

Distilled as new wine

Worship in a congregation of refugees and immigrants

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How can our ever-changing community of faith worship cross-culturally in a way that is faithful to our holy God of love? When our backgrounds—levels of formal education, life experiences, and political realities—are very diverse, can we find unity of purpose and spirit through our common worship?

We gather as those whose lives have been crushed

Toronto Mennonite New Life Church (TMNLC) is a small Spanish-speaking Anabaptist congregation that is part of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. On most Sundays, eight or ten different nationalities are represented when we gather for worship. Most of us are Latin American refugees and immigrants. Civil wars and

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strife have raged across Central and South America, and the superpowers of the past and the empire of the present have ruled us with an iron grip. Some who have gotten caught up in and been victims of these struggles have come to Toronto seeking a new home in a land where they can start again.

Ours is a transient community of individuals and families torn by the tensions and paradoxes that are the aftermath of refugee experience as it confronts present realities of limitation and deprivation. Havoc exists at the heart of family life, and instability leaves people fragile and broken. Grief is part of daily life. Those in the older generation cannot let go of what they have lost, and youth want to forget where they came from and embrace the new culture, to fit in and belong somewhere—if only to a gang.

Households that had been dominated by the father are suddenly ripped apart by a culture that grants all members of the

family the right to be and do as they wish. The older generation's norms derive from what anthropologist Edward Hall refers to as a *high-context* culture, which is relational, collectivist, intuitive, and contemplative. The younger generation is taking its cues from the dominant *low-context* Canadian society, which tends to be logical, linear, individualistic, and action-oriented. Adolescents take over in their families and anarchy ensues. Fragmentation and loss of identity make for fearful hearts and crushed spirits.

In the midst of this fear, in the face of a struggle with unknown powers that are sucking people down into depression or enticing them with supposed freedoms, we at TMNLC offer a variety of services. Through the church, people are invited into a space for exploring faith in God and God's call to become part of a new community. As the presence of God grows in our hearts, we become a fellowship, a new body of believers who are learning to listen to the Lord. This communion with God and our fellow pilgrims is what we read about in 1 Peter 2:10: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." We believe and proclaim the gospel of peace and try to sow the seeds of life of the Prince of Peace in the hearts of those who are drawn near.

Every Sunday the congregation is different. We never know who will be able to attend. Newcomers have very little security. Permanent work is hard to find. Opportunities to earn money are sometimes available only on weekends. Families have to move to surrounding towns and cities, because life in Toronto is expensive. Some who have participated in our circle for several months or even years are deported to their countries of origin.

What constitutes meaningful worship for this constantly changing fellowship? Can we embrace the various wandering souls in their brokenness, in their varied experiences and needs? Is there a common foundation on which we can build? Can our circle be the winepress that holds us and unites us and draws the best wine from us? We are finding out that the experience of building community is like placing ourselves in a winepress; it contains our crushed lives and brings us close to one another as we go through the process of being transformed together into new wine. As we let go of our pain and brokenness, we are distilled so the essence of God's life in us can emerge.

Scripture reveals to us a God of nomads and refugees

To address the needs of refugees and immigrants, we have developed two worship services, one on Sunday morning and the other on Wednesday evening. They are spaces in time, offering worship and pastoral care for a journey of constant invitation to dwell in the security of the One our scriptures reveal to be the God of pilgrims, desert nomads, refugees, and outcasts. These services have different approaches but many of the same elements. Some people can only come to one of the two services every week; as a result they sometimes participate for months or years and never meet those who participate in the other service. Other brothers and sisters come to one and then another worship time, depending on their other commitments, and they do not find the services repetitious, because the approaches are different.

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The main difference between Sunday worship and Wednesday worship is in the use of scripture. Sunday mornings we follow the Revised Common Lectionary. These ecumenically chosen readings provide a framework for worship and praise around a theme which is the basis for an exposition of the Word and for our communal prayer time. For people who have never participated in a

church service, and for those who come from different traditions, discovering the basis of our faith is a unifying experience. Through the scriptures, the Spirit continues to reveal to our hearts who God is and how God is at work in the world.

