

# CANADIAN MENNONITE

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GOD AT WORK IN THE WORLD FEATURE

# Watershed discipleship

*As followers of Jesus, what are we doing today that is transformative and earth-honouring?*

BY TODD WYNWARD  
FOR MEETINGHOUSE



*We're heading into transition times, my friends, an unknown wilderness for which there are no maps, only sketches.*

**W**hat does a transformative, earth-honouring Christianity look like at ground level and lived out in daily action? Reforms of personal habits—such as recycling, eating locally and shopping responsibly—are important steps. But we'll need to embody a more vibrant Christian environmental ethic if we are to become the people God yearns for us to be, and to address the overwhelming ecological crisis facing us today. We'll need to do something wild and take on the yoke of watershed discipleship.

Watershed discipleship? It's an intriguing, provocative term that blends two domains rarely joined in our imaginations: one scientific, the other religious. Yet it's this kind of paradigm—both data-driven and deeply spiritual, both ancient and new—that Jesus followers will need to adopt in the coming decades if we are to play any significant role in our planet's healing.

What is watershed discipleship? Activist and theologian Ched Myers gives the term two meanings, and I've added a third. In a nutshell, watershed discipleship means:

- **BEING DISCIPLES** during this watershed moment. Interlocking and immediate crises of climate change, diminishing resources and widening ecological degradation compel us to make environmental justice and sustainability integral to everything we do as disciples of Jesus, asserts Myers.
- **BEING DISCIPLES** within our watersheds. Myers suggests that followers of Jesus today must be people of specific places, who root their prayers and practices in actual watersheds of care.
- **BEING DISCIPLES** of our watersheds. It is the "re-placed" identity we as a species must rediscover if we are to unshackle ourselves from the ecocidal, "dis-placed" path of empire. We need to go to school on our surroundings, as the ancients did, and learn core life truths from our own home places. As followers of Jesus, we need to treat our region as rabbi and teacher as well.

MENNOPIX IMAGES BY ROSS W. MUIR



*God's gifts of clean water, pure air and good soil are in the balance; our industrial society is damaging them at a horrific pace.*

## Your way is my way

My friend Stephanie came by yesterday to plug in her electric car. She once lived next door to us and we shared a washing machine, but now that we live 32 kilometres apart we've become her way station. She can do errands and bring her kid to gymnastics, and then visit with us and top off her battery in case it's a bit low for the return trip home.

Out here in our little mountain town, electric cars are still oddities. Convenient charging stations and smooth level roads are rare or nonexistent. But Stephanie's household and mine are partners striving for a better kind of life together, so we get creative. When she arrives, I drag her 220-volt extension cord through my house and plug it into the outlet for our clothes dryer, which we rarely use due to the abundance of Taos, N.M., sun that strikes our backyard clothesline.

This time when she visited we updated each other on our latest findings: she'd discovered a farm in our region that sold flour from wheat it had grown and ground, and I told her about the barley I'd

planted this winter so that we could provide our own fodder to our milk goats, instead of importing so much hay from farther away.

Stephanie's household and mine are on a journey of watershed living together. It's slow and we stumble, but we help one another on the path. Inspired by the ancient biblical example of Ruth, we're beginning to say your way is my way. We're making a few steps on the path of energy descent and community resilience, and learning to live a bit more within our niche as citizens of our watershed.

## Walking the watershed way

We're not journeying alone, either. Earlier this year, I was licensed by Mennonites in New Mexico and Colorado to be an educator and capacity-builder for watershed discipleship in the way of Jesus. What does that mean? I'm not sure, exactly, but I mean to find out. My first step will be to visit with existing congregations and groups in the larger region to find out what they are already doing and highlight some of their place-based practices they

might want to share with others.

Next, I want to encourage the communities in our Mountain States region to enter into a 10-year exploration with us, an invitation to life-change that we're calling "Walk the Watershed Way." How can we each—in our own context—free ourselves from harmful lifeways and transition into a better future together by altering habits, innovating systems and living lighter on the earth?

We're living into this question in 2015 by initiating a decade-long period of shared exploration, initiating and observing significant change in our own lives and communities. Each year, participating communities will craft an annual reflection and then share it with other communities, describing the best practices, struggles, questions and surprises that emerged during the year. Peer communities will help develop measurable next steps and guiding questions, and together we'll head into the next cycle.

