

Chapter 6

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

Getting started

The staff at Church Innovations has ebbed and flowed over the years. We have had different executive directors, office managers, operations managers, research associates, and consultants. But since 1995 we have had only one dwelling text: Luke 10: 1-12.

This text is the passage associated in the Episcopal Church USA with David Oakerhater, an early Episcopal Native American evangelist and missionary. We were attending a retreat weekend with some leaders from the Minnesota Council on Indian Work of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota on David Oakerhater's Day 1995 to plan some work on resources for lay catechists. Every morning we read the passage, we heard it at lunch and at other times of the day, and we closed the evening with it. It shaped the flow of our planning and began to shape our imaginations.

At the close of the weekend, those Native American Episcopal leaders said to us, "This should be your dwelling story at Church Innovations. You are always sending out or being sent; you are on God's mission." So we took the passage and the habit back to our staff. At every staff meeting, we read the passage. We read it in multiple translations of the Bible. We had different people read each week. We allowed silence to unfold. We began sharing with one another where our imaginations got caught. Eventually we gave up pairing and reporting the partner's words, since after a few weeks we already had paired with everyone else there, and since our group was usually only 4-6 persons, our discussions were fairly lively anyway. Whenever we had a group of visitors or new consultants or students present, we added the partner portion of the exercise back in.

After a year or so, several of us who do consulting work on the road had introduced the practice in other places, and when the passage was read the following week at the home-team staff meeting, we often reported on the unusual new interpretations and experiences that had happened the previ-

ous week on the road. Sometimes we heard tales of a conflicted and anxious staff who had found new insight during a dwelling session. Sometimes we heard about an entire church assembly of 800 persons dwelling together around tables of 10, and how the dwelling took people out of a fighting posture and into a listening one.

But *why* keep this up for years?

Some staff found Dwelling to be a waste of time. To be sure, they valued the importance of the Word of God and the place of the scriptures in our mutual work, but we had so little time with one another that it seemed to waste those valuable moments. When at first they sensed the high commitment of the group to the work, they simply remained silent, hoping others would take the hint or not to prolong the discussion any more than they had to. As time progressed, they began to present such a negative body language in their silence that a couple of staff described it as turning the room to 40 degrees below zero. Indeed, the combination of silence and body language created tremendous discomfort for several staff members. Only after direct confrontation were we able to surface these staff persons' sense of our wasting time. This proved a most helpful and challenging conversation about dwelling in the Word and about our ways of working with one another.

About the same time, part of our home-team staff decided we had probably been too long in Luke 10:1-12. We hadn't made sense out of the harsh ending but we were not likely to come to any agreement about it, we had shared many of the same images multiple times, and perhaps we should move along to a different text.

The new text was chosen, and we moved. For some, this move was a good thing, at least for the first week or two. For others, it felt like being uprooted and placed in a new situation. We tried the new text for a month, but most of the group began referencing Luke 10, even while reading from the new text. We were longing for home. So those who had suggested the change graciously agreed to move back to Luke 10. We have never left it again.

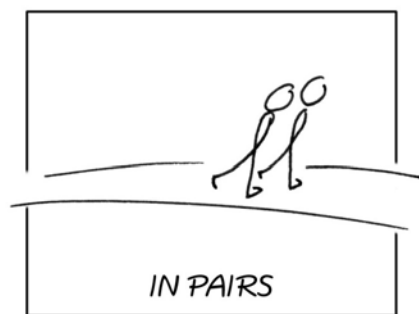
There is a book all about Luke 10 written by our friend Al Roxburgh. It discusses the missional nature of the text and how it provokes the believer's

imagination. This is not that book. This is a mere case study of our staff of researchers and consultants and what they have made of the passage over the years. But here are some of the things we have learned in the process of dwelling in this Word, things that have profoundly shaped who we are at Church Innovations.

Luke 10: 1-12

1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

At some point we noticed that the Lord sent people out in pairs.



We also noticed, after months and months of reporting our work to one another, that we did better when we went out in pairs. We were more responsive to the people who had invited us, we were sharper, we learned more when we were in a pair than when we were alone. It even worked when one of us went alone and then paired up with a person on the staff or in the church body or congregation that had invited us. I suppose we had always known that two heads are better than one, but one week during dwelling someone on the staff said, “Well, of course you did good work last week in that meeting. There were two of you. Even the Lord sends people out in pairs!”

“Well, of course,” you might respond, “of course that’s true.” But it is true, and until that moment we had not thought of pairing as a way to do better the work God had already given us to do. Now it became part of our vision of our work.

2 He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Some of our staff come from farming families. This image of the Lord of the harvest has always been a very powerful image for them. To see the Lord

of the harvest, standing at the edge of his harvest field, noting how few the laborers are, had the power to make us very sad indeed. And then one day someone said, “But look! It’s our job to pray to that same Lord of the harvest for laborers. Let’s do that!” And we began to pray for laborers. Sometimes it was for a laborer to join our own staff in a particular capacity. Sometimes it was for laborers in the Church at large. And sometimes it was for a very specific laborer for one of the groups we were consulting with.