Our Wednesday worship is organized around systematic study of a book selected from the Bible. At present we are studying the Acts of the Apostles, having just finished the Gospel of Luke.

The Old Testament uses the image of the vine as a metaphor for the people of God. In the New Testament, Jesus calls himself the vine, and his people are the branches that produce fruit if we abide in him. The metaphor is expanded into the trampling of the grapes in the winepress. Jesus endured being crushed for us. This image becomes a balm for us in our broken lives, as we identify with the experience of being crushed. Scripture draws us close when we discover that from beginning to end it illuminates and

describes our experience of suffering. Here is the foundation for community building: the Spirit revealing God's nature and we seeing ourselves mirrored in this revelation.

We pour our grief into the cup of Christ's suffering

In both services, we offer the Eucharist (thanksgiving service) once a month and on special occasions. At present, we serve communion on the first Sunday of the month and the third Wednesday. The Eucharist is the proclamation of the basis of our faith, the pathway to God left to us by Christ himself. Evangelism at its best happens through this remembrance proclamation.

We partake of this meal of the living Christ himself as the supreme food from heaven for our earthly journey. Like God's people who were fed manna in the wilderness, we are invited into a nourishing relationship through eating the bread that is different from all foods because it comes from above. The more we are fed by this experience of the mystery of God's presence as we partake, the more the presence of the eternal is revealed to us, so that our faith grows and unfolds in deeper communion and strength for the journey through the wilderness of unknowing.

As we are called to participate in this meal, our worship reaches into the timelessness of eternity. We are then set free to see God breaking through into the present. As we are drawn into God's eternal present, we become increasingly aware of God's intervention in the world of now, in our behalf. Before the foundations of the world were laid, God preordained that the Lamb of God would be slain for us so we could be clothed in the garments of Christ. God provides the robes of righteousness through the living Word of redemption, to replace our own garments of inadequate covering.

It is in participating in the Eucharist that we are united in a new bond and become bloodbrothers and bloodsisters. Through the body and blood of Christ, we become a worshiping community. We are no longer strangers but family, with God as our father and Jesus as our brother. Suffering "plants the flag of truth" in our hearts, as C. S. Lewis said. Gathered in this newfound place of assurance and meaning, we pour our pain, tragedy, and grief into the cup of Christ's suffering. As we surrender our suffering to him, he invites us to drink of his suffering for us. We then participate in

drinking the cup of salvation, God's communion. We find great comfort in the truth of meaning in suffering beyond our ability to comprehend.

As we are nurtured and filled, we desire to become channels of this new life for others. The experience of having been crushed makes us vulnerable and able to identify with other vulnerable ones. It is only when we pass on the blessing we have received that we continue to be filled. Our congregation has come to see Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams, to mention but two entities, as meaningful arms for extending the blessing. It is important to keep before us the many who are still in situations like those from which we have been healed and are being healed. The practice of our faith in service to others has meant getting involved in fundraising and participating in a

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variety of needs such as disaster relief. One member of our congregation represents us on the board of Lazarus Rising, a Mennonite initiative that employs a street chaplain to work with homeless people in Toronto.

The Eucharist becomes the sustaining food and drink that brings true meaning to our past and present experience of being crushed grapes that are now becoming holy wine.

Singing articulates our gratitude and longing to belong

Our songs of praise and adoration are a visible, communal, musical expression of the gratitude in our hearts. The experience of singing together binds us in an offering of mutuality as we join in voicing the same words. The poetic forms carry a message about our intimate relationship to our Lord.

The hymns and songs vary in their style and content. An open time for requesting songs or hymns gives room for personal preferences. And leaders also select classical, traditional, and folkloric hymns and songs in accordance with the theme of the scripture texts. The instrumentalists practice these in advance. Guitars are used regularly, along with other percussion instruments: tambourines, maracas, drums. We prefer this accompaniment as reminis-

cent of campfires, spaces of community respite, and oases of the past. Piano accompaniment is sometimes used as well.

