



EQUIPPING FOR... LEADERSHIP

Welcoming Strangers and Growing Disciples – Lessons in Congregational Renewal

Shelly Chandler

In May of 2017, Canadian Ministries hosted a church leadership event led by Stan Ott and Steve Ebling from the Vital Churches Institute. While we often see congregational renewal as a daunting process, Ott and Ebling remind us that church growth and transformation begin with the simple practice of living in relationship with others.

For this *Equipping for Leadership*, we've invited newly graduated M.Div. student Shelly Chandler to share a few of the key practices she will carry into ministry from this conference. In this reflection, Shelly blends her personal journey of faith with insights into ministry practices that help congregations welcome newcomers and grow disciples.



Centered Hearts, Soaring Vision conference participants, May 2017

Shelly's Story: Called to an Unfamiliar Place

Although I knew that God wanted me to go to church, I was terrified that first time I entered a local Presbyterian church. Other than going to Sunday school a couple of times with my cousin when I was a child, church was a foreign place. When I entered the narthex there were two people there who greeted me: a lovely woman named Nancy, and a man in black, wearing a white collar. I was so unaccustomed to the practices of the church that I didn't even know what to call the Rev. Mike. I wanted to turn around and run back up the hill to my home. Anxiousness set in and I really didn't know what I was doing walking into a church. But with their words of welcome and acts of hospitality, Nancy and the Rev. Mike made me feel comfortable. Nancy even came up to me after the service and personally invited me to stay for coffee time ... and I actually did!

Sharing our lives with others is what we were created for. And yet, we live in a society where people are celebrated for personal achievements, for “going it alone,” and not needing to rely on others. We are isolated from one another in so many ways. We have little face-to-face contact, we don’t know our neighbours, and we spend increasing amounts of time within our own four walls where there is little opportunity for encountering people who are different from us.

Scripture presents us with a different way. Living together in community – in a relationship with one another and with God – is a recurring theme in the Bible. And while we name this as one of our values, entering into the reality of this life is difficult. Each of us faces challenges. Viewing ourselves and others as Jesus would – recognizing the struggles and pain of everyday life – opens us up to welcome and serve one another.

“Every person,” Ott says, “is a story, if we bother to read it.” According to Ott, reminding ourselves to see people as Jesus sees them can transform the way we welcome others into our lives and our congregations. Developing “people eyes,” as Ott calls this practice, allows us to put ourselves aside and focus

on the needs of others. We are moved into action.

God provided us a living example of this life. Jesus came into the world and entered into relationship with his disciples. He ate with them, he travelled with them, he taught them, he laughed with them and cried with them – he shared his life with them. Following Christ’s example, we are called to share our lives with others. It starts with a simple “hello”, but it must become something so much more than that. What are some of the ways you could move beyond the “hello” and invite others into your life and Christian community?

Ways to Welcome

- Before the service or at coffee hour, talk to someone you don’t know. Ask them about themselves. If they are new to the church, introduce them to others.
- If you always sit in the same place at church, purposefully sit in a different place and make conversation with those around you.
- Make it a habit of gathering a group to go out for brunch or lunch after the service. Always invite newcomers to join you.
- Host newcomers’ gatherings regularly. For example, invite anyone who is new to a special dinner hosted by other members of the church.

Shelly’s Story: Welcomed into Discipleship

In the beginning, Nancy and the Rev. Mike were the only two people that took the time to get to know me and learn about the challenges I was facing. I felt lost and alone in those early weeks, yet God kept urging me back. Week after week, things got easier. Nancy and the Rev. Mike were warm and welcoming and took the time to get to know me, finding out about my life as a single mother of two young girls. With Nancy’s repeated encouragement, I finally brought my girls with me. And then the floodgates opened; suddenly many, many people spoke to me and welcomed me.

Throughout the conference, Stan Ott repeatedly reminded us that we have to be the people of God before we can do the work of the people of God. Those who are able to welcome people into the life of a congregation often do so from a place of deep discipleship. They are disciples who live by the three central dimensions of faith that Christ embodied: love for God (Luke 10:27), love for others (John 13:34) and commitment to the work of God in the world (Matthew 28:19-20). At the conference, Ott stressed the importance of creating the conditions in

congregations that will allow for people to grow in all three of these interconnected dimensions of discipleship.

There are several ways congregations can lay the foundations for these dimensions to flourish. In order to grow to know and love Christ, we must prioritize practices that nurture our spirit, such as regular worship services, daily devotions, Sabbath keeping, and prayer. To fulfill our calling to love others, we need to participate in community life inside and outside of the church through welcoming newcomers, befriending our neighbours, sharing meals with

friends and strangers, engaging in face-to-face groups, being generous with our time, money, and possessions, etc. To engage the world into which God sends us, we must show Christ's compassion to all we meet, bear witness to Jesus, stand up for what is right and seek out opportunities to serve.

Though it sounds straightforward, entering into other people's lives, and helping them enter into a life of discipleship, is not easy because it is a counter-cultural way of being. The framework that Ott recommends for growing disciples focuses on working with a few people at any given time. No matter how large your congregation or how wide-reaching your social circle may be, focus on the few that God has placed before you. If God has brought someone through the doors of your church or into your life, seize the opportunity to care for that person and help them navigate the road to

discipleship. What discipleship practices could you and your congregation adopt to welcome people more fully into the life of the church?

