

Becoming Watershed Discipleship Communities

The fifth in a series on Watershed Discipleship toddwynward@gmail.com

There's a profound environmental movement beginning to bubble up in an unlikely place: the Mennonite church.

I don't have an easy relationship with institutional Christianity. All too often, organized religion ends up supporting the warlike tendencies, ravenous greed and socioeconomic inequities that Jesus sought to liberate us from. Knowing this, I became a Mennonite fifteen years ago. Why? Well, frankly, if you're interested in participating with God's dream to make earth as heaven, Mennos are one of the best outfits going. Of course, Mennonite history and practice is fraught with human inconsistency and moral weakness and succumbing to the values of dominant culture, but the opposite is also true: for five hundred years the Mennonite tradition has taken seriously the idea of following a radical Jesus. This has led to all types of embarrassing, Empire-defying stances: civil disobedience, refusing to bear arms, intentional simplicity, forgiving murderers, befriending the poor, practicing mutual aid, and engaging deeply in global peacemaking.

And now: watershed discipleship.

An undomesticated Anabaptist

I like Mennonites most because they have a long history of developing parallel societies in the shadow of Empire. My wife and I try to do that too: we live in a yurt in the Sangre de Cristo mountains near Taos, New Mexico. My friends and I milk goats, shear sheep, plant trees, catch water and try to grow a lot of our food in the high desert. My wife and I each have more than two decades of experience as wilderness educators, river guides and camp directors. Both of us have spent more than a thousand days—three years of our lives—in open country and in wilderness, sleeping under the stars. More than once we have been called feral. Recently, a cityfied visitor from Philadelphia giggled in awe when she entered our small dwelling, and immediately started snapping photos. She simply couldn't believe we use a composting toilet and carry water to our yurt by hand in buckets, like millions of people across the world.

Before you get too impressed, let's be clear: we're pretenders. My family still has laptops and a cappuccino maker, cell phones and Netflix. We daily take our son to soccer practice in a Prius and monthly drive a hundred miles to shop at the nearest Trader Joe's. Even though we homestead in the high country, we're still entangled in Empire, as much a part of the system as anyone. Which is why organizing with other Mennonites to become Watershed Discipleship communities is so life-giving.

Did not our hearts burn within us?

Picture this: July 2013, downtown Phoenix, AZ, me at my first national Mennonite Convention. During the last hours of the week-long event, about a dozen of us gathered from across the nation, hastily organizing our own meeting on white plastic chairs in a faceless food court. We came together as Mennonites to see we could do regarding climate change. We came together as North Americans hoping to transform our policies, our perspectives and our lifestyles. We came together wanting Mennonites to repent from our culture's eco-cidal madness; we came together wanting our churches to engage in watershed discipleship, as followers of a God who loves all of creation.

What began as a hasty assembly evolved into a sacred circle. Spirit moved strongly amongst and through us. Together we listened attentively and spoke prophetically. Here we were, at an institutional gathering for an institutional church, and transformation was filling the air. No lie—I was caught up. Potential for a new reality blossomed in my cynical heart. At the end of our meeting, the dozen of us departed to our own scattered parts of the continent, yet we did not feel alone. We now held a common vision: a near future filled with congregations across North America embodying watershed discipleship, changing our society from the inside out.

What do Watershed Discipleship communities look like? We think they share at least four key traits:

- They practice **bioregional adaptation**, seeking to craft sustainable lifestyles that fit within the gifts and limits of our watersheds;
- They enact **structural mitigation**, resisting eco-cidal institutions and policies that threaten the health of our vital life systems;
- They actively support **community-based organizations and appropriate technologies** that foster healthy regional economies and provide mutual aid alternatives to dominant culture;
- They embody a **spiritual resiliency**, sharing and living a scripturally-grounded, community-based, Jesus-following, life-changing, earth-honoring, despair-erasing Christianity that is light, salt, and leaven even in the face of hopelessness

How do we get there from here? How do we, steeped in a displaced and dysfunctional culture, learn to re-place ourselves? How do we build capacity to become the Watershed Discipleship community we want to be?

Albuquerque Mennonite Church has been exploring these questions for some time now, and has come up with a response. The congregation hopes to increase its own knowledge and practice by hosting "Re-Placing Ourselves: Becoming Watershed Discipleship Communities," April 4-6, 2014, featuring speakers Ched Myers and Elaine Enns. The event also includes something a bit different: many practitioners and speakers from within the congregation are scheduled, highlighting their words and efforts as experienced watershed discipleship practitioners. Although others are invited, this event's primary intent is to build the congregation's own awareness, motivation, and capacity. Event planners have identified six core components to congregational capacity-building: 1) understanding the prophetic call to Watershed Discipleship; 2) grasping the depth of the current mess we're in; 3) finding active hope in the face of despair; 4) learning about community mobilizing efforts already underway; 5) learning about the cultural defiance and personal practices of inspiring local citizens; and 6) collaborating together to organize new initiatives and imagine new possibilities.

Me, excited? You bet. If effective, this type of community-based "teach-in" could be a model for other faith-based groups, a solid step toward becoming the transformative congregation they yearn to be. Interested? Contact morewithless@abqmennonite.org.