

A Witnessing Community:

FOCUS

One distinctive characteristic of the early Anabaptists was their missionary zeal. Unlike their Protestant and Catholic counterparts, the Anabaptists believed that the Gospel transcended national and territorial boundaries. True Christians proclaimed the Gospel to all people, in every place.

Peter Riedeman, an early Hutterite leader, used the image of light to explain the church's mission:

The church of Christ is...a lantern of righteousness, in which the light of grace is borne and held before the whole world, that its darkness... be thereby seen and made light, and that men may also learn to see and know the way of life (*An Account of our Religious Doctrine and Faith* [1542], p. 39).

The Anabaptists believed that Christ's Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) remained binding on Christ's followers. Witness, however, was costly—"people loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). Consistent, harsh persecution dampened the Anabaptist evangelistic spirit. North American Mennonites, heirs to the Anabaptist Vision, have become the "quiet in the land." We are known for our disaster service and our relief sales; the beliefs and motives behind these actions are less well known.

Sympathetic outsiders urge us to stop hoarding our treasures, but instead encourage us to share them. In a world addicted to violence, many Mennonites champion the way of peace. In a world burdened by loneliness many of us offer community. In a world without hope we offer Jesus Christ. The world is in need of these. Paul's words confront our silence:

*How are [people] to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
(Romans 10:14)*

As a pastoral leader, you have a special role to play in the witness of your congregation. You are a teacher, motivator, trainer, storyteller, connecting your people with the story of God's people. You are also a **coach**, encouraging and equipping your people to speak that story on their own. You know that your leadership has been successful when your people sing—with

Goal:

To see the church as the witnessing community.

Objectives:

1. To emphasize evangelism as central to the church.
2. To present several ways of being evangelistic.
3. To understand witnessing as having both a personal and a corporate dimension.

enthusiasm—“I **love** to tell the story of Jesus and his love.”

EXPLORE

From the beginning, God has called those who choose to follow God to be a missionary people, a witnessing people. Being present at the scene of an accident makes us a witness. The authorities may ask for our account of what we have seen and heard. We may need to testify in court. God also asks that we testify of what we have seen, heard, and experienced of God. God not only blesses us but requires something of us as well.

In Genesis, God’s blessing to Abram also carries a responsibility:

*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that **you will be a blessing...**and in you **all families of the earth shall be blessed.** (Genesis 12:2-3, emphases added)*

God’s response to human sin was to call a new people, a chosen people who would be his witnesses to a stubborn and rebellious world. This understanding was formalized with the covenant at Mt. Sinai:

*...You shall be for me a **priestly kingdom** and a holy nation... (Exodus 19:6, emphases added)*

The role of a priest is to be a mediator or bridge between God and people. The Old Israel, the children of Abraham were to be such a link. That task is now the responsibility of the New Israel, a new people, the church.

*You are a chosen race, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may **proclaim** the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9, emphases added)*

The mandate is clear: God’s people are a witnessing people. Less clear, however, is the **what**, the **how**, and the **why** of our witness. A witnessing people live in such a way that their lives speak of God: sharing with others what God is doing in their lives, and telling of God’s wonders in the world so that others may also experience God’s love and become witnesses.

THE CONTENT OF OUR WITNESS

To whom and about what do we witness? One approach to witnessing is to confront persons with a series of beliefs and rules that they can either accept or reject. A different approach—and, I suggest a biblical approach—it to approach witnessing as storytelling: speaking the mighty acts of God on behalf of His people. This has both a corporate and a personal dimension. We tell stories of what God has done for us personally and we tell stories of what God has done for our people.

A. **In the Old Testament, God’s mighty act is the Exodus.** The Exodus provides the key for understanding who God is, how God relates to God’s people, and makes gratitude the motive for obedience. Throughout the Old

Testament, writers summarize their witness of God’s mighty acts, renewals, and transformations. Here is one writer’s summary found in Deuteronomy 26:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number. There he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. The LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders. He brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” (Deuteronomy 26:5b-10a)

B. In the **New Testament** we read of the **mighty acts of the apostles**. From Acts 5, “Many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles.” Because of their witness they were persecuted and put in prison. At their release they were flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. Yet every day in the temple and at home they continued to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

C. The Martyr’s Mirror records the **mighty acts of the Anabaptists**, a people that suffered great persecution, imprisonment, and often death because they would not refrain from giving witness to what they believed. Even at their hangings, burnings, and other horrible forms of punishment and suffering they continued to witness by singing praises to God and praying for their persecutors.

1. Identify some of the mighty acts of God in this account.
2. What do these acts tell us about God? About us?
3. What might be some of the mighty acts of God’s people in your congregation?



God’s acts on behalf of the community command center stage in most of the Old Testament. Psalm 66 demonstrates how the community story can also have a personal dimension:

Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people

ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me. (Psalm 66:5-12, 16-20)



4. Identify the mighty acts of God reported.
5. Reflect on the second paragraph. Describe a time when God responded to one of your prayers.

As people reflected on God's acts, they came to understand the nature of the God they served:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable... The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made... Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. (Psalm 145:3, 8-9, 13-20)



6. What qualities of God are highlighted in this psalm?
7. Schedule a twenty to thirty minute time when you will not be interrupted. Write your own version of Psalm 145, based on your experiences with God.



In the New Testament, God's mighty act was Easter—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the defeat of death, and the promise of life, abundant and eternal. Without Easter there is no Christian faith. With Easter there is forgiveness and a fresh start for all who believe. The “mighty acts” of the apostles mentioned earlier are the direct result of God's Easter “act.”

