

Foothills Mennonite Church

MCA E3: Word and Deed

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Matt 5:14-16

Introduction

In 1974 a British missionary to India named Lesslie Newbigin returned to England after 30 thirty years. What he discovered was that the church and the society he had grown up with in England had changed. Newbigin no longer saw a relevant connection between the church and the culture. The culture had left the church behind and the church had become a religious enclave. Newbigin knew how to function as a missionary church in India but not as a Christian in England. The life of the church in India was about bringing the Good News of the gospel to people in desperate situations. It was about telling the people about Jesus. It was about planting discipling communities among believers. It was about confronting injustice. It was about advocating for human rights and change in society. Newbigin's expectation upon returning to England was to return to his Christian country and continue the work of sending missionaries out to the lost places of the world. He realized that the skills and mission that he had lived in India were now equally necessary in England. Newbigin's focus, for the rest of his life and ministry, became reimagining what it meant to be a Christian and a Church in the Western culture.

In September 2018, Mennonite Church Alberta began a process of involving our community of churches in discerning the next phase of life for the church in Alberta. I know many of you were involved in listening exercises, both in MCA and here at Foothills, in seminars and teaching on discerning God's leading, and in extensive times of prayers calling on God to lead the churches to move through some of the pain of the past toward a new and hopeful future.

Through these processes of discernment Mennonite Church Alberta developed a three-year focus to bring the church forward. As a community of churches, MCA encouraged us to consider what it means to **encounter, embrace and embody Christ in life, in community and in the world**. This is a journey that officially began in 2020.

MCA never imagined that its renewed visioning program would coincide with a global pandemic, yet we forged forward.

Year One and Two

The three-year journey relates well with realities that Newbigin discerned on his return to England, and the need for the church to be renewed in its self-understanding and its place in the world. And it begins deeper than that. It begins with a renewed understanding for us as believers. How do I understand my faith in this world? How do I nurture my relationship with God? How do we flourish as Christian communities? How, then, do we engage the world?

This is the three-year movement of discipleship and mission.

We have moved through 2020 and 2021. The focusses emphasized by MCA have been formation and belonging—on faith in Jesus and the community of Jesus' followers.

Now—2022, and we are encouraged to engage what it means for the church to be Good News in the world.

The Scriptures call for the church to be Christ’s ambassadors in the world. 2 Corinthians 5 informs the three-year MCA vision. We are those who have been made new in Christ, gathered in communities of faith and sent out as ambassadors to participate with God in reconciling the world.

The Latin American vision for this movement of God’s people is *mission integrale*, or integral mission. It is the understanding that the life of the church impacts the world to proclaim and demonstrate the Good News of the gospel. The book *Wordeed* describes integral mission this way: “Its purpose is to incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God and to witness to the love and justice revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, both on the individual and community level.” (*Wordeed*, 51)

The vision of year three for our Mennonite churches is a corporate life of **Word and Deed**. How do we live out our faith, as people and as the church, in the world?

MCA has posed the questions:

How are we being invited to pour ourselves out as the Body of Christ for the world, bringing healing and hope to a world in need?

To what is God calling us with respect to our engagement with the world?

Year Three

Christians and churches engages in acts of love, justice and protection of human dignity and life. Out of the wellspring of personal faith and shared identity comes the capacity to impact the world and draw others toward relationship with God and the church.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.”

Matthew 5 is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. To the crowd gathered around him, Jesus lays out the fundamental teaching of what the church will look like moving forward in his name. These are the ethics and lifestyle of the new community of God’s people.

“You are the light of the world.”

Light

Light is an important symbol in the Bible. We can quickly understand how, as a metaphor, light communicates so many positive things. Light brings clarity. Light contributes to growth, Light reveals. Light brings comfort and security.

The Bible says that God is light. 1 John 1:5 contrasts God as light with darkness. To belong to God is to belong to the light—all that is good and true.

The Bible says that Jesus is light. John 1 is such a significant passage in the life of the church as we seek to know and follow Jesus. We have heard it a few times recently in services. Jesus is the light of God coming among all people.

In total in the Bible, “Light is ... associated with God, his Messiah, his people, the law, the temple, Jerusalem, and the accomplishment and experience of salvation.” (WBC, 100)

And now Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.”

When Jesus says that his followers are the light of the world, he is saying that the church now represents all the light has represented in the story of God’s people. As followers of Jesus, we represent the truth of salvation that comes in and through Jesus to the world.

