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ABSTRACT

THE PASTOR AS VITAL LINK: A STUDY IN HOW SEMINARY-  
EDUCATED PASTORS ENGENDER ENGAGEMENT  
WITH SCRIPTURE IN SELECT  
CONGREGATIONS

by

Jewel Gingerich Longenecker

Chair: Erich Baumgartner

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title THE PASTOR AS VITAL LINK: A STUDY IN HOW SEMINARY-  
EDUCATED PASTORS ENGENDER ENGAGEMENT WITH  
SCRIPTURE IN SELECT CONGREGATIONS

Name of researcher: Jewel Gingerich Longenecker

Name and degree of faculty chair: Erich Baumgartner, Ph.D.

Date completed: July 2014

### Problem

The problem this study sought to address was the tendency of “ordinary readers” of Scripture to misuse the Bible on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand. The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. The conceptual lenses through which research data were compared to literature in the field included teaching methodologies proposed by Wink, Blair, and Borsch.

### Method

The study used a qualitative research design. It was field focused, utilized the “self” as the research instrument, used interpretation, employed expressive and first-

person language and voice, and paid attention to particulars. The study offers a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. The grounded theory grew out of interviews with six pastors who were chosen purposively. Pastors were chosen who (a) regularly lead adult Bible studies in their congregations; (b) are consciously utilizing tools of biblical interpretation gleaned in seminary as they prepare for and teach adult Bible studies; (c) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are enthusiastically engaged with Scripture; and (d) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are making use of tools of biblical interpretation. In addition, the grounded theory reflects interviews with participants in the studies these pastors are leading.

## Results

Five major themes emerged from interviews with pastors: (a) their formative experiences with the Bible; (b) their passion for biblical formation; (c) their understanding of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching; (d) their pedagogical approach; and (e) personal characteristics that support their Bible teaching. Although pastors came from diverse backgrounds and ministry settings, their experiences, perspectives and behaviors share a great deal in common. While pastors do not share a teaching *technique* in common, they do share an overall pedagogical *approach* in common, and they share much more in common than a pedagogical approach. This is particularly striking because the data were drawn through a “grounded theory” approach. Interview questions were open-ended and assumed no hypothesis regarding what kinds of

experiences, perspectives and behaviors pastors might share. Nevertheless, remarkable consistency is present in the findings.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that pastors' passion for the Bible, understanding of pastoral identity, personal characteristics, pedagogical approach, and formative experiences combine to empower pastors to successfully create communities of engagement around the Bible. It further claims that forming pastors who successfully lead ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible is the responsibility of many parts of the "ecology of ministry," including congregations, regional and national church bodies, colleges and universities, seminaries, agencies, retreat and conference centers, publishers, and other supporting organizations. As pastors are being formed as children, growing into young adults, being equipped for ministry, being called to particular ministry assignments, and carrying out their ministries in various congregations and communities, all parts of "the system" have major roles to play in lighting the fire of passion for Scripture and in nurturing habits of mind and heart that support the development of effective pastor-teachers.

Andrews University

School of Education

THE PASTOR AS VITAL LINK: A STUDY IN HOW SEMINARY-  
EDUCATED PASTORS ENGENDER ENGAGEMENT  
WITH SCRIPTURE IN SELECT  
CONGREGATIONS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Jewel Gingerich Longenecker

July 2014

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WITH SCRIPTURE IN SELECT  
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## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM

#### **Introduction and Background of the Problem**

Christians have long claimed the Bible as a central source of authority for faith and life. Yet church members are often at a loss as to how to interpret the Scriptures. While academic biblical scholarship has flourished since its emergence in the 17th century, Bible readers outside the field of biblical studies often have not taken advantage of advances in biblical knowledge in their efforts to understand and apply Scripture to their lives. As in many fields of human endeavor, in the realm of biblical studies there is a substantial divide between academicians and “ordinary readers” (De Wit, 2004). The result is a troubling tendency among ordinary readers to misuse the Bible, on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand.

So, for example, Master of Divinity students at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), where I work, gain skills in literary criticism, socio-historical analysis, Hebrew and Greek language, source criticism, and canonical criticism, among others, with the expectation that they will become leaders who are “grounded in and continuously formed by the Bible,” according to the program’s stated goals (“Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary: Master of Divinity Educational Goals,” 2014). But at the same time, Mennonite church members in the U.S. exhibit a widespread lack of regular

engagement with the Bible (Kanagy, 2007) and in many cases a lack of familiarity with biblical interpretive tools.

The chasm between academic biblical scholarship and the use of the Bible in the church is found across denominations. Blair (2001), a pastor, Christian educator and practical theologian, sums up the issue:

For most of this century, the majority of ministers and Christian educators have received training in the use of historical-critical tools. For the most part, however, the laity in our congregations have not been taught even the simplest of these tools. . . . This lack of lay training has undermined the foundational tenet of the Protestant Reformation, which insists on the right and duty of every Christian to read and interpret the Bible. (pp. 70–91)

Lacking guidance in how to translate the technical tools taught in the seminary Bible classroom into something usable to the laity, pastors typically shy away from teaching them, Blair (2001) notes. They may sense the validity of these tools and use them themselves, but are unsure that what they learned in seminary has value in congregational teaching settings. “In my experience, teachers worry that using historical-critical tools will, at best, bore their adult students, and at worst, shake their faith” (p. 91).

How is it helpful to expose people in the pew to literary construction, ancient geography, the nuances of source languages, the relative reliability of manuscripts, or the editorial processes involved in putting the Bible together? Some may argue that only a few churchgoers are interested in such seeming minutiae and that these matters are best left in the hands of experts so that pastors are free to carry out the “real work” of attending to people’s spiritual needs.

