

Chapter 7

Leading, killing, and being liberated

From four cases of groups who dwelt in the Word to killing and being liberated? It seems like quite a leap.

But there's a reason to take a moment to think about death and freedom here. Between your two authors, we have probably led dwelling in the Word in more places and times with more people and in more diversity of cultures than any of the rest of the staff or partners of Church Innovations. We've also made more mistakes than anyone we know! More interestingly, we have watched more people lead dwelling in the Word than any of our staff or partners. We hope to share in this chapter a few lessons about leading dwelling in the Word. We also will need to describe to you the ways of killing it and the ways of leading that lead to being liberated by the Spirit.

Leading

We never know who is going to be a leader in dwelling in the Word. This was one of our early discoveries and remains one of the most important. In most local churches we have found that people place leadership regarding the scriptures either into the hands of the clergy or a select few local leaders who are accustomed to speaking in front of others or who have certain expertise or education. But we have discovered that the way dwelling in the Word works makes it possible for persons who are not usually thought of as leaders to lead in dwelling.

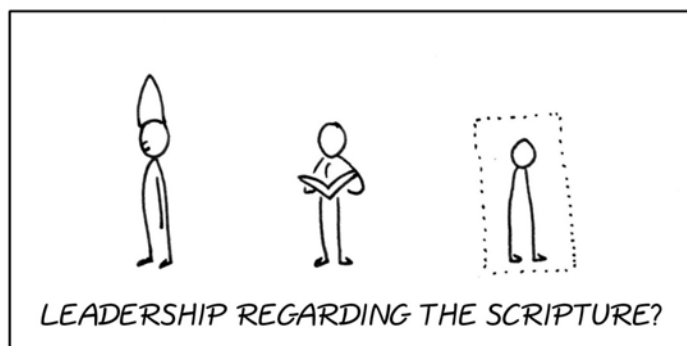
Early on we took the risk of inviting a group of working class women to deliver a major report to their church council and staff. They were quite uncomfortable at the thought of presenting before an essentially male leadership group. However, they had been practicing dwelling in the Word within their own group during their work of doing interviews and creating this report. So when they started to present the report to the council by leading dwelling in the Word, it created a new set of power relationships and dynamics. Those who normally controlled the conversation (the council members) were freed to explore God's Word for themselves and their local church without having to also guide or control the conversation. The group of women

who led the dwelling in the Word felt no need or pressure to come to answers but rather were delighted at the chance to free the council group to explore God's Word.

Two wonderful things happened as a result: first, the women explored the power of being servants to the more traditional leadership as an important way of leading, and second, the council discovered a whole new leadership base and resource right under their noses.

One might take from this story a false impression that the secret to dwelling in the Word is to have no leadership at all; that is, to abdicate the place of leadership in order to create the space and time for the conversation and to simply guide it. Quite often stories like this one get romanticized into the rather silly claim that anyone can lead because effective leadership is simply letting go. That claim undermines the leadership capacity of these extraordinary women. Quite to the contrary, these women had well-developed capacities to be servants who free others to dwell in the Word. They had been practicing the components of those capacities for months. They came with many of those components well in place from lives that had allowed them very few leader roles. And the occasion of leading dwelling in the Word with the church council freed them to exercise these capacities in a place and time in which they previously would never have been welcome to lead. They had learned from hard experience and deliberate practice what it took to lead in this setting.

One of the most important insights they had was learning to trust the Holy Spirit. They came with the attitude and belief that wherever two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit will be true. They came with the minimum knowledge base about how to read a text out loud and invite people to dwell in it. They came with useful skills that they had been practicing for months. They were prepared to pass those habits on to the group of



traditional church leaders. Their work was not the abdication of leadership; it was leadership within the Spirit and promises of the Triune God.

Killing

Christian innovation is a process of failure growing out of a Christian imagination and wisdom towards a shared positive outcome. The many things we've learned about dwelling in the Word illustrate in some most painful ways this hard process of failure.

