

## Chapter 5

### The case of the executive church body staff

#### Getting started

“You know, we really appreciate the chance to begin these retreats in the Word of God. There is so much of the Word of God. Really a lot of it. Sixty-six books of it.”

“Yes, it is deep and rich. So many stories. Parables, even.”

“So aren’t we limiting ourselves by staying in Luke 10:1-12 for each of our meetings together? Limiting what more we could learn from the Word?”

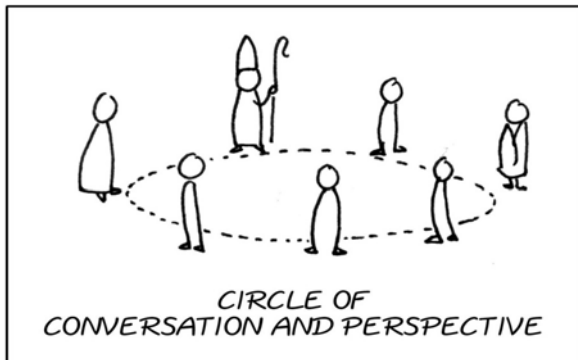
These comments came from three members of a large judicatory staff near the start of our second staff covenanting retreat with them. At the first retreat a month earlier they had been polite and gone along with the practice, but when they came to realize that at the second retreat we would dwell in the same passage, they were a little irritated, perhaps even bored with Luke 10.

Oh, they were right, of course. Staying in the Luke 10:1-12 passage for three retreats during a staff covenanting process seemed quite finite, especially given the extensive work they were doing between retreats. After all, staff covenanting is a several-month process of discovering how each staff member works in a full-staff configuration, and how the whole staff supports the mission of the church body they serve. Participating staff members do a lot of homework, recording in columns their own job responsibilities and authorizations, creating logs of their time use, drawing and diagramming how staff members collaborate or silo while working on projects. And they do all of this, together in three retreats, and alone between retreats, with only Luke 10:1-12 as their companion. Perhaps if we’d chosen a different text for each of the retreats...or if we had allowed each person to choose a different verse upon which to base their own work!

## Freeing others into free speech

Of course some members of this particular staff, from the very first hour of the first retreat, did see the value of the exercise in deep listening, of finding a partner. If we had not done this partner exercise, at the first retreat executive staff members and maybe one or two others would have been the only ones to volunteer any reflections on the passage – at least, they were the only ones to speak up during any other of that retreat’s conversations. But the dwelling exercise puts individuals in pairs with someone they aren’t usually paired with. It has each person getting to know another’s thoughts and reactions. It has each person trying on another person’s understanding of or questions about the scripture. It has each person repeating to the whole group what the partner has said.

In terms of group dynamics or psychology, one could call this pairing “perspective taking,” since each person must report the perspective of the other. In asymmetrical relationships, such as a bishop with a maintenance manager, the power of learning from another can be very great, even unexpectedly great. The maintenance manager may simply expect to learn from a bishop’s reaction to Luke 10:1-12, and speak the bishop’s words to the group the way a person repeats an answer in a class taught by a professor. But hearing a bishop



take the maintenance manager’s words and report them to the group, having heard profoundly something new in the story, brings a power shift into the dynamic; we see power, servanthood, even slavehood for the sake of hearing the other clearly.

And something else happened as these staff members listened to one another as we dwelled in the Word. On this executive church body staff, some members were very new, while some had been in the system for decades. When we took up Luke 10:1-12, one of the newer persons would note the missional aspect of the journey Jesus was sending the pairs to make and would note the style of the instructions for that journey:

“What a lot of specific instructions! Jesus was very specific about what he wanted them to do and say, wasn’t he!”

OR

“Wow! They were embarking on this trip with someone else and they had almost no clues about what to do or say and took nothing with them. I can’t imagine doing that!”

Then long-time system members responded to such comments, noting how nice it would have been to have had such instructions when assuming their offices some years back. But quietly, in their hearts, we saw them take note of which newcomers valued the specific instructions and which desired the more open-ended ones. They were learning much about one another in the midst of taking up the Word.

### **But *why* should we remain in the same house?**

But we should return to their objections to the practice of remaining in just one passage. Surely all of scripture has much, much, much to offer, and staying in Luke 10 does limit a staff to one set of images and information. Yes. It limits the information. It gives a certain set of boundaries. It creates a set of walls and windows. It makes a space within which several metaphors and images dance.