Think about the metaphors Jesus uses to drive home his point.

Jesus says, “You are a city on a hill.”

Immediately, the people’s imagination would have gone to Jerusalem—God’s city. Jerusalem was meant to be a beacon of light to the world. It was meant to be the place where God’s people were able to connect most deeply with God and one another. It was meant to represent the goodness and greatness of God.

Isaiah 2:3 says, “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”

Drawing on the imagery from Isaiah 2, the purpose of the city on the hill is to draw others toward the community and invite others to come. The city is visible and prominent. Drawn to the city on the hill means being drawn to the life of the city. It is an invitation to join and belong.

The church does not withdraw from the world but stands out, distinct from the world. The church represents hope in the world. The church is the place to meet God. You are the church—the city on a hill.

Jesus says, “You are a lamp on a lampstand.”

The very purpose of a lamp is to give light... anything else is foolish/absurd. To light a lamp and not take advantage of the light it produces is a waste. How many times have you gone to use a flashlight and realized that you left it on, its light unused and wasted? When we light a lamp or a flashlight the point is for the light to be seen and useful.

To be a lamp is to live in such a way that we reveal that God is present and at work in our lives and in the world. The light reveals God. The light helps to lead and guide. We point our flashlight into to darkness to help us know where we are going. A lighthouse shines to help ships make safe passage of dangerous waters. The lamp on a lamppost creates the space for us to share space together. We turn on the dining room light to allow us to fellowship together and enjoy one

another's company. We leave the porch light on so others can return home safely. Do you get the point?

You are the light of the world.

And Jesus says, "Shine your light." This is the only directive statement in this passage. Jesus says you are the light, now shine.

Celtic Christian communities invited others to discover God through an invitation to "Come and see." People were invited to come among them, see how they lived, and by the testimony of their lifestyle to see God in the midst. It is how we live that makes the biggest difference in the world (not what we believe or feel).

As we work at being a welcoming and inclusive community, will others come and see God in the way we live with one another and engage with those around us.

Returning to Isaiah 2, the implicit result of shining our light is peace and justice. Verse 4: "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Word and Deed

As light in the world, the church represents the presence and action of God to those around us. This is the nature of Word and Deed.

The church proclaims God—who God is, what God has done for the world and how God is active in the world today. We witness to the transformation that has come in Jesus. We have called this evangelism. However, our understanding of evangelism has become severely narrow. Evangelism is essential in the life of the church but must not be limited to telling people how wretched they are and how God will save them if they believe what we believe. Many Christians have tired of this idea of evangelism. Can you imagine how the targets of evangelism feel?

And the church participates with God in embodying the values of God's ways in the world. We are ambassadors of peace. We are advocates of justice. We are bringers of comfort and love. We live in ways that fosters the fruit of the Spirit in the world: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

You are the light of the world in word and deed.

Word = evangelism

First, you are the light of the world in word. Our words matter to our witness in the world.

We bear witness to the love of God in word. This is the true nature of evangelism. The word evangelism comes from the Greek for good news: εὐαγγέλιον

It means to tell the truth about reality. In our world, it's what the news used to be before it became entertainment. In the ancient world, it was most often used of heralds sent among the villages to deliver significant news, particularly the *good news* regarding the Caesar.

The revolutionary use of this term in the New Testament was to spread the news that a new Lord has come—one greater than Caesar. This is truly Good News.

Evangelism is the declaration that God is bringing transformation in the world. God is transforming lives here on earth to live in harmony with heaven-on-earth. This is the essential message of the church, then and now.

Think of the person in your family that is particularly keen to keep family stories alive. It's an important role. Once stories are lost, they are difficult to recover. When stories are lost, our identities are impacted. Our family story-tellers ensure the connection between the past, present and future.

In their book *Healing Our Broken Humanity*, Grace Kim and Graham Hill describe the church's storytelling as drawing people to a renewed vision of God's goodness: "The church remembers and tells the story of Jesus Christ." (Kim/Hill, 156)

Missional church leaders says the church is sign, witness and foretaste of heaven on earth. We witness to the world about a "peaceable, virtuous, ethical, loving, just, servant and reconciling community." (Kim/Hill, 157) We share our own relationship with God. This is our truth. We must speak it boldly.

Our responsibility is to speak words of truth.