The clicking of a laptop keyboard remains alive in both of our ears, even now, from one of our more spectacular failures. The clicking was the result



of a stated clerk's taking of notes during a time of dwelling in the Word at a big presbytery meeting. The stated clerk's separation from the process, keeping distance from the dwelling, indeed the clerk's polished refusal to participate in the dwelling, was only one indicator of a set of practices of this group that made dwelling almost impossible.

The second indicator that we were failing was that members of the presbytery were unwilling to seek out a reasonably friendly-looking stranger and move over to listen. With the announcement that "everybody knows one another here," everyone in the various factions of the presbytery stayed seated next to one another and refused to move.

The third indicator of failure was the first person's report back to the large group after working with her partner. Her report was all about what she thought; it simply stated her own reading of the text, not her partner's. In fact, in their time of listening one another into free speech, they had succeeded mostly in questioning the value of anything that the Apostle Paul might say to us from Philippians because of his sexism and racism. Everyone after that first person followed suit, not reporting what they had heard but piling onto the initial suspicions of Paul. We should probably tell you here that we

did not bring the Philippians text to this group; the Philippians text had been chosen *by the presbytery* as the key text for their visioning and planning process, into which they had invited us. Well, the dwelling went downhill from there. The anxiety in the group went up. The visioning and planning process never recovered.

Mistakes in our leadership and theirs are abundantly clear. We were not well-informed about the role of the stated clerk, which is to take very good notes on every topic under discussion and order those notes for the presbytery for future reference. When we noticed what was happening, we might well have underlined to the group the importance of *everyone's* fully participating in the dwelling, of not taking notes but letting the talking and listening flow. We also might well have intervened when people claimed they already knew one another and didn't need to move and seek out someone new. We surely should have intervened when it was clear to us that the first report back was not a report of listening to another but of someone's own opinions. If we had made any of those interventions, we might have prevented the total failure of the dwelling. Of course, the power structures of the presbytery were being threatened severely by the dwelling in the Word process. By calling attention to what was not happening, we might have only precipitated a much too early confrontation on their dysfunctions. Still, true servants of dwelling in the Word must risk such confrontation. Leadership comes with *real* risk.

One of the simplest lessons here is how the practices of leadership in the church in its most modern forms actually are threatened by dwelling in the Word. This failure to dwell well was not an accident but rather a whole series of failures arising from deeply-held rules for the use of scripture by leaders in the church. For example, these good and faithful people held the *modern* belief in using distance in order to stay objective; that explained the stated clerk's continuous clicking. He understood that his role was to remain outside, objective, in order to effectively balance the different power interests in the presbytery and provide clear records of what happened. Needless to say, dwelling in the Word suggests a different understanding of power and its exercise. This is not to say that the stated clerk's place in other parts of the meeting might not be wisely to record and order information for the good of the group.

Another simple lesson from this example is the role of critical suspicions.

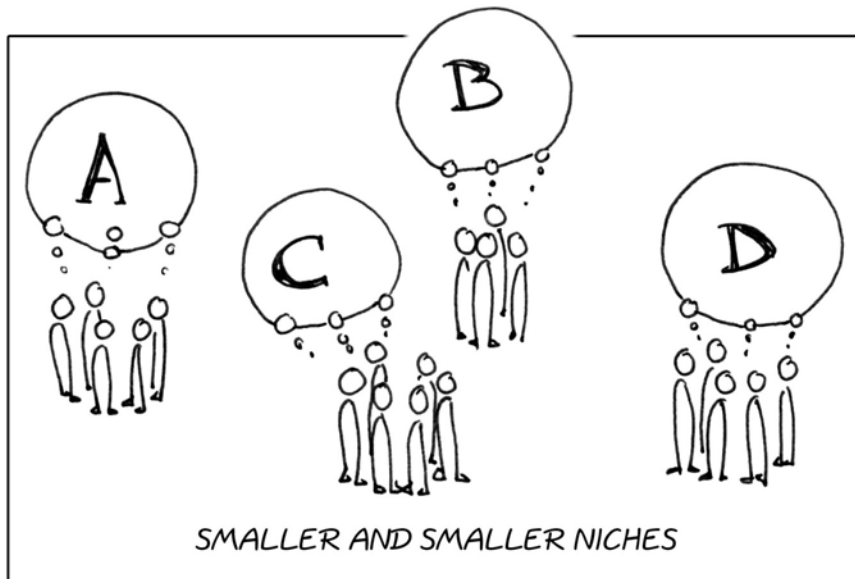
In dwelling in the Word we deliberately use the *postmodern* invitation to begin with an interpretive stance of *good will*, to open ourselves hospitably to whatever we hear in the Word and from one another. We all enter a space and time of seeking to hear God’s Word through listening one another into free speech, listening to everyone, including both the persons in the room and the author of the text. As time goes on in the habit of dwelling, there is plenty of space to bring forward important and even critical suspicions. But if we start from an interpretive stance of *suspicion*, that classical modern way of hearing kills the Spirit. “The letter kills; the Spirit gives life.”