## Misinterpretation of Scripture

Experience, however, tells a different story. Without access to scholarly tools, many Christians are prone to misuse the Bible or to give up reading it entirely. In the past century alone, mis-readings of Scripture have made the Bible a weapon in the hands of despots, a tool of perversion by church-going perpetrators of abuse, and a metaphorical club in the so-called culture wars. As Miller (2011) wrote, “A person alone on her couch with Scripture can . . . come to some dangerous conclusions: the Bible has, at certain times in history, been read to support slavery, wife-beating, kidnapping, child abuse, racism and polygamy” (pp. 46–51).

Radio preacher Harold Camping’s use of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation to predict a specific “end-times” date of May 21, 2011, illustrates the point. More alarming than his errant preaching, however, was the fact that so many of his listeners lacked the interpretive tools necessary to discern between a solid reading of Scripture and a shaky one.

Christians in earlier time periods also fell prey to leaders’ misinterpretations of Scripture. New Testament scholar Camery-Hoggatt (2007) gives several examples:

[Anesthesia, almost as soon as it was introduced] was condemned by church leaders on the grounds that freedom from pain was only to be found in heaven, and therefore it was both immoral and unchristian to try and escape pain while we’re still on earth. . . . The history of the church is filled with similar stories. Some nineteenth century theologians argued that Christians should not use subways because to do so would bring us closer to the underworld, and in that way expose us to the workings of the devil. In the same way, some twentieth century church leaders argued that Christians should not preach the gospel over the radio because radio waves were in the air, and who was the devil but the prince of the powers of the air? What these men were arguing doesn’t seem very sensible today; but to them, when they made those arguments, they seemed wonderfully clear and compelling. What this means is that the internal sense of rightness isn’t a very good measure of whether or not we’ve understood the Bible or applied it properly. We have to have a different yardstick for that. (p. 25)

That yardstick, Camery-Hoggatt goes on to indicate, includes making use of the hermeneutical tools used by biblical scholars.

### Disengagement From Scripture

While misinterpretation of Scripture is one part of the problem that results from the gap between biblical scholars and people in the pew, another aspect of the problem is the failure of many more liberal-leaning Christians to read the Bible at all. Seeing the failures of literalism, these believers question the Bible's relevance for moral and ethical matters. A 2000 Gallup and Simmons study found that moderates and liberals are less likely than conservatives to read the Bible frequently. Likewise,

those with more education are less likely to think that the Bible is a comprehensive guide to life than are the less educated. Forty-six percent of those with a postgraduate degree say the Bible answers basic life questions, compared to 72% of those with a high school education or less. (para. 2)

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg (2001) writes that many Christians, wanting to avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation, are unsure how to approach Scripture:

[These people] are less clear about how they *do* see the Bible than about how they *do not*. They are strongly convinced that many parts of the Bible cannot be taken literally, either as historically factual or as expressing the will of God. Some people who reach this conclusion leave the church, of course. But many continue within the church and are seeking a way of seeing the Bible that moves beyond biblical literalism and makes persuasive and compelling sense. (p. 5)

Similarly, pastors report that among liberal Christians, the Bible is increasingly suspect. One pastor-participant<sup>1</sup> in “Engaging Pastors: Jointly Tending to Excellence in Ministry,” a Lilly Endowment-funded AMBS project that involved conversations between AMBS professors and over 350 pastors, wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless identified in published materials, all church leaders and members have been given pseudonyms.



Biblical authority is a big issue. I find myself having to defend scripture in Sunday school from adults who have been Christians their whole lives. . . . Somehow there needs to be a way past the idea that a literalistic understanding of scripture is the only one. I can see how the church has been influenced much more by liberal theology than Christian theology and that makes things interesting. On a more sarcastic note, many of my boomers still believe they will solve the world's problems. If only people would be good, liberal thinkers like us, there would be no sin in the world! (P. Powers, personal communication, April 16, 2010)

Already in the 1960s and 1970s, James Smart (1970), a professor of biblical interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in New York, recognized the trend toward increasing disuse of the Scripture among mainline churchgoers. He placed the blame for this problem squarely on the divide between scholars and ordinary readers of the Bible.

The primary source of the Bible's failure to maintain its place in the life of the church and in the lives of Christian people is a multiple breakdown in communication: between Biblical scholars and those responsible for preaching and teaching, between preachers and people, and, not least, between the separate departments into which the faculty of a theological seminary is divided. (p. 27)

Smart's (1970) assessment has proved prophetic. The divide between academic biblical scholarship and the use of the Bible in the church persists undiminished in this century. This gap continues to cause ordinary Bible readers to ignore academic tools for biblical interpretation, resulting in a troubling tendency to misuse the Bible, on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand.

### **Context of the Study**

While pastors-in-formation at AMBS are exposed to a wide array of tools for interpreting Scripture, most Mennonite churchgoers are unacquainted with these tools. Even as AMBS and its sponsoring denominations, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, have stated expectations that pastors-in-formation will develop a biblical imagination and, in turn, equip members to read and study the Bible

("Ministerial Credentialing, Competencies and Education, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA," 2010), Mennonite church members in the U.S. exhibit a widespread lack of regular engagement with the Bible (Kanagy, 2007) and in many cases a lack of familiarity with biblical interpretive tools.

Lacking necessary tools of biblical interpretation, many Mennonites are susceptible to embracing interpretations of Scripture at odds with Mennonite/Anabaptist teaching. For example, many Mennonites follow and support conservative talk show hosts, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, despite their public commentaries in direct opposition to stated Mennonite faith commitments. A case in point was Glenn Beck's March 2, 2010, radio broadcast in which he warned listeners, "