In his *Kingdom Ethics*, David Gushee emphasizes, "We *invite*, and never *coerce*, anyone who is interested to come and join our 'city on a hill,' in which God's shalom is beginning to be experienced." (Gushee, 213)

We invite people to be a part of a community that journeys together in faith. Together we wrestle with how to know God and how to follow him faithfully.

Many in the church have made evangelism about exclusion—who's in and who's out. For Anabaptists—Mennonites—evangelism is about welcome. It is about welcoming people into a relationship with God and with others. It is an embrace. It is Good News.

"The goal of evangelism is not simply conversion but the creation of a new community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord of all aspects of life and that lives out this confession in word and deed." (Wordeed, 51)

Deed = Justice

Second, you are the light of the world in deed. Our actions matter to our witness in the world.

We need to live into a perspective of the church that sees the life and work of the church as integral to the life of our communities. The work of the church is justice, as well as evangelism—deed, as well as word.

In the Bible, salvation is always understood as both a spiritual and physical reality. Salvation is healing. Salvation is rescue. Salvation is a deed of both God and the church.

Jesus says, “shine your light.” The world needs to see the church actively caring for people, particularly the broken, the needy and the outcast. This is not about been seen for our own sake, but about people being able to see God at work in and through us. We do need to be careful of our motivation; we don’t serve others for what we might receive. Jesus warns of these types of actions later in the Sermon on the Mount. But here, Jesus is saying, “when the world sees your deeds, they see God, and they are drawn to him... Shine.”

We are going to look at biblical justice from a few different angles in May. The essential thing we need to know today is that biblical justice is central to God’s own nature. When the world sees the church embodying biblical justice, they see God.

We are committed to confronting injustice among us. The life of the church matures and is enriched when we come together to overcome internal conflicts. When we are able, for the sake of unity and peace, to pursue reconciliation, we demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit to work miracles. When the world sees the church wrestle together, rather than fracture, we reveal God at work. We want to pursue peace as a priority. We want to foster a community where conformity is not a requirement for unity and belonging.

We are committed to confronting injustice in the world. This community is demonstrating in these days what it looks like to respond to need in our world. We have been gifted with the resources to respond. Individually, we give of ourselves and demonstrate the love of God. Together, we come together and extend ourselves for the sake of others. Jesus met the felt needs of those he encountered in his ministry. He made others a priority. Not only did he meet their needs, but he treated them as human beings. He saw them... many who had rarely be acknowledged before. This is part of our engagement with injustice: to see people and affirm their humanity. When someone is hungry, we need to help them eat.

We are committed to confronting systems that cause injustice. It is insufficient to simply manage the symptoms of injustice. As ambassadors of God, we are advocates for transformation and wholistic justice. You know the saying, “Give a man a fish, he eats for a day; teach a man to fish, he eats for the rest of his life.” Well, we also have to asks questions about who owns the pond, who controls fishing rights, what are environmental impacts that effect fish habitat. Biblical justice is seeing the whole of humanity and creation returned to a place of Shalom—of Godly perfection.

Our hearts were moved when we heard the report from the crew that participated in the MDS project in Princeton. Will we allow the impact to stop at our hearts? We saw what God was doing through our friends. What is he calling us to, now? Where are the places in our lives that

we can make a difference for the sake of God and demonstrate him to the world? Princeton, Ukraine, Downtown Calgary, your job, your family, your neighbourhood?

“You are the light of the world.”

Conclusion

The church has an essential role to play in living out integral mission—Word and Deed—in the world: “Here then is Christian mission at it best: when it reaches into the places of pain and marginalization in order to form relationships, offering healing, hope and restoration. It is when it loosens the yoke of the oppressed through public engagement and promotion of living at peace with everyone that integration of faith and social action truly address the person as a child of God whose Kingdom comes.” (Wordeed, 84)

Like Lesslie Newbigin experienced on his return to England, often the relationship between the church and the world has been obscured. Jesus speaks into this time... this place... this culture... this reality... this church.

You are the light of the world... shine your light.

Throughout this year, we are encouraged to imagine and foster ways that we can live into the MCA vision of year-three of **Encountering, Embracing and Embodying Christ in Life, in Community and in the World.**

We pray that the presence and witness of the church in the world will be revitalized as we engage this vision.

Together may we live out Good News in Word and Deed.

Amen.