Scholars refer to the New Testament summaries of God's acts as the *kerygma* or preaching of the church. An example of the New Testament story is Acts 10, where Peter addressed Cornelius and his household:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:34-43)

8. What aspects of Jesus' story are most important to Peter?
9. What claims does Peter make about Jesus?
10. Identify the personal and the corporate parts of Peter's sermon. (See the first paragraph under THE CONTENT OF OUR WITNESS on page 44)
11. Forgiveness is promised to "everyone who believes in him." How do you understand this requirement? (Consider that there is a difference between believing on or about and believing in.)
12. Reflect on the "resurrection power." How does this truth empower you?



THE CHARACTER OF OUR WITNESS

We must be clear about the story we share. We must also be alert to the manner in which we give our witness. The most effective witness is testimony, speaking from our own experience. People may not agree with our testimony, they may interpret events differently, but they cannot deny the reality of our experiences. Consider the testimony of John the Elder:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3, underline added)



13. We have not walked with Jesus as the Apostles did; yet we can testify to what we have seen and heard. Describe how you came to be a Christian.
14. Read “Taking the Gospel across the street in Southern California” by Tom Price (ARTICLE FIFTEEN, page 128). What are the “missional church” traits demonstrated in the Pasadena Mennonite Church? Which of them are present in your congregation?

No combination of words, however polished or persuasive, will be credible if our words are not consistent with our actions. Our actions must confirm our words. Who would believe our words about the joy of following Jesus if we are constantly complaining and arguing with those around us? Jesus promised—and cautioned—the Twelve:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. **By this** everyone will know that you are my disciples, **if you have love for one another.**”*
(John 13:34-35, emphases added)



15. How does one love as Jesus loved? Does love ever mean active protest or involvement? Give present day examples.
16. What evidences would outsiders have that your congregational members love one another? How has your “love for one another” drawn other believers to your congregation in the past year?

Testimony—telling how God has touched my life—is crucial in effective witnessing. There will also be times when we must confront people with the demands of discipleship. As we noted in the last lesson, God’s people slip away from the light. Our witness is not only to those outside the Kingdom, but to those on the inside. As leaders, you will want to have available a full range of witnessing resources:

*Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, **and** encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching* (2 Timothy 4:2, emphases added)



17. Examine the three commands in italics. Which of these three is easiest for you to do? Most difficult?
18. What, in your pastoral experience, frustrates you most quickly? What action step could you take to increase your patience?

THE CULMINATION OF OUR WITNESS

If we know what to say and how to say it, one question remains. Why do we witness? How do we know when we have been successful? In short, what is our goal?

Some would respond, “Our goal in evangelism is to save sinners.” This means confession, repentance, and accepting Jesus as their personal Savior.

Mennonites would endorse this perspective but would expand it: “Our goal in evangelism is for people to find salvation in Jesus, and to also become disciples, to choose to follow Jesus by living according to his teachings.

The basis for our understanding of evangelism is the Great Commission:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

The phrase “Go therefore” can also be translated “As you go...” This commission is not only for “missionaries” but for all Christians. Wherever we are, we invite persons to choose Jesus and to follow him in life. The sixteenth century Anabaptists insisted that all practice this command.

19. What are you doing in your congregation to “make disciples” of your members?
20. Reflect on Jesus’ promise, “I am with you always.” How does this promise empower your ministry?



CONNECT

21. What, in the Christian message, has been “good news” for you?
22. Think about people whom you view as effective witnesses for Jesus Christ. Identify what they do (or don’t do) that makes them effective.
23. Imagine that a “candid camera” would record your actions for a week. What actions or words would indicate that you are a disciple of Christ?
24. Review the faith recitals in Deuteronomy 26, Acts 10. Read “Mennonite because we say so” by Jerry Kennel (ARTICLE SIXTEEN, page 130). Schedule a time when you can write uninterrupted for an hour. Using ideas from the article and the Biblical texts, write your faith testimony. Include both your personal story of salvation and the salvation story of your people (the Mennonites)
25. God enumerates the reasons messengers are needed. Reflect on the lyrics





of the hymn, **Here I am, Lord (Hymnal# 395)**. What is the good news God wants us to share? Why?

APPLY



26. Below are several key tasks of the church. Rank them in two ways: first, by the importance they have in your congregation; second, by the importance you would like them to have in your congregation. Use 1 for the highest rank and 5 for the lowest rank

| Task | Current Importance to My Congregation | Desired Importance to My Congregation |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Worship & Proclamation | | |
| Nurture & Education | | |
| Caring for One Another | | |
| Service to Others | | |
| Evangelism & Witness | | |

27. Describe one way that your congregation has been a witness in your community in the last year.

28. Read “Community as mission,” by Lois Barrett (ARTICLE SEVENTEEN, page 133). What are the ways that your congregation is part of the missional church?

29. You are traveling by air and your flight has been delayed 90 minutes. A fellow passenger strikes up a conversation and learns that you are a minister. She tells you, “I went to church when I was a child, but I lost interest. Christianity didn’t seem to make any difference. What makes Christianity important to you?” Write your answer.

30. The church today is often seen as “irrelevant” and ineffective. Why? How can we change this?



Readings

ARTICLE FIFTEEN

“Taking the gospel across the street in Southern California,” by Tom Price, Reprinted from *The Mennonite*, May 15, 2001, pp. 4-6.

ARTICLE SIXTEEN

“Mennonite because we say so,” by Jerry Kennel, Reprinted from *The Mennonite*, July 5, 2005, pp. 8-10.

ARTICLE SEVENTEEN

“Community as Mission: The church as apostle to the world--part 3,” by Lois Barrett. Reprinted from *The Mennonite*, Nov. 3, 1998, pp. 6-7.