The ways of killing the Spirit are myriad. On one occasion when leading a dwelling in the Word, one of your authors with a degree in Systematic Theology and Hermeneutics very early on in the dwelling started to show off his in-depth knowledge of a critical reading of the text. A number of the clergy in the room took the cue and began to do the same. Needless to say, the dwelling in the Word did not lead to a floating conversation. It didn’t take long for it to sink into an “I know more than you know” dark hole.

One of the points of this tale is *not* to completely avoid critical tools and knowledge in dwelling. On the contrary, it is a question of timing. Allowing the conversation to float within a healthy spirit of good will actually creates the space and time for a more critical analysis of our understanding of scripture. Without good will, the willingness to acknowledge and assent to others’ interpretation, we will have no community in which to critically assess those readings.

Also, please do not misunderstand us to be telling this tale to reject the modern Bible study. We are all in favor of Bible study in its many forms. However, this tale does illustrate that dwelling is a very special framing of Bible study within an interpretive and communal good will. Part of the genuine challenge in a diverse culture where we cannot depend on having a shared set of values and meanings is that, if we begin with suspicion, we will almost certainly kill conversation, while if we begin with assent and good will, we likely create a conversation that gives life, energy, and multiple ways to look at tough critical questions. Good Bible study must have the critical distance to support such critical questions, but without the framework, the setting, the environment of a community working from assent and good will, there’s no one who will speak up. Or if someone does, he or she

may do so to provide the one right answer and squelch conversation in the Spirit, even unintentionally. In effect, too much of modern Bible study creates smaller and smaller niches of folks who agree with one another, small groups of people who confirm their own prejudices, and hide that action under the mask of the good and important work of being critically suspicious.



Leadership that gives life to Christian community invites people to good will and assent borne by trusting the Holy Spirit. This is leadership with real risk that leads to innovation.

Of course actions that can kill true dwelling in the Word are not always purely related to modern attitudes and academic learning. You already know that there are some very old power moves that are almost impossible to criticize (or recover from) in the church. Our favorite example of such an action is what we've come to call "The Pious Power Move." You may have seen this one. For example, when a tough conversation is underway and several people have offered differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations, people's anxiety rises. It is very tempting for an anxious person to use a pious power move like this one: "What's really important is that God is love, and so we shouldn't dwell on these differences. Let's just love one another." Where does that leave the persons who were putting their minds and hearts into true listening and reporting back various interpretations?

Or, worse, as the anxiety rises, some people are very tempted to say, "Wait! Let's pray. Right now." Of course, prayer is very much related to dwelling in the Word. In fact, as you develop the habit of dwelling, you will find that it often becomes extended prayer, especially if you let longer and longer silence unfold before you move to listening to a stranger. But to jump into a developing conversation filled with differences and request prayer out of anxiety

actually demeans the differences between good people and breaks things up just as important understandings are almost in hand. In the end, pouring pious syrup onto a group kills the conversation as fast as any Bible bullet or critical suspicion or hostile retort does. So beware the pious power move.