Ways to Go Deeper

- Commit to a daily spiritual practice: scripture reading, silence and solitude, Sabbath keeping, prayer.
- Create a prayer covenant with one or two other people. Agree to pray for each other every day for a set amount of time.
- Gather regularly in small groups to read scripture, pray, share life and support one another in the journey of faith. Invite newcomers to join a small group. Use Word-Share-Prayer, a free resource from The Vital Churches Institute, to stimulate reflection and discussion: www.vitalchurchesinstitute.com/pages/word-share-prayer.

Shelly's Story: Growth through Relationship

Relationship is not a foreign concept in the Christian church. It is at the heart of Christian discipleship. Yet, I've discovered that it is not something we all do well. Many people experience isolation and loneliness when first joining a church, often spending weeks sitting alone before someone truly takes the time to get to know them and invite them into the life of the congregation. If more people were like Nancy and the Rev. Mike, who responded to Christ's call to welcome the stranger, just imagine how the Christian community would grow! Thanks to Nancy and the Rev. Mike I learned how to become a disciple – how to read my Bible, how to pray, how to love my neighbour, and how to talk about my life with Christ with others.

Most churches will tell you that they want to grow. But, they don't know where to begin and feel intimidated by the process. It starts when we stop seeing evangelism and discipleship training as programs of the church. It should be our way of life as Christians. Jesus did not say, "Some of you, go and make disciples of all nations..." No, Jesus, speaking to his eleven remaining disciples commanded them *all* to "go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. 28:19). Each of the eleven believed themselves to be sent, and, as a result, many more were touched by the Gospel and also came to see themselves as *sent* people. We need to re-engage the mindset that each and every Christian has not only been *called* to faith, but also *sent* out to serve Christ in our communities, our workplaces and our places of recreation.

This seems daunting, and quite frankly frightening, but in reality it is something we all have the capacity to do. Read Acts 2:42-47 and you will see that relationship – sharing life together – was at the heart of community life for the early Church. Every day, the early believers met together to eat, learn, worship, give thanks and give to those in need. And, "the Lord added to their number daily..." (Acts 2:47). *Relationship* is the key to success in growing discipleship in ourselves and others. We need to show up and be present in people's lives, embody and offer Christ's love and compassion, and stand up and work for justice alongside those impacted by oppression, prejudice and inequality.

Stan Ott and Steve Ebling have created three steps out of Christ's missional mandate to engage in discipling relationships with others:

- **Show up** (compassion) – We are fully present in people’s lives in moments of celebration and sorrow and offer the compassion of our Lord to those who are ill, downtrodden, and in need (see Matt. 25:35).
- **Speak up** (evangelism; witness) – We are firmly grounded in our faith and seek to introduce others to the reality of God and to following the person of Jesus (see Matt. 28:18-20).
- **Stand up** (justice) – We recognize our interdependence and uphold that which is right against the realities of injustice (see Matt. 21:12-14).

How can you show up, speak up and stand up in the lives of others?

Ways to Grow

- Hold a Bible study or develop a sermon series based on the three Bible passages mentioned in the missional mandate. Encourage congregation members to reflect on how they can show up, speak up and stand up.
- Spend time with each other outside of the church. Have coffee or drinks together in a local restaurant. Host your small group gathering in a local park or community garden. Go for walks and hikes together. Invite each other to parties and celebrations. Be sure to include newcomers.
- Is there someone in your congregation or community that is struggling or not well? Commit to connecting with that person regularly (writing letters, weekly phone calls, uplifting text messages, etc.).

The Halverson Benediction:

Wherever you go, God is sending you; wherever you are, God has put you there, God has a purpose in your being there. Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in His grace and love and power. – Richard C. Halverson

At the end of the conference, Ott introduced us to the Halverston Benediction – a blessing that reminds believers, as we go out into the world, that God is with us wherever we are. Recognizing that we are a *sent* people means being awake to God’s presence and open to fulfilling God’s purpose in our daily lives. No matter where we are, God can work through us.

That day when I first walked through those church doors, Nancy and the Rev. Mike could not have known that I would eventually respond to a call to ministry. Yet, they allowed the Holy Spirit to work through them by welcoming me and accompanying

me as I tentatively stepped on the road to discipleship. There are many people out there waiting to receive the welcome that I received – people that God has prepared for us to love, care for, and invite into the life of Christ. Many of them may never walk through the doors of a church. We are called to grow together in Christian community, but also called to go out into the world as disciples and disciple-makers in every sphere of our lives.

Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21). Let us live as sent people, believing in Christ’s love and power, and eager to fulfill God’s mission in this world.

We are extremely grateful for the engaged and insightful leadership of Stanley Ott and Steve Ebling from Vital Churches Institute / Leading Moments LLC at this conference. Many of the ideas presented in this *Equipping for Leadership* have come from their presentations and conference handouts. For more information about The Vital Church Institute’s work on congregational vitality, transformation, missional endeavor and leadership, please visit: www.vitalchurchesinstitute.com. Or, pick up Stanley Ott’s book *The Twelve Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Church* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from you!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of leadership and congregational vitality. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271.