

Dwelling in the Word

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Chapter 2

What happens?

Simple instructions. Simple process. Right?
Here is what comes of dwelling in the Word.

Deep listening to one another

We hear one another. We listen deeply to one another and notice things. This deep listening happens in dwelling because the practice involves hearing the passage, reflecting silently upon it, and then finding a partner we don't know well and listening that person into speaking freely about what thoughts or feelings came during the reading. Such deep listening is rare enough in classrooms or among staff members or on church councils. Even rarer is having to report to the rest of the group what the *other* person said.



Reporting the words of another as truly as possible is an old active listening exercise, nothing new, to be sure. But that sort of listening honors the other and makes sure that it is safe to say freely what needs to be said.

Can you imagine being on a staff or a committee where this kind of deep listening to one another takes place regularly? Wouldn't it be freeing?

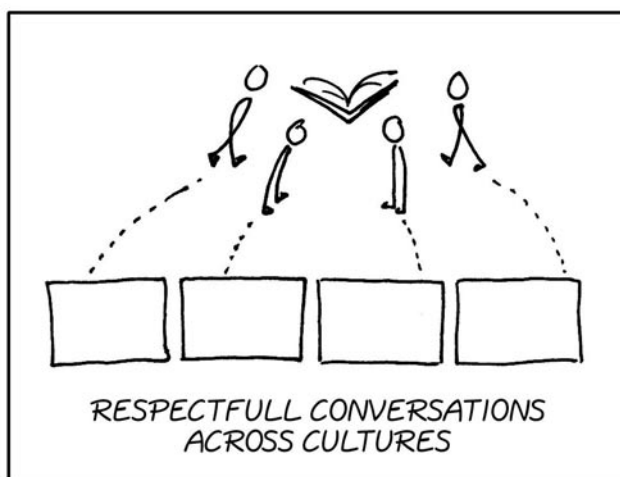
Wouldn't it build trust? Wouldn't it make that staff or committee co-creators with God of a trustworthy world?

Imagine a group of leaders of a dozen or more congregations meeting for the first time in the city of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. They are coming from different denominations and cultures and classes. Some of these congregations have been explicitly created by the rules of apartheid that divided culture and race, even in the same denomination. They have not really met with one another in a joint project before this first meeting. And they bring very

different worship patterns and traditions.

The local leader invites them to worship together as their first joint act. They are already anxious, and the simple fact that they share almost no ritual practices or music (including hymns) across the group intensifies their anxiety. The body language is clear and painful. The congregations are further apart, even literally, at the end of the worship service than they were at first. Almost everyone has experienced significant embarrassment or shame during parts of the worship.

Now imagine all of them being asked to listen to the Luke 10 text as it is read and then find that reasonably friendly-looking stranger. Strangers are easy to find. But then add the fact that the facilitator insists that the stranger be from across denominational lines. This seems to be a recipe for disaster. First, no movement. And silence. Then, a few folks cross the floor and cross the massive gaps between the congregations, finding a reasonably friendly-looking stranger. It almost looks like a junior high dance. Some stand with their hands in their pockets or behind their backs, giving no one eye contact; others simply avoid the task and turn to a fellow congregation member beside them. The facilitator quietly reminds them to cross the boundaries. Finally, most make the perilous journey and cross the boundaries. The opening moments look painful. Nervous smiles and laughter, quiet control, open discomfort and so many other postures are everywhere. Then the miracle happens.



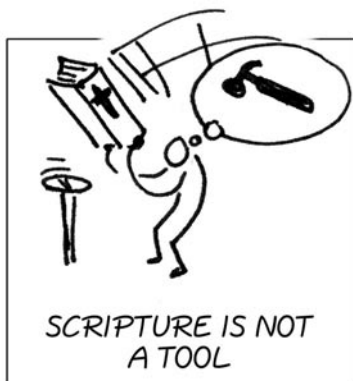
First one and then another begin to listen, really listen, and they *lean* into what they are hearing. Then something even more amazing happens: people start feeling heard by someone from across a boundary. They will later report that they had never in their life been heard across that boundary on something so near and dear to them as the Word of God. Yet in one more way

the simple truth is revealed that the Church is, by the will of the Father, in the person of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, a creature of the Word of God.

