

Faith Friends

A catechism story

Gwen Gustafson-Zook

I magine a congregation made up—in about equal proportions—of middle income ethnic Mennonites, lower income folks from various theological traditions, and college students and young adults, most of whom grew up in Mennonite homes. In this congregation folks who have graduated from seminary sit side by side with folks who quit school after eighth grade. Some people have read the Bible all the way through more times than they can tell you, and some have never read a whole chapter of any book. Some know all the acronyms of the Mennonite world, and others mistake MMN¹ for M&Ms. There are those whose vast experience dealing with social systems should qualify them for some kind of degree, and those who know nothing of AFDC,² Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC,³ Section 8 housing assistance, and SSI.⁴

Faith Mennonite Church is such a congregation. The worlds of the people who attend this congregation are very different. The fact that they are church together is a wonder-filled and beautiful thing. And this diverse mix makes for some interesting challenges.

Faith Friends have bridged cultural differences. More important, the approach has allowed seekers to be met where they are, nurtured in their life and faith, and empowered to affirm their commitment to Jesus and to the church.

Faith is a small congregation. But to look at its membership rolls, one would think it is much smaller than it really is. Membership is currently around thirty-five. Average attendance is around seventy. One reason for the discrepancy between membership and attendance has to do with difficulty we have had in designing membership classes appropriate to the mix of people who attend Faith. First is the logistical problem of finding

a time when everyone interested can meet. Scheduling is complicated by transportation problems, lack of telephones,

erratic work schedules, and the crises that accompany poverty. Second, while some find reading a book about Anabaptist history stimulating, others experience reading requirements as a barrier to membership. And there are issues of group process: while some find engaging in group discussion enjoyable and thought-provoking, others experience the same group as intimidating, threatening, or boring. So how can a congregation like Faith help prepare people for membership?

Six months ago, with a growing list of people wanting to explore membership at Faith, the congregation's leaders decided to take a step away from the traditional membership class. We call our new approach Faith Friends. Each person who wants to prepare for membership is assigned a partner—an elder or another member of the congregation. Partners serve as spiritual friends—Faith Friends—to help those seeking membership prepare to join the church, and then to walk with them through the first year of membership. Faith Friends agree to get together as often and as long as they need to in order to process five areas related to our life as followers of Jesus and participants in the church.

Salvation and the work of Jesus. The first area invites the Faith Friends to ask the question “What difference does Jesus make?” They talk about who Jesus was historically and who Jesus is in the present. Faith Friends are encouraged to share from their experience of meeting Jesus and of growing in awareness of Jesus' presence in their lives. Bible study together can be meaningful at this stage in the exploration. For those not inclined to read, parts of the video series *Turning toward Jesus* can help raise questions and generate meaningful discussion.⁵

Anabaptist history. The second area asks Faith Friends to pool their knowledge of Anabaptist history. They explore early Anabaptists' commitment to following Christ in life, their practice of believers baptism, their interest in recovering early church models for their life together, and their emphasis on holding fast to Jesus' teachings—including those on nonviolence. All Faith Friends are encouraged to take a trip through Menno-Hof, a Mennonite Anabaptist interpretive center in Shipshewana, Indiana, and to discuss that experience together. The movie *The Radicals* can also serve as a beginning point for conversation and for understanding parts of the early Anabaptist movement.

Mennonites today. From Anabaptist history, Faith Friends move naturally to the third topic for discussion: Mennonites today. They discuss the central tenets of Mennonite faith, perhaps using *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, or the youth guide to the confession. They also talk about current realities in the Mennonite world. *The Mennonite* and *Mennonite Weekly Review* are good sources of such information. Friends may also discuss how the Mennonite Church in our area is structured. At a minimum, they look at how our church body relates to our conferences and to the broader church. Some find the video *Our Family Can Be Your Family* helpful.⁶

Daily Christian living. The fourth area for discussion has to do with daily Christian living. Faith Friends are invited to entertain the question, “What does it mean for me to live as a follower of Jesus?” Faith Friends are asked to discuss how they nurture their relationship with God, how they tend to the inward journey. They are also asked to discuss how they express their faith in their daily life, how they tend to the outward journey. Faith Friends may choose to explore spiritual disciplines together. They may work together on projects in the church or local community. They may prepare soup or wash dishes for our weekly congregational meal. Working side by side, they get to know each other better and express their faith through service to the community.

Familiarity with the Faith congregation. Finally we ask that friends talk together about our congregation. Some may choose to attend our annual meeting on “Who we are at Faith.” There we share stories of our history and explain where the congregation has come from. We also talk about diversity: because we are convinced that our diversity is a gift from God, we are committed to finding ways to hear each person’s voice, to overcoming the barriers that separate us, and to honoring each person as a child of God irrespective of abilities and disabilities.

When both partners feel that their discussions are complete, a pastor works with them to arrange a time for the candidate to join the church. On these occasions, Faith Friends stand before the worshipping community together. Mentors give testimony to the faith of candidates for membership. Then candidates tell us a bit about their faith journey. The pastor asks candidates the questions from the *Minister’s Manual* for situations in which simple wording

is required: Do you believe that Jesus loves you? Do you believe that Jesus forgives you of all your sins? Do you love Jesus and want to live by his teachings? Do you want to be a member of this church?⁷

We recognize that this preparation is not exhaustive. But it gives us a place to start. The process requires ample trust. It also provides an opportunity for those who have been members longer to revisit their own faith commitments and to grow by interacting with those whose life and faith experiences may be significantly different from their own.

Has it worked? Since we initiated this process six months ago, we have welcomed into membership an average of one person a month. We consistently receive requests for a Faith Friend from folks who have participated in the life of the congregation for a while but who have not yet joined the church. Those who have served as Faith Friends have volunteered to do it again. Faith Friends have bridged generational, economic, and educational differences. Most important, the approach has allowed those seeking membership to be met where they are, nurtured in their life and faith, and empowered to take the next step of publicly affirming their commitment to Jesus and to the body of believers at Faith. And that has been very good.

Notes

¹ Mennonite Mission Network.

² Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

³ Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

⁴ Supplemental Security Income disability programs.

⁵ *Turning toward Jesus*, available from Mennonite Media, is a video curriculum for new and growing believers, developed out of research conducted among pastors who have taught such classes in urban settings. The four-video series includes three sections and sixteen video-based lessons and personal testimonies. The boxed set is accompanied by a 123-page leader's book and reproducible student sheets.

⁶ *Our Family Can Be Your Family: Mennonites and What We Believe* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Mennonite Board of Missions Media Ministries, 1989).

⁷ John D. Rempel, *Minister's Manual* (Newton, Kan.; Winnipeg, Man.: Scottsdale, Pa.; Waterloo, Ont.: Faith & Life Pr.; Herald Pr., 1998), 52.

About the author

Gwen Gustafson-Zook makes her home in Goshen, Indiana, with her husband, Les, and her children, Si and Sadie. Pastoring, parenting, and making music give her energy and meaning in life.