

“How I have experienced God or each other creating shalom (peace) on this journey”

May 21, 2017

Since this past September, our church has been in a period of transition and visioning. We've been on a journey together. In January we created five task groups and asked them to articulate the vision and logistics of how we might do and be Shalom as a church community. These task groups were: Inclusion, Vision, Operations, Contributions, and Formation-Education. We've been giving input, listening, and responding to the proposal each of the task groups has produced. Now today, after church we will meet as a congregation to discern our response to those proposals. On September 11, during Steve's first worship service with us (Steve Thomas is our transitional minister), Steve encouraged us to focus on the journey rather than simply the destination, to notice the beauty on the way. So today, we would like to focus on the beauty of our journey together. We have asked several people to share with us how they have experienced beauty on this journey; how they have experienced God or each other, us together, creating the peace of shalom on this journey.

Peter Boeve:

I remember looking up the Shalom Community Church on the internet. What stood out to me was the focus on Jesus.

I remember two particular worship services when several of you shared the struggles of your faith journey while going through significant challenges. There were tears and Kleenex for many...me included. “Wow...this is what Shalom is about, huh?”

That's not always the way deep sharing “works.”

During a summer unit of Clinical pastoral Education years ago, at the U. of M. Medical Center, I was asked to visit a woman in the Surgical Intensive Unit. She had had a bilateral amputation of both legs...above the knees. I entered the room, went to her bedside, introduced myself, and asked if I could sit down.

Her eyes stayed closed, face grimacing, her body trembling in intractable pain. She didn't answer. I said a few more things trying to initiate conversations. Nothing, but groans. I stayed seated for about another 10 minutes – silent myself, feeling total overwhelmed and inadequate. No shalom. No well-being. No peace. Only turmoil. No prayer. I fled the room.

That afternoon, I shared my short, written verbatim with the pastoral care team. I had no concluding theological analysis. And the ensuing conversation revolved around what to be and do in such suffering. We didn't get very far.

Two years ago, I interviewed at the Arbor Hospice next door to be a hospice chaplain. I wanted to be able to reflect with others – patients, their friends and families, and the chaplains – about how faith might be involved with suffering and dying. About halfway through the interview, it was clear that they were overwhelmed with their caseloads. To find time to reflect on their experiences would not be possible. They barely had time enough to deal with helping folks say goodbye, relationship matter, and working through feelings about ending life as we know it.

I wondered aloud: “But what about life after death? ...What about resurrection? ...Jesus' bodily resurrection? ...The promise of our resurrection?”

What about putting fingers in the wounded hands, his feet, his side? What about NOT recognizing him, and then, in the breaking of the bread, suddenly recognizing him? What about “touch me, and touch me not” spoken to Thomas in the upper room, and Mary at the tomb? What about his passing through locked doors, or his appearing to his followers for 40 days after his resurrection? ...Those appearances transformed many of his followers ...to the point of their *not* fearing suffering and dying?

St. Paul says that the physical BODY, is transformed into a spiritual BODY. Life is only three dimensional? Heaven here?

We live in unimaginable times: weeks with Donald Trump; the polar ice caps continue to melt. Mother Nature's life economy is being destroyed by the market economy. The human community self-destructing our source of life and well-being. For all of us to continue living like we do, we need 4-5 more planets!

It seems a good time to continue wondering what makes for shalom ...for well-being ...for something like "Heaven here" ...or (as one poet puts it) "to be kissed by God". It sure feels to me like this is a remarkable congregation to be doing just that.

And, after all, it's Eastertime. What IS important ...after all.

Deb Landis Lewis:

Jesse Kauffman:

When you're new to a church, there is so much to learn. Sure, you have the history, vision, and identity of the church as a group, but then there's all the same details for individuals and families within the church. You wonder if this is a place for you. What is this Shalom?

The excitement over being the new person often leads you to share your story several times over, but you don't always get the stories of people who have already been attending. You're not sure what all you should share, how upfront you should be about your beliefs. You can be left knowing you're welcome to participate in the church, but you don't know where you belong. Will you be a part of this Shalom?

Years have passed and you find yourself still attending the church, feeling more connected to the people you've had a chance to get to know a little better. You still haven't heard everyone's story. You've gotten bits and pieces here and there, but the picture of the church isn't complete. You realize you've begun to fill in the gaps with bits of your imagination. You begin to feel more like the people at church care about you, wanting you around and involved in different ways, but you still wonder if you really belong? Is this your Shalom?