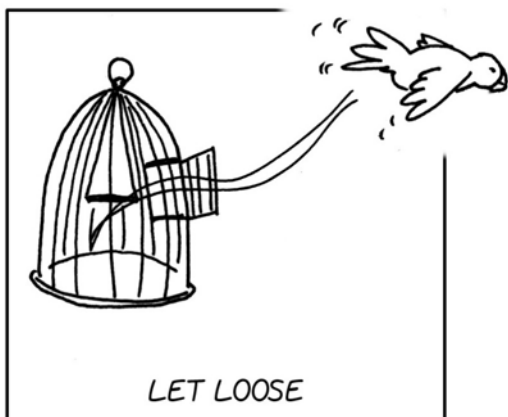
Being liberated

When all is said, done, and reflected on, most of the time in dwelling in the Word we have experienced groups and individuals being liberated. One Presbyterian student of ours who was quite pious in very appropriate ways, wondered aloud in class about whether there was any place for critical studies and suspicions in the habit of dwelling in the Word. She had found the process to that point quite liberating and energizing, in contrast to many negative conversations in her adult life that had started with critical suspicions. However, as the weeks of class went by and in our weekly dwelling many students brought forward historical and critical studies and suspicions, she began to see how liberating the practice was for hearing God's Word in, with, and under the ugly facts of racism, classism, sexism, and the many other ways sin has shaped the church's reading of scripture.

Another Presbyterian student of African-American descent, who had worked in human services for the state for more than a decade, was stunned in the early stages of the dwelling in the Word. She put it quite succinctly, "I have never been in a group of people who honored an ancient text so much!" She was *not* making a compliment. As the weeks passed, she saw how a community was being formed in the dwelling process that allowed her and others to speak honestly about some of the perverse ways the church has read and interpreted scripture. Her voice and life experience enjoyed a freer space and time than she had been used to in any diverse setting outside a group that already agreed with her. In the end she said, "I have experienced a freedom here, dwelling in this ancient text, that I have never experienced before."

One of the pitfalls of having very delightful experiences of dwelling in the Word is that you don't always get them. You are spoiled from the good ones, and then you have one that feels very flat. When this happens, you become very tempted to retell the stories of the delightful experiences of other groups as a way of rescuing a failure. We have learned the hard way that

such sharing of previous “successes” seldom can turn around a bad or even just flat experience of dwelling, for a number of reasons. Instead, feel free to trust the Holy Spirit and allow even the bad and the flat conversations their



place in forming Christian conversation. Here the liberation goes two ways, as it often does. The leader lets go and feels free to allow failure as a part of innovation, and the gathered group lets go to see where they will be led. Over time these experiences actually prove powerful, both in forming community and in innovating missional church.

Over the years we have worked with many extremely gifted consultants and facilitators. Many of these have not taken to dwelling in the Word easily. Most have learned their consulting and facilitating skills in the school of modern control. That is, they have developed well-honed practices for always staying in control of a group and a conversation. When we ask them to begin each meeting of a group by dwelling in the Word, the consultant or facilitator who usually uses modern control leadership is put at uncomfortably high risk. As a result, when we invite them to lead dwelling in the Word, they almost always add other techniques and practices that they presume add value, value worthy of their expertise and cost. But in the end these added facilitation techniques also add control measures that prevent the freedom of dwelling in the Word.

We remember in particular two world-class consultants who began this way, adding techniques and instructions and frameworks to dwelling. One of them eventually took the risk of moving beyond the modern wisdom of adding high control techniques and practices. His colleague, an equally extraordinarily gifted consultant, simply could not trust the process of dwelling and was constantly at odds with all of our consulting methods, since they all grow out of dwelling in the Word. No doubt he adds real value to the local churches and organizations with whom he consults. Equally without much doubt, the man that was able to let go of the high control techniques and practices, especially around the scriptures, has enjoyed a kind of liberation he never expected.

We could go on with stories of leadership, killing, and being liberated; no doubt you could add many stories of your own. We share our stories both as lessons for the wise and as signs of hope for those who are seeking such dwelling in the Word. All of them serve to underline the real risk and even more amazing results when we trust the Holy Spirit in our reading of scripture.