It confines, in a certain way, the information for a group of people, and through that confinement and focus, they begin to see everything differently, by the power of the Holy Spirit as it opens the imaginations of everyone in that metaphoric place. By the time a group has “remained in the same house,” as Luke 10: 5 instructs, several times, these metaphors and images, just a few of them, begin to dance with the thoughts and reflections of the staff participants. After all, we do not

dwell in the Word to get information from it, information to be used or applied to our job authorizations or work planning. We dwell in the Word to create a space for the Spirit to teach us, to help us teach one another, to form Christian community and base it in the Word.

Not during the first hours of the first retreat day, but often by the second day of that retreat, someone, not usually one of the positional leaders like a moderator, bishop, or executive, but rather one of the support persons such as the website designer or the communication assistant, will surprise the group by drawing them all back to the Word. Here's how it happened on this staff.

We were working through the staff covenanting 3-column list, descriptions of what each person feels *responsible* to do in any given week, what he or she actually feels *authorized* to do (was given the actual time, money, and access to get done), and what he or she *wants someday to be authorized* to do. The person who coordinated this particular church body's print news, website, and materials for assemblies was comparing his *responsible* column and his *authorized* column.

He said, "Well, these ten things are my responsibilities, from my job description, but I also feel authorized to do these ten things, as if I had been given instructions and sent out to get them done – kind of like in Luke 10. I even have a partner – like being sent in a pair – to get numbers 6-8 done."

"Yes! *Pairs* are in Luke 10, too!" said the treasurer.

"Yes, and that makes me wonder," said the executive, "how many times we actually do work in pairs without really acknowledging it."

And so on.

While remaining in one passage does limit information and the number of stories or characters to learn from, the images and metaphors that are present in that one passage begin to seep into people's thinking and reflection and begin to show the staff members how even their most ordinary work may be grounded in scripture, may be seen as a mission in the same way the "70 others" had a mission. Staying in Luke 10 creates conditions that encourage a missional imagination. And that, we believe, is a work of the Spirit.

We began this chapter noting the series of objections to remaining in Luke 10. This is always the case at the second retreat, when it becomes clear that the consultants are going to stay there and not move. It always happens in class, too, about the third or fourth week. It always happens in council or session or committee meetings, too. As soon as people see that it's not a perfunctory devotional activity or Bible study done for application to life, dwelling starts to feel like a habit they do not want to have. Of course it is a habit. When you have to sit still and listen to the same Word, and hear it through the mind of another, reporting back what the other thinks and not what you think, that may also seem like a lot of bother. It may even seem dangerous. And it is. But how it transforms.

On the third retreat, this church body staff arrived and settled in for our opening practice of dwelling in the Word. Someone volunteered to read, they observed some silence, and then they found a partner, although many had partnered with one another before by this time in the cycle. There was an energy, almost a pressing forward, an eagerness to hear what everyone was about to say *this time*. And oddly, while the one person reported the words of the partner, people looked at not just the reporter but the partner as well, as if they were hearing them both speak at the same time. Partners checked with one another to see whether they'd reported faithfully, the conversation got lively, and it was nearly impossible to move to the next item of work at the retreat schedule.

They seemed taken up into the passage – they were hearing it and seeing much more, and it was speaking to parts of their lives we couldn't have anticipated in the first or second retreats. Not only that, the staff seemed much less asymmetrical when dwelling than they did any other time. After all, no matter who you are, when you are dwelling in the Word in this way, you are at the service of the other you are hearing.

### **On pausing to be taken up into the life of God**

Life on a church body staff has real pressure. People have demanding schedules, and they provide types of support to congregations that they never dreamed of when they began doing the work. They share the joys and woes

of one another's lives, they are often subject to very dirty politics, they live in glass houses, and they need to trust one another and trust the One who has called them into such service.

Dwelling in the Word helps a church body staff see that the power of the Holy Spirit is as real and as close as their practice of dwelling in the Word together. It shows them that God's Word, although containing 66 books of wisdom, is not there just to give them information. It is alive, and it witnesses to the power of the Triune God every time they make room in their lives for it to do so. The Spirit calls them together, presents the passage, one which they have learned well enough to recite from memory, and then surprises them with her power, her images, and their own recollections of what they've heard and seen in the past week, making it new, alive, the *viva vox*. The Spirit creates with them Christian community, a body where trust lives and where loving and serving the other is the way to live. How they dwell together determines how they *dwell* together.