple? What have I learned about community or love or obedience? Reflecting together with other disciples, especially those more mature than we, is a powerfully shaping activity.

### Illustration #2

## We learn by doing then reflecting

Tammy Lundquist knows how youth like to learn. For the past year, she has been helping the youth plan monthly service activities at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

She wanted to help the kids think about peacemaking and racism. So, after presenting background material on why racism is an obstacle to peace and how a Christian responds to racism, she sent the students to four different ethnic grocery stores.

"We had two teams that were each given ten one-dollar bills. They were instructed to spend no more than \$2.50 in each store and to purchase food new to them, then share it among the group," Tammy explains.

They visited Scandinavian, Asian, Mexican, and Somali grocery stores. They were also instructed to pay close attention to their feelings and comfort level.

After the activity, Tammy gathered the group and posed these questions: What store did you like? What food did you



enjoy? What was different from other grocery stores? Did you need things to be familiar to be comfortable? Did you have fear entering any of the stores? Did you find common ground? What surprised you about your feelings?

Student Katrina Schrock describes her experience.

“The stores we visited opened my eyes to all the different types of cultures that are right in our city. The people we met were very happy to share their stories and experiences with us.”

“The activity started with some hesitation for both students and leaders,” says Tammy, “but ended with stories of kind words exchanged, a new found strength to step out of comfort zones and some yummy new treats to share with our families.”

Third, mission drives formation and formation drives us to mission. It may be tempting to think that we do formation now in preparation for being sent out for mission at some later time. But if we learn best by doing, we also learn to do mission by doing mission. Further, doing mission forms us spiritually. With mission and formation, one does not follow the other, they happen at the same time.

If we find formation activities stultifying, it may be because we are taking the wrong approach to formation, believing that once we are “formed” we will apply ourselves to the riskier (and more interesting!) task of mission. Or perhaps we are comfortable in our Sunday School or Bible study group, inwardly relieved that no further action seems to be required. But for Christian disciples, mission is a vehicle for significant formation.

In Christian education, we do not separate formation from mission, but understand that they occur at the same time, one energizing the other. We have intuited this when we organize service projects, whether they take an hour or a week. Let’s expand this understanding and challenge ourselves to acts of mission. How is God sending us into our daily context to be catalysts of reconciliation and healing?



The Emmanuel youth group. Back row: Toffer Lundquist, Eyoiei Adeda, Katrina Schrock, and Andra Zerbe. Front row: Bereket Girma, Alicia Poplett, Rediet Girma, Katrina Poplett, and Tammy Lundquist.

The Bethesda Mennonite Church youth group in Henderson, Nebraska, was inspired to act in obedience to Jesus as a result of a mission trip. (See story on page 4.)

### “Disciples” of all ages?

I have mentioned that these ideas apply to all age groups. Sometimes we wonder about this. To what extent do we treat children (and anyone who has not yet made a faith commitment) as disciples? This question merits a much longer discussion, but in short, I believe that we can be unapologetic about including everyone in formation activities. We are the church; this is what we do: we follow Jesus. Our fondest hope for our children and others is that they would know the joy of following Jesus too. Christian formation activities can be wonderful tools for sharing this good news. As long as our approach is loving, respectful and age-appropriate, we invite all ages to participate in faith-forming activities.

### Our aim

This is the aim of Christian formation: to become like Jesus and to take on his purposes. As we are led to deeper obedience (action), we are formed and shaped more and more into the character of Jesus to care about what Jesus cared about, to respond as Jesus would, to carry out the ministry of reconciliation. (II Cor 5:18)

“God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world.” (Mennonite Church USA Vision Statement)



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## Illustration #3: Challenge ourselves to acts of mission

# Do I really need to buy this bottle of water?

That's a question the youth of Bethesda Mennonite Church in Henderson, Nebraska, are asking themselves these days. This past summer, they went on an Urban Immersion Service Retreat in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Pastor Andrea Wall liked the fact that the program included a component of bringing their learning back home. The final

"Because Jesus came to save us and we are grateful and love him, we try to become like him, therefore we look at his words in scripture and try to be like that. He says to feed my sheep, and if someone is thirsty give them a drink. We want to do that and show them that God cares," said Andrea.



The Bethesda Mennonite Church youth hold up the new water bottles they purchased after a service retreat inspired them to act on behalf of the poor.

day is spent in reflection, where the group asks themselves, "What does this mean back in our own context?"

"That was the part I was most excited about so I was preparing the kids for that along the way," shares Andrea.

One question the UISR staff asked the group was, "What struck you most?" The youth remembered some statistics they had heard about water. Every 15 seconds a child dies from an illness caused by a lack of clean drinking water. Americans spend \$100 billion a year on bottled water. Amount needed to provide clean drinking water for everyone in the world who needs it: \$30 billion.

Back home in Henderson, the group looked at the scriptures and thought about how they might make a difference.

"We decided that we would help fund a well through an organization called The Water Project. We also wanted to support MCC, so we are supporting a salary for an MCC well technician for a year."

But they didn't stop there. The group came up with several more ideas for reducing their consumption of water bottles and for inviting their congregation to join the project.

"We challenged the congregation to give a dollar to the project for every bottle of water they purchase, and we encourage them to reduce their consumption of bottled water by purchasing a water bottle they can carry around with them. A portion of the money they pay for the water bottle will go toward the project.

"We're going to do the same thing with our coffee spot. To help reduce the consumption of cups, we're going to offer a mug people can buy and bring every Sunday."

Money from the sale of the mugs also goes toward the project.

The youth even plan to get the children of the congregation involved. There will be a "wishing well" in the front of the sanctuary, and during the offering time children will be encouraged to put loose change in it for the well project.

Andrea has seen connections between this mission project and the Christian formation of the youth. One of the youth has really blossomed as a leader through the project. Plus, says Andrea, "I think the kids have really enjoyed the practical side. It gives them something hands-on to do where they can feel they are passing on God's love. It has given them a chance to direct something where they know they can make a difference, and they are really taking ownership in that."