Why did we choose 10 years? Three reasons:

- **IT'S A** timeframe that encourages continued attention and accountability. Our earth is going to undergo significant change in the next 10 years.
- **IT GIVES** a sense of practical urgency dosed with a healthy forgiveness. It makes us plan, prioritize and prepare without feeling defeated. The kind of structural changes we need to make—in areas such as food sourcing, housing, energy, transport, community economics—are not going to happen overnight, or even in a year.
- **2025 MARKS** the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism. Five centuries ago, a little bit after Martin Luther tacked his protests on the door of the Catholic Church, the forefathers of the Mennonites and Amish broke the law and scandalized Catholicism by baptizing one another and forgiving one another's sins, without needing professional priests to do it for them. Five hundred years after these transformative actions, it seems fitting to have a reckoning, and ask: As followers of Jesus, what are we doing today that is transformative and earth-honouring?

### Choosing your own path

Where will this exploration of the Watershed Way lead our faith communities over the next decade? I'm guessing that no two communities will follow the same path. For groups located in dense urban areas, walking the Watershed Way may turn both prophetic and political, such as what is happening in Detroit, where some faith communities are resisting powerful interests that willingly accept unpaid water bills by corporations but turn off the taps of the poor. Others might enter into a bioregional food covenant like Stephanie and I are doing here in Taos, and see how we can adapt to what is available in our area.

I am a Mennonite, an environmentalist and an unapologetic follower of Jesus. But where I live in northern New Mexico, the Watershed Way is practised more deeply by other traditions. I'll be joining an ancient river, not creating something new. Over the next decade, I'll be learning from my indigenous neighbours at Taos Pueblo about how they have been able to walk the Watershed Way in this bioregion for thousands of years; I'll be learning from traditional Hispanic farmers and ranchers about how they have been practising the Watershed Way here these past five centuries. I'm guessing that where you live you have mentors and guides, too.

Watershed living is my path of earth-honouring, Jesus-following discipleship. For me, as a "half-done" Christian, it is not an intellectual exercise; it is experiential and transformational, a learning-by-doing that results in liberated lifeways and systemic change.

Is this path for you? That's for you to decide. God's gifts of clean water, pure air and good soil are in the balance; our industrial society is damaging them at a horrific pace. How can we half-done Christians change our ways and become the people God yearns for us to be? Whatever path you choose in these transition times, I believe that it must be both personal and political, social and spiritual, individual and communal.

What will it be for you, in your place, in your situation? Perhaps you'll encourage your church to "go green" with solar

panels and encourage your electric company to provide cleaner energy. Perhaps you'll harvest roof rainwater and advocate for clean water laws. Maybe you'll get a few folks to commit to a bicycle-based lifestyle and fight against fracking. Or maybe you'll grow more of your own food and support local food hubs connecting producers to consumers, and help low-income people get healthy, fresh food. Maybe you'll travel into the woods for weeks at a time, and discover you need a lot less from industrial society than you thought.

We're heading into transition times, my friends, an unknown wilderness for which there are no maps, only sketches. God is doing something new and the Spirit is troubling the waters. As Ched Myers observes, whenever the Holy Spirit is poured out in human history, traditions are disturbed and institutions disrupted, because our untamed God is not a domesticated

deity, but the One who liberates us from our enslaved condition. ✂



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*new book, Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God, was published this fall by Herald Press. More of his writings and doings can be found at [leavenrising.com](http://leavenrising.com). For a companion article on this topic, visit [canadianmennonite.org/displaced-and-denatured](http://canadianmennonite.org/displaced-and-denatured).*



*Meetinghouse is an affiliation of Mennonite and Brethren publications in Canada and the U.S.*

*How can we each—in our own context—free ourselves from harmful lifeways and transition into a better future together by altering habits, innovating systems and living lighter on the earth?*

### For discussion

1. What is your closest river? How large is its watershed? How does the river benefit your community? Is the health of the river important to your community? How does your municipality work at keeping the water clean and safe?
2. Todd Wynward assumes that there is an "overwhelming ecological crisis facing us today." Where do you see that crisis in your community? Who are the people in your congregation who believe that working at healing the planet is imperative for Jesus' disciples?
3. How important is it for Christians to work at reducing their consumption of non-renewable resources? Have we been guilty of regarding creation as a commodity, rather than as a gift from God? Do you agree with Wynward that we should "make environmental justice and sustainability integral to everything we do as disciples of Jesus"?
4. How has your congregation been working at honouring the earth? Have you personally tried to change your habits to live lighter on the earth? Is "going green" gaining momentum in your watershed?