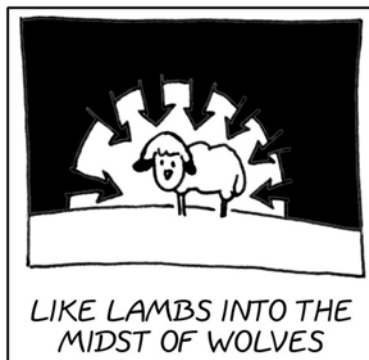


I do not know how many times this has happened, but I can remember at least eight times that, much later on, after hiring a new staff person or hearing of someone joining a project or staff we

had been consulting with, someone said, “Wow. That must be what happens when we pray to the lord of the harvest.” We don’t even realize the effect at the moment, but the Lord sends the laborers as we pray for them.

3 Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.

From time to time, the Church Innovations staff has felt, like most people, like lambs in the midst of wolves. As individuals, we have run into our share of hostile people, people who look like the enemy, people who take us to be the enemy, people who are ready to eat and who see us as tasty morsels to put away.



From my own background living for a time with a Greek family, I even look at the word “See” in verse 3 and remember my Greek mother’s warning to her young daughter: “Κυταξε! [kee-tax-ay!] See here!” Get going, but look out!

Yet recently during dwelling at our home-team

staff meeting, one of our members brought back from the road a beautiful new image: the wolves are ravenous, all right, but they are hungry for something they have never experienced – the full love of God in Christ Jesus, and Jesus the Lamb, in us, is what they seek. They do not seek so much to devour us as to gain Jesus.

What a difference it makes to a researcher, to a consultant, to the staff of an organization that partners with church bodies through change and conflict, to think of ourselves as bringing Christ as a Lamb to those who are hungry and cannot be satisfied with anything else.

4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.

Of course we have some fun with this verse on the road when we have any trouble dealing with luggage. But the notion of going just as we are, to be completely dependent on our host's hospitality, to come mostly just to listen and learn, that is very hard to do at first, especially when we are consultants and people bring us in expecting we will come with everything they need to solve every problem. Even we, when we first started out, believed we had to come up with all the solutions. And then this passage opened our eyes. The Holy Spirit had given every town and place where Jesus intends to go all the resources it needs. We bring only ourselves to that place and spend our time there accepting the gifts of the host. In focusing only on the host and not on what we bring, we prepare for the work ahead of us.

5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' 6 And if anyone is there who shares in peace your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.

Over the years we have spent a lot of time wondering what it looks like to extend the peace and see it rest on someone. And, in turn, eventually most of us have seen it happen and told stories of actually knowing where it rested. We were able to depend on that peace and that person when the work got difficult. We also see ourselves as the hosts in the story, offering hospitality. Of course we wonder then how many times someone has actually extended the peace to *us* and did not see it rest upon someone on our staff. Then what? At

least the guest does not go away empty-handed, since our Lord promises that the peace will return. But either way we see ourselves in the story, this verse gives us pause.

7 Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.



We have had an ambivalent relationship with this verse. It tells us to eat, for the laborer deserves to be paid, and we love that because we work hard for those who invite us to be partners with them. But it also tells us to remain in the same house and not move about, and yet we are always seeking (and the Lord is always delivering) new relationships. How does one make sense of that? We have come to believe that some verses, like this one, keep us on our toes, always trying to discern the Spirit's calling for us. Our best work has often been the long-term walk with a church body through change and trial. Perhaps this verse tells us to be in the relationship for the long haul and not simply for convenience's sake.

8 Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; 9 cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'

Once again, eating! Eating is seldom a problem for our research and consulting staff. Of course, we have been invited to many places where the food is unlike anything we've ever had before. Sometimes the food or the language or the customs or the culture is so different as to be very uncomfortable – painful, even. Yet if we do not sit with our hosts, eat with them, *be* with them, how can we know them? How can we walk with them through the challenges they face? I am not sure how many times we have seen actual curing of the sick, but there is no reluctance on our part to mention that our hosts are near to God's kingdom, that God has a preferred and promised future for them, and that the Holy Spirit has given all the necessary clues to

discern it. God's kingdom is indeed near.

10 But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. (NRSV)

Now, of course for mainline Christians, which, for the most part, our consulting and research group and our home-team staff are, this ending is troubling. We have gone over it and over it. We have wondered at the harshness of it. We have become frightened at the power of the sent ones to curse a whole town if they are not welcomed properly. We have noted that the proclamation is the same whether they are welcomed or not, but even that wisdom does not lighten the heaviness of the ending. We are left wondering what do with it in this day.

We are not alone in that wondering. More than once I have brought Luke 10:1-12 to a large event, given it to someone to reproduce on a powerpoint or projection, and begun leading dwelling in the Word only to discover that they have stopped the passage early at verse 11 or even at verse 9, leaving off the ending. When asked about this editing later, the person will always say, "Oh, that last is just too sour," or "Oh, we don't want to go *there*, do we?" or "Please. Not every line of scripture is important."

But somehow, all 12 verses have been teaching us for these many years. Even the last three. They give urgency to our task. They tell us not to linger if we're not welcome. They tell us that we won't succeed at everything and that we must move on. They even tell us that the curse, if it's the only thing some people in that town or place hear, may be the very way that the Spirit will get those people's attention. And so we wrestle.

On our home-team staff, our research group, our consultants group, and our Board we have Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, United Methodists, Covenanters, Baptists, Mennonites, Episcopalians (and

Anglicans), United Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Reformed Church of America, Evangelicals, and several other denominations. We also have hybrids of these and one or two persons who would never identify with any of these. And yet all participate in dwelling in the Word. It creates for us a story in which we are all speaking the same language, in which each of us plays a part, sometimes a different part every time we read it together. It shapes us, placing us into God's story. In this habit, we dwell in the life of God.