Enter the transition process. The church as a group begins to check in with itself to see who it has become and where it believes it is headed. Now you've got a chance to hear some of the stories you've missed, discover if this group of people is who you've imagined them to be.

You begin to hear of the richness of this group of people, their individual and shared stories. You marvel at the glimpses of divinity within the story of Shalom. You add your own to the timeline and can see that for better or worse, you've become one of these people. A participant in the journey toward shalom.

You take part in the process, have lots of conversation, and find yourself pleasantly surprised. You're grateful to see more of the church's humanity. Though sometimes messy and hard, you know it's also your opportunity to see the church's divinity. Strong feelings arise. You observe people genuinely listening and holding space for others to share from their heart. You see people within the church walking alongside each other, lending a hand, despite differences. You hear the hard conversations, ones that feel like they'll decide whether or not you really belong here. You're nervous or scared but you add your own voice too. You realize the journey toward shalom can be complex and difficult.

And then you remember that shalom is more than just a destination to which you travel - it's the map that guides you, food that sustains you, and traveling companion that comforts you. You realize that to reach shalom, the people of Shalom will need to cling tightly to that hope, that promise. You remember shalom is bigger than you, its much bigger than your journey, or even bigger than the journey of this church. And it will

continue to guide us beyond this afternoon, and this transition process. May we follow, be, experience, and find shalom.

Curtis Weaverdyck:

The word SHALOM has always been complex in meaning, to my mind. This word comes from another language, and I am told that it means something like Peace, Wholeness, Well-being. The lack of a simple definition gives the word a hint of mystery, a sense of possible meanings beyond what has been defined or is expected.

I am very much aware that there are definitions of Shalom Community Church which I wanted to reinforce and which made a cohesive and comprehensible description of who we are. Those definitions turn out to not be good enough.

Our process of delving in to deep questions about the identity of our congregation has been one of opening ourselves up to the mystery that is in our midst. I find that we have gone beyond simple definitions and grappled with possible pieces of our identity that go far beyond anything that has been defined or articulated in the past. One of the most surprising elements of our discussions, both in the Task Groups and in our larger gatherings, has been a growing sense of intimacy, coming from hearing honest heart-felt sharing. There are ways of thinking that are outside of my own, but which I can relate to and value as integral to the identity of Shalom.

One of the instances that stands out in my mind is coming to a 9am meeting hour, having read the proposal to be discussed, and having some serious misgivings about the distance between my own thoughts and what I was reading. Sitting in the circle and hearing the different voices, and behind the voices the yearnings, the carefully articulated cares, and the underlying love, how could I not respond in love. Those distances that show up on paper are nothing in comparison to the truth of the complex web of connections that are the real definition of Shalom.

This word, SHALOM, that we have used as our identifier, is true in its deep and complex and mysterious sense of the goodness that surrounds us. We may have many different words to articulate our own sense of the divine, Holy Spirit, God with Us. Yet Shalom exists. A blessing.

Steve Thomas: “God is in the Tension” (rough notes)

I have witnessed in our transitional journey how God is at work in our differences. In my view from the balcony at Shalom, I observe a certain tension that others noted in last week’s discussion. It’s the tension between differing theological perspectives at the core of our congregation’s faith. It’s expressed in the theological differences between the vision and formation proposals. It’s acknowledged in Addendum A of Vision Proposal: *“Areas where there were differences... centered primarily on theological identity. There were strong desires for Anabaptist identity, and strong desires for an identity of being a place of diverse beliefs.”* And that *“Many articulated valuing both Anabaptism and diversity.”*

We have different tolerances for tension. A part of me would like to resolve the tension. But another part of me calls me to embrace the tension. In spiritual discernment, we often look for a sense of peace. While God is often in the peace, God may also be in the tension. I believe God is in this tension for something creative and good. The Welcoming Statement includes this affirmation: *“We value the creative tension... that result from sharing differences in beliefs.”* So rather than resolve the tension, I

think God is calling for us to embrace the tension; to let the tension lead to something new in Shalom's development for the next stage of its journey.

I believe God is in the tension calling for us away from an either/or to a both/and approach, holding both together. We can preserve our Anabaptist Christian identity and become more diverse.

