

Chapter 8

How will your group dwell in the Word?

What will dwelling in the Word be like for your group?

Imagine how you will introduce it. What will you say? What “props” might you use? What will you have available in the room to make it easier to try? How will you invite everyone to try it? What do you expect people’s reaction will be? How long will you propose to try it out with this first group?

What passage will you use? Do you already have a text that your group identifies with? Or will you use Luke 10:1-12? Or perhaps Philippians 1:27 and 2:5-11?

The Luke passage is absolutely delightful in its introduction to being missional. It is a story of 35 pairs of good people, without any training, launched out to extend the peace to people they haven’t met but whom the Lord also intends to visit. It captures and eventually shapes the imagination of people who may want to look beyond their own circles into the world that God loves and to persons God wants to embrace. It provides words and images for people who want to discover how God might be calling and sending *them* to serve others.

The Philippians passage is also a story. It is Jesus’ story as the first century church must have recited it week after week and month after month. It is the good news, the Gospel, for sure. But it is also very good Law. It encourages believers to be slaves to another person in order to free that other person into relationship with God through Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It urges the posture of slavehood or servanthood in order to free someone else. That is mission, too! And it helps, by the Holy Spirit’s power, to create the community needed to tackle a tough issue without killing one another.

Once the habit settles in with most of the group, how will you introduce it to newcomers? How will you decide what value it brings to you, in order to say what value it might bring to other groups in your congregation? Remember,

as in all things, people do not learn from experience. People learn from reflecting upon their experience, and they do this best together, in the group that has practices dwelling in the Word together.

This taking time for reflection is very, very important. How will you lead by giving people a chance to reflect on what the Spirit is doing with you in dwelling in the Word? Real leadership is often about framing things, about creating time and space for people to reflect on little parts of the big picture in order to name and claim what they already know and to identify what has to be learned before a decision can be reached. Reflection allows a group to harvest what God has already given them. Your group no doubt has the capacities to dwell in the Word. Once they've done it for a time, lead them in reflecting on its value.

How will you build curiosity into the group so that members begin looking for places the Spirit is speaking to the group? How will you make it safer for people to begin speaking with one another about God's presence and activity in your midst? In our work with hundreds of congregations, no matter the denomination or continent, we have been amazed at the absence of "God talk" in one-on-one interviews, comparatively safe encounters, even when an interview question asks where God is present in congregational life. In one large set of interviews in which over 35,000 words were recorded, fewer than 90 were the words *God*, *Jesus* or *Christ*, or *the Holy Spirit*. While that figure might amaze you, it didn't shock us. People have just not been given permission, habits, or safe enough space to talk about what God is up to in their lives and in their shared life as congregations. Dwelling in the Word is one way to give that permission, habit, and safer space for God talk. Dwelling creates the kind of community where such talk can be accepted with good will and even tested critically. Indeed, people are apt to "speak the truth in love" only where such community has been formed by the Spirit.

We know, because people have told us many times, that the habit of dwelling in the Word can profoundly change the shape of committee meetings, staff meetings, council, session or vestry meetings. And exactly because it

changes things and allows the Spirit some elbow room, it will make people uncomfortable. That's understandable. And the people who are made uncomfortable are not bad people. They're just not used to doing this sort of spiritual discernment. Leading a group into this habit may get difficult. But take the step anyway. Offer it as an experiment. And then offer the people a chance to reflect on the experiment and claim what they have learned. The results may surprise you.

Then again, they may not.

But the Spirit works by surprise much of the time.