Deep listening for God

Here is something that is true no matter where in the world we have worked: Europe, Africa, Australia, even among Native Alaskans – wherever the church is established and not new-born. Established churches offer Bible studies in many shapes and sizes, but hardly anyone in those studies simply reads the Bible, listening for God’s living Word in scripture to speak. Instead, people read part of a book of the Bible, study commentaries or interpretations, and get information and even knowledge about the times, about the history, about Jesus even, but rarely if ever encounter our Lord in their actual lives as they read.

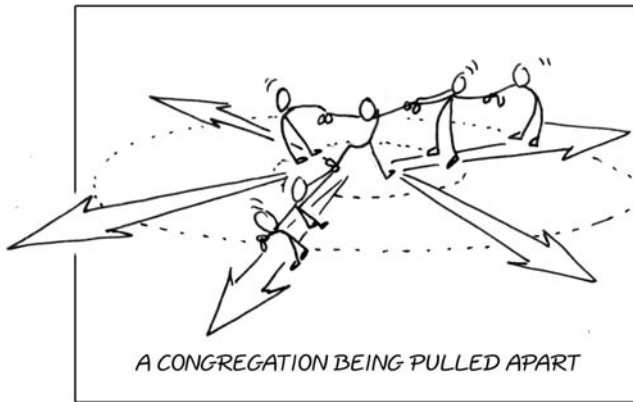
Even pastors and other church professionals rarely if ever dwell in the Word. They use the Word in order to do their jobs (prepare a sermon, create a Bible study, get ready for Sunday School lessons), and using the Word in these pursuits is very important for their work in the church. But these good people rarely linger, wander, live inside the scriptures, waiting to be spoken to by our Lord, who promises to be there – after all Jesus *is* the Word.



Helping people to regard the scriptures not as a tool but as the living voice of God, encouraging them toward a vocation that God has in mind for them, encouraging them to dwell in the Word for this reason, this is perhaps the most innovative thing we’ve ever done at Church Innovations. And it is perhaps the oldest, simplest, least technical thing possible.

Imagine a major metropolitan church who has had three different senior ministers in five years. Imagine the pain in the leadership who had started with each senior pastor with such great hopes and expectations. With each disappointing ending of a pastor’s leadership their hope diminishes and their

grief increases, as does their anxiety. Conflict over many different things, things over which there has always been disagreement, now brings them into readiness to fight or to flee the scene. Differences they might once have accepted now seem church-dividing.

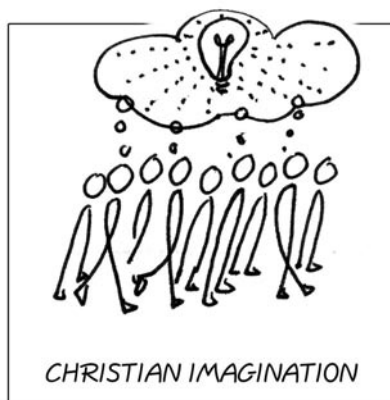


Imagine them now dwelling in the same Word over a significant period of time. Instead of doing Bible studies on the controversies that divide them, they begin to form a shared sense of the challenge facing them. This challenge is much greater and more compelling than the things that divide

them. More importantly, they are being challenged to listen for God's preferred future, not just their own preferences.

With this deeper question and this expectation to listen for God's Word, they are able to distinguish the various levels of importance of the matters over which they disagree. Listening for God's Word both makes clear and puts in their proper places the differences between them and also frees the leadership to establish some rank order in the matters they must decide about. While they do not pretend to be absolutely certain of God's preferred future for their church, they now stop making their differences church-dividing.

Shaping an imagination for Christian vocation



Really living inside a story over time begins to shape a group's collective imagination. Think of people who live together through a trying experience. That story shapes them, becomes their story, defines who they are in relationship to one another and sometimes who they are over against everyone else in the world.

