

Luke 24: 13-35 Jesus journeys with us and the fire burns in us

The focus this week is on continuous evangelism. For many in more progressive churches, evangelism has become the “e” word.

Andre Gingerich says that Mennonites love service, are allergic to evangelism, flirt with peace and have no idea about justice. The part of that quote I’m focusing on today is the allergic to evangelism part.

Sharing our love for Jesus in our circles, is often limited to humanitarian aid, social justice activism and donating to good causes like MCC. None of those things are wrong, and all of them belong in what we call discipleship. But somehow, the idea of inviting others into a relationship with Jesus that leads to their own discipleship, is just unthinkable. It’s insensitive, it recalls the worst of our Christian legacy, of colonialism and coercion.

I lived for many years in Europe where just a small percentage of people would confess Christ and be an active part of a local congregation. For most people, their Christian heritage was something you lean on when you’re old and about to die or when you’re weak and need something to lean on. In many parts of Europe, Christian faith is a fairy tale, unenlightened, a relic of the past.

During the years the socialists were in power, it became disadvantageous and sometimes even dangerous to confess Christ. While there was supposed freedom of religion, everyone knew that if you were a member of a church and heaven-forbid, an active member, and you would not join the political party, you would not be allowed to study what you wanted, or get the job you wanted. They found legal ways to persecute you for your religion.

Friends of ours told us that they always knew who the Stasi informant was in the church. That's right—I said “the Stasi”. It was of interest to the government to have spies/informants everywhere. In fact, 1 in 3 citizens of the GDR were willing to rat out their neighbors, colleagues and relatives if they thought their behavior was disloyal to the system. In the churches, it was obvious because those folks were just there, not really participating, not living in discipleship and were showing no fruits of the Spirit. But you certainly thought twice about what you shared and saved your criticism of the system for safer places.

The numbers on the church rolls began to shrink until in places like Halle/Saale where we lived for 9 years, only 6% of the population was still affiliated with a church.

People in more densely populated Christian areas, like here, say, oh people will recognize Jesus in us because we are different. Our good works and our ethics and our love make us different. And people will know it's because we're Christians. Progressive love to quote Saint Francis with the saying, "preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words."

But we found in Germany that we could preach the gospel without words as much as we wanted and people were so removed from any idea of what it meant to be Christian that the connection was not obvious for them. They attributed anything we did to us being Americans so we realized that we were going to have to put words to our actions for people to connect the dots.

Sara Wenger Shenk, former president of AMBS, recently wrote a book about the hesitancy of progressive Mennonites to go anywhere near the e-word. I could tell you many stories about the resistance even at Mennonite Mission Network, but that would be a rabbit trail at this point! It's a real issue. It causes discomfort and resistance for many because of what they have experienced in their past. I know that I am walking into a potentially very unpopular message today.

So, I am saying that I am going into this teaching with the assumption that in general, this congregation, like most other progressive Mennonite churches, is at least uncomfortable with the topic if not resistant.

Maybe it's time to re-imagine what it means to do what Jesus asked us to in the Great Commission and modeled in his own life.

What Jesus told us to do in the Great Commission was not to go door-to-door and tell people about Jesus and ask if they're saved and know they're going to heaven when they die.

The emphasis is on making disciples. There are grammatical clues in the famous sentence about going, making disciples, teaching and baptizing, that help us understand that the main point is to make disciples. In FoH Core Values, all of our values are part of what we consider discipleship—following Jesus, imitating Jesus, becoming more like Jesus.

So, the question should be, how are we doing at making disciples? Not, how are we doing at evangelism?

Can we do a good job of making disciples only if it happens inside these four walls? And only with people who come to us because they see our good deeds and put two and two together? The Great Commission doesn't say wait for people

to come to you. I know this is crass, but if people wanted to come to church, they'd already be here. People wandering in randomly because they saw the church sign is highly unusual in this day and age and will likely only continue as the church's place of prominence in society continues to decrease. The number of nones and dones around us is increasing rapidly.

I was at Goshen College the other evening for a pastor's meeting with the campus pastor, president Stoltzfus and our beloved Cyneatha Millsaps to talk about ways for local churches and the college to collaborate. They showed statistics from the last 10 years and students who identify as having no religion rose from single digit to double digit. This is our future.

Back to the Great Commission. The going part of it doesn't mean you have to move across the world. You can do it right here in Elkhart, in Goshen. On Cleveland or Greencroft Blvd. The going part is more like, as you go about your daily life and are out and about, make disciples.

What it might look like in our day and age to make disciples as we go about our daily lives? How do we share the thing we say is the most important thing that shapes our lives? We confess that Jesus is Lord of our lives, but do people around us know that? Making disciples assumes contact with people who are on a

journey. Where on their journey might our paths intersect? How do we initiate or participate in conversations about what difference our faith in Jesus makes in our lives?

Let's take a closer look at the story of Jesus walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

1. He met people who had questions where they were at.
 - 14 and 15 say they were talking to each other about everything that had happened. While they were discussing these things Jesus himself arrived and ***joined them on their journey***. It seems Jesus teleported in, which is not something we are going to do, but he joined them on their journey.
2. He asked questions and listened.
 - In verse 17 Jesus says to them, "what are you talking about as you walk along?" And they continued to recount what they had witnessed the last few days. People have mini and major crises all the time. Life has drama. Where can we listen and ask questions as people try to make sense of what is going on in their lives?
3. Jesus shared what he knew from his own experience

- In verse 27 it says then he interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures starting with Moses and going through all the prophets. Can we tell people our stories of faith, what we have understood in the intersection of life, Scripture and our own journey with Jesus?

4. He spent time doing ordinary things with them, like eating

- Verse 29 says, “they urged him saying, stay with us. It's nearly evening and the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. And after he took his seat at the table with them he took the bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them.” He accepted their offer of hospitality. Steve and I always felt it was a major win in Germany when someone invited us to their house, rather than us always doing the inviting. People don't want to be seen as needy but to relate in mutual ways, to be ones who have something to give, not just receive. Building relationships that lead to making disciples start with very basic things, like sharing meals, hanging out, playing games, watching movies, and on and on.

5. He trusted the Spirit to enlighten their hearts

- Verse 31 “their eyes were opened and they recognized him but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?” We don't convict or convert anyone. Spirit does that. We give witness to the work of the Spirit in our lives and leave the outcome to the Spirit.

6. He trusted the two to share what they had learned with others

- In verse 33 it says, “they got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. And the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread.”

FoH is good at many things: mutual care, worship of Jesus, witnessing to the powers. But how are we doing at making disciples? How can we improve? How can we re-imagine it so that it comes more naturally? As life-long learners, how can we nurture that fire that burns in us, so that we can't help but talk about it?