

MESSENGER STUDYGUIDE

Food for thought, questions for discussion, and activities to help individuals, classes, and small groups use Messenger as a focus for study and reflection.

February 2007

Food for Thought: An Overview of the Issue

“Teach your old church new tricks. It’s not magic!” advises this issue of *Messenger*, with a set of features highlighting **ways to make changes and chart new courses** in congregations:

“Reaching Out Through Christian Education” by Steve Clapp (pp. 8-11), “Making Change” by Jeff Glass (pp. 12-13), “Seeking God’s New Harvest” by Karen Doss Bowman (pp. 14-15), and “Fighting Geriatrophy” by Jeff Tomson (pp. 16-17).

In the Bible study, author Christina Bucher focuses on “**Lamentations: Mourning and Confession**” (pp. 18-19).

Activities: Connecting with the Content

Read and study the following passages from the story of the exodus of the Hebrew people out of Egypt—stories that describe how difficult change can be for a people in distress and for their leaders: Exodus 16:1-36, Exodus 32:1-35, and Exodus 33:1-34:10. **Make a five-column chart for these three stories.** In the first column, list each Bible reference. In the others, describe briefly what happens in each story, the specific difficulty related to change, the varied responses of leaders including Moses and others, and God’s response as the scripture records it. **Now make a chart of three changes in the life of your congregation,** preferably events in recent years: For each, include the date, a brief description of what happened, the specific difficulty related to change, varied responses of church leaders such as the pastor and others, and how you have seen God respond. **Pray about these events** that have changed your church.

Read the entire five chapters of Lamentations. **Enter into a time of personal meditation** about experiences of loss and grief in your own life, or the life of your family, congregation, or community. After recalling each experience of loss or grief, read aloud Lamentations 3:22-24 as your prayer to God.

Questions for Discussion

1. Clapp writes that Christian education is great way to grow a church. What evidence does he cite to show that Christian education can be a key factor in church growth? Why may a good Christian education program help a church grow? How may good training in Christian education translate into confidence, hospitality, and evangelism among church members? How do Anabaptist churches (Brethren, Mennonites) compare to other Protestant churches with regard to Christian education, and how may this trend affect our church growth?

2. Glass describes how change happens in congregations. What example does he give of a negative way for change to happen, and what negative consequences result? Have you ever seen this happen in your congregation? When and how did it happen? Now describe a more “creative and successful” way for congregations to make change happen, as outlined by Glass. What steps does he propose for positive change in a congregation? Have you ever experienced this kind of positive change in your congregation? When and how did it happen?

3. How has revitalization taken place at Lindsay Community Church of the Brethren, now New Harvest Community Fellowship, according to Bowman? What did the pastor and others do to prepare and facilitate revitalization? What outside forces helped the church to make positive changes? How has the church in Lindsay grown?

4. What strategies does Tomson suggest for congregations to incorporate and serve different generations, styles, and cultures? What are the stages of church life? Which of Tomson's suggestions to target different generations, and ways to solicit community feedback about church programs, make the most sense in the situation of your own congregation or other churches of which you have been a part in the past?

5. Think about your congregation in light of these articles about how a church may make changes, and discuss the following questions:

- Is my congregation putting enough energy into Christian education, and why or why not? How could my church's Christian education program be strengthened? How could the Christian education program also contribute to church growth?

- Does my congregation have positive processes in place for change? If not, how could such processes be put into place? What might result from a positive approach to change?

- Where are growth and change happening in my church? What kind of growth is happening, and how is it visible: numerical, spiritual, growth in faith, maturity of discipleship?

- Does one generation dominate my congregation? If so, how has this affected the worship style and types of ministries? How could my church diversify its generational and cultural styles?

- How could my congregation and its leaders use tools offered by Tomson to make positive changes, such as the "Average Annual Growth Rate," "Annual Growth Rate," and "Composite Maturation Number"? What might the church learn through the use of such tools?

6. How does Bucher describe the book of Lamentations? How may the book challenge readers? What types of emotions are expressed, and how? What historical events triggered the emotions?

7. Why does Bucher compare the grief and mourning of Lamentations to the aftermath of the events of Sept. 11, 2001? Answer her question, "Where is God in all this?" from the point of view of Lamentations. Then give your own personal answer to that question. Do you share the theology, or understanding of God, expressed by Lamentations? Why or why not?

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