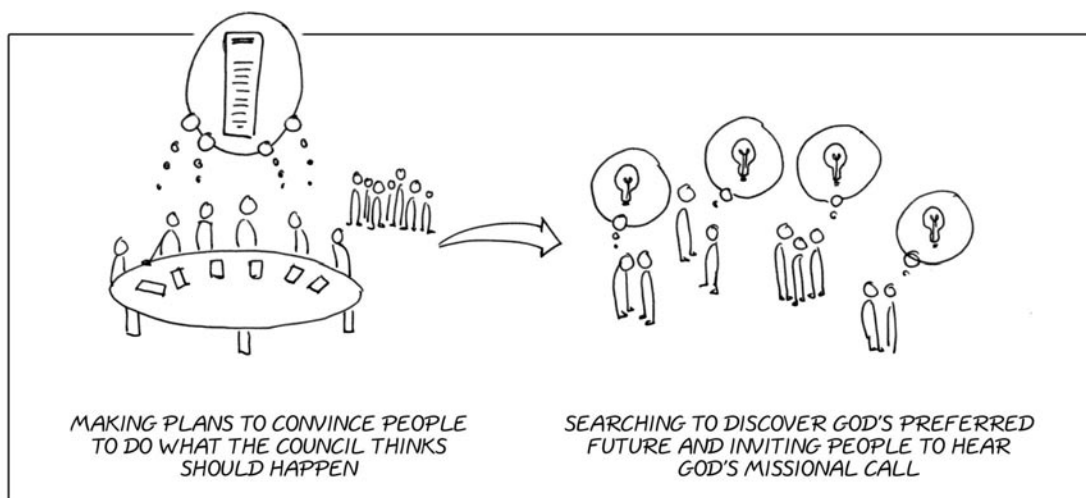
Dwelling in God's Word, especially in one pas-

sage of it, has a similar effect. Over and over again, in that familiar house, happily meeting and re-meeting those beautiful and friendly words, jostled by the words that puzzle or even annoy, people are greeted, embraced, poked, and provoked into thinking in new ways, asking questions of one another, listening one another into free speech, listening even to the Holy Spirit's call.



After all, churches do not exist for themselves. Our God is a God who loves the world and is in mission to it, desperate to contact those who have no idea who Jesus is yet, and there are plenty of those people. God is busy, daily, reconciling the world to Godself. That is God's mission, and it's a big one. Churches are blessed by God, gifted even, given their particu-

lar corner of the street, and their particular members to figure out what part of that mission of God is theirs to do, what piece of God's action they are called to. Dwelling in the Word shapes church leaders' imaginations to seek that missional vocation.



Imagine a church governance board that is constantly frustrated with the task of recruiting inactive or less active members to do what the governing board believes needs to be done. Imagine them practicing dwelling in the

Word and beginning to hear God calling them into a part of God's mission in their community. Then they see that the real issue is not convincing people to do what the council thinks should happen but instead inviting all their members to experience God's missional call.

Continual surprises

At Church Innovations a dozen years ago we began the practice of dwelling in the Word, in that missional text Luke 10:1-12, because we are a missional institute sent to help churches, and churches are also sent out in God's mission.

In a dozen years, you would think we would have heard every possible reflection. And of course, we have heard many of them more than once. And yet, every week something new happens. Either we have a guest with a completely new idea, or someone will bring a stunning story back from the road to the home-team, or some long-time staff member will say, "How many times have we read this passage, and I'm just hearing now for the first time that..." The Holy Spirit draws us in to help us discover wonderful surprises.

Creating Christian community

After some time, not very long, people who have dwelt together in any sort of house begin to know one another more fully. They develop a set of shared experiences. They know the punch lines to the same jokes. They have certain adventures together. They become a sort of community almost in spite of themselves. They create a shared culture.

Dwelling in the Word, although it is a metaphoric dwelling, still manages to create that sense of community, that sense of shared culture. Certain words begin to remind the dwellers of certain things. A sort of verbal shorthand develops. Humor invades many places where humor has not appeared before. Even in Luke 10: 1-12, which talks about being sent as lambs amongst wolves and which ends with a pronouncement of doom to those who do not

welcome Jesus' appointed ones, makes people step back, look at their own lives, put them into perspective, and even laugh.

The habit of listening so carefully to the other as to be able to report the other's words faithfully to the group, that activity creates community, too. Honest reporting and fair access to the conversation builds trust in the community. And when trust is built in a culture, that culture can withstand risks and entrances and exits and big change. It's good to know that the Spirit provides everything we need to be able to adapt to big change, even in so simple a way as creating Christian community through the habit of dwelling in the Word.

And now...

And now, to help you envision how dwelling in the Word looks and feels in various places and in various groups, and to help you see what happened in those groups as a result, we give you four cases:

Chapter 3

The case of the church council

Chapter 4

The case of the reluctant seminary class

Chapter 5

The case of the executive church body staff

Chapter 6

The case of the research, consulting, and home-team staff