—BY BARB DRAPER

### VIEWPOINTS

### Readers write

*We welcome your comments and publish most letters from subscribers. Letters, to be kept to 300 words or less, are the opinion of the writer only and are not to be taken as endorsed by this magazine or the church. Please address issues rather than individuals; personal attacks will not appear in print or online. In light of the many recent letters on the topic of sexuality, we will edit any letter on this topic to a paragraph and post the rest online at [www.canadianmennonite.org](http://www.canadianmennonite.org). All letters are edited for length, style and adherence to editorial guidelines. Send them to [letters@canadianmennonite.org](mailto:letters@canadianmennonite.org) and include the author's contact information and mailing address. Preference is given to letters from MC Canada congregants.*

### ✉ Is it really time for a vote . . . or should we keep talking?

RE: "IT'S TIME for a vote," March 30, page 14," and "A historic moment," Aug. 17, page 2.

Russel Snyder-Penner makes many good points in "It's time for a vote." His description of how the roundtable discussion format has hindered conversation is very reflective of my experience. In my congregation, having moved to a roundtable format, it has neutered our conversation, in my view.

I understand the sentiment that it's time to call for a vote, but as an avid reader of *Canadian Mennonite* I am also puzzled by the suggestion that we as a congregation actually participated in this Being a Faithful Church process. About 11 years ago our congregation had a conversation on sexuality, after which we understood how wide the range of our views actually

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### FROM OUR LEADERS

## Defining the 'other'

WILLARD METZGER

Early in the Syrian refugee crisis, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) asked me to be part of a delegation meeting with Chris Alexander, minister of immigration. We indicated that the church was ready to do what it could to respond to the crisis. But as the crisis continued to unfold and governments struggle to know what to do, I pondered further.

By articulating the "other," we identify the traits and characteristics of those who do belong and give them an identity. Left unattended and unchallenged, these general attitudes can grow into specific expressions of racism and bigotry, expressions inconsistent with Christian values.

Jesus challenged the common definitions of the "other" by regularly welcoming Samaritans. He purposefully elevated the status of women and children. He refused the rejection of lepers. To follow the example of Jesus is to radically erase the definition of the "other." Cultures are

recognized as different expressions of the human experience. Borders are recognized as merely geographic identifiers. We are a diverse expression of people under the grace and love of a common Creator. In this, we are a global family. So a global refugee crisis like that facing us now is an opportunity for all humanity to reflect on our capacity to welcome one another.

To only open our borders to people who seem most like us is to deny our commonality. We are all created in the image of God. We are all filled with the capacity to love. We all long for safety and well-being for ourselves and our families.

The Christian church seeks to reflect the attitude of Jesus. In our Mennonite Church Canada family of congregations, this is expressed by our ecumenical memberships in the EFC and the Canadian Council of Churches. In both these relationships we commend Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) as the response platform that helps our congregations become places of welcome

for Syrian refugees.

But let us not leave responses only to church organizations. This crisis is also an opportunity for each of us to help erase the definition of the "other." Some simple suggestions include:

- INVITING SOMEONE new to share a meal.
- TRYING A different ethnic meal.
- WATCHING A movie with subtitles.
- LISTENING TO non-English music.
- READING BOOKS from non-western authors.
- ACCESSING STUDY material from [commonword.ca](http://commonword.ca).
- INVITING A Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker/staffer to share understandings and insights from their experiences.

While these steps may appear simplistic, they will help strengthen the capacity to appreciate differences. This, in turn, will help broaden an understanding of God. Then as a part of our human family requires a safe haven, our doors will naturally swing open in welcome and embrace.

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