In my report and in my teaching I have referred to Spiral Dynamics as a model for our human and social development. As we develop in this model or in faith formation, we become increasingly inclusive and universal in an ever-expanding awareness of our connection with the Divine. The common tendency in development is to cast off what was in favor of what's to be. But philosopher Ken Wilber wisely calls us to *"transcend and include."* We rise above what was before but don't cast it off. As we progress along the spiral, we can include one's heritage but with different meaning as what we believe and become evolves. Picture an expanding spiral evolving along a center point—which for me is living out Divine love in the way of Jesus.

To frame this in terms of polarity management, the tension we have is between tradition and innovation, between stability and change—what I referred to in my report last fall. Refer to the bulletin insert... In this model, we don't choose between one pole or the other, but hold both together in dynamic tension. It's like breathing: there's inbreath and there's outbreath. We don't choose one or the other; rather both are held in a dynamic relationship together. Just try to have one without the other.

For a more organic model consider the roots and branches of a tree. The vision proposal states that Shalom's heritage is Anabaptist Christian.

The formation proposal refers to Shalom *"As people rooted in a Judeo-Christian faith."* I think both imagine something more growing from these roots. Point to the oak tree we recently planted. It has roots and branches; both essential for the tree's life and growth. Polarity of roots and branches of a tree. Cut the roots from a tree and you'll kill it. Cut the branches from the tree and you'll reduce it.

Take the education/formation proposal as the roots grounded in our Judeo-Christian faith. Roots anchor a tree in the ground and draw water and nutrient from the soil. Take the vision proposal as the branches growing upward and outward. Branches connect with leaves that convert light into food for the tree, and branches provide shelter and food for others. Hold both the roots and branches together for the tree's vitality. We hold both Shalom's heritage and vision together, embracing the tension between the polarities of tradition and innovation. As a faith community, there's a dynamic tension between our formative heritage and our expanding identity. We're not to resolve by choosing this or that, but to hold them both together as something new emerges from the tension.

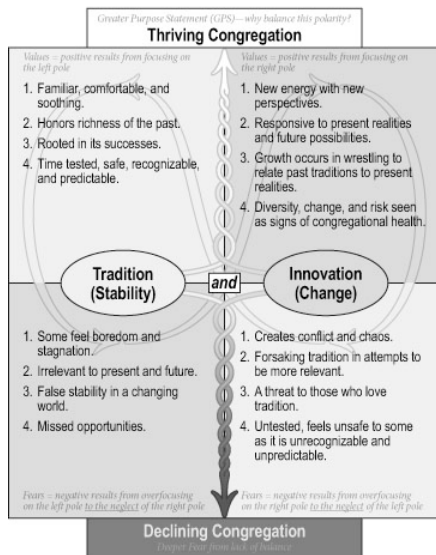
Isaiah points to God's affirmation and God's invitation: *"I am the one who formed you... And I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness..."* (Is 43.1,19).

We see in the early church a dramatic tension between strong differences on honoring heritage and expanding inclusion—a polarity of tradition and innovation. We find this described in Acts 15 when the church came together to discern what to require of Gentiles entering the faith community. I trust that we will eventually reach in our process of discussion and discernment a consensus like the Jerusalem church where we will also say, *"It seemed good to us and the Spirit..."* that we hold together both our Anabaptist Christian identity and our theological diversity. May the Spirit continue to lead us forward in our journey.

Handout: A Tension to Embrace

Issues in the church may be problems to resolve. Sometimes they are not problems, but simply tensions between polarities—i.e., interdependent pairs of truths or dynamics. Each pole has an upside and a downside. There is a flow of energy (maybe Spirit) in polarities like an infinity loop with ongoing self-correction of the polarity from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other. Eventually the upside of one pole reaches its limits, especially if overly focused to the neglect of the other pole, and goes to the downside of its pole.

If we treat polarities as a problem to solve we will likely have unnecessary conflict. If we shift our approach from a “problem to resolve” to a “tension to embrace” we can discover more creative, life-giving responses for our development. This calls for us to move from dualistic either/or to integrative both/and thinking—in order words, it’s not this OR that but this AND that. The following map of the polarity of tradition *and* innovation provides a way of framing one a dynamic tension before us in our formation and vision proposals.¹



¹ *Managing Polarities in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2010) by Roy Oswald and Barry Johnson. –ST, 2017