The whole of the worship team strives to prepare a meaningful sequence of hymns and songs that include children and adults in expressions of joy, reflection, adoration, praise, and reverence. Sometimes we invite corporate dance with children and adults. The purpose is to guide us into a time of reflection and openness to the message of the Word. As we are caught up, our individual voices become one, and we find ourselves receptive and open.

One of the hymns, “You called me, Lord my God,” from the Honduran Anabaptist community of faith, has become very meaningful to us is:

*You called me, Lord my God,
my hands are ready now
to build with you, O God,
a fellowship of faith.*

*No angels can perform
the task given to transform
a world in pain and grief
to wholeness, joy, and peace.
But God chose human hands
his mandate to fulfill.
Lord, help me in this work,
to do your holy will.*

*Blessed are the faithful ones,
those who strive for love and peace,
proclaiming to all justice
while living liberty.*

This song recognizes our human condition, a personal call from God to be involved in building a new community with others, and a continued challenge to live in a new freedom. This liberty restores us to practice justice without ignoring the injustices, as we build a community of people of peace.

The refrain of another favourite hymn, from the Paraguayan Anabaptist community, affirms that “God is calling forth a people

his true Israel to be. I belong to God's own people by his power and grace to be." The second stanza reminds us,

*God had said in Jeremiah
thirty-one, verse thirty-three:
Very soon a day is coming,
a new covenant there'll be.
I will write my laws within them,
in their mind and in their heart:
then they'll always be my people,
I'll forever be their God.*

This sampling articulates our longing to belong. God is the initiator and the enabler who desires to grant us what we covet: to be brought into a new community, to be the new wine of meaning and healing that embraces the past and transforms it.

In prayer we seek God

The fourth and final element of our worship, communal prayer, incorporates abundant thanksgiving, petitions, intercession, and praise. The methods of prayer are varied. Sometimes the leader responds to the requests or expressions of thanksgiving with the phrase "For this we pray to the Lord," which is followed by "Lord, hear our prayer." Other times, people rise and pray spontaneously. Sometimes someone may be asked to pray for another, perhaps because the intercessor has lived through a similar experience and can pray with great empathy for the one in need of prayer. On Wednesdays we often give opportunity for everyone who is present to pray aloud for the requests that are brought to the community.

Every two months, we incorporate a healing service into our Wednesday service. Prayers for healing of body, mind, and spirit are followed by anointing with oil and communion. On these occasions, each person who requests prayer is prayed for in private space, one on one, with full confidentiality, by someone asked in advance to be available to offer such prayers. We have often held these services with Toronto United Mennonite Church and had people pray in different languages. A physician joins us for these services to pray for her patients in great need.

These services are deeply moving and are requested by the congregants. Occasionally we have also had prayer vigils for specific needs to seek God more intensely. This practice, combined with fasting, is especially needed when someone brings a request for a prayer of liberation.

Sometimes we receive people who do not speak Spanish, and several members of the congregation who are good at simultaneous translation into English can step in to translate during the service. We welcome these visits and the opportunity to interact with visitors and friends of the participants, who are themselves exploring faith. We thank God for opportunities to witness as best we can and to discover how others are seeking the Holy One. In God's power and strength, we try to be faithful in what we do and say. The greeting of peace is our final embrace with our brothers and sisters, as we face the mission that each of us returns to.

Sharing a meal strengthens us for the journey

Every Sunday morning we eat a simple meal together. In a sense, our sharing bread is a continuation of our worship. Each Sunday a different family is responsible for preparing and serving the meal. On Wednesdays the communal meal is eaten as people come in from work before the service. These times of sharing our food and having fellowship are community-building experiences through which we get to know one another better. Both physical and spiritual bread of life strengthen us for the daily journey.

We are slowly becoming "poured-out wine" for our God, as Oswald Chambers writes. When I first read this phrase, I had not experienced what Chambers meant. I could understand the concept in my head, but it was not in my experience. Now, in a closer walk with God, I am just beginning to understand how we arrive at the willingness to become poured-out wine. Daily we are crushed and yet not defeated. Daily we offer to God the blood of our lives that is being transformed into new wine: the best wine from the winepress of trodden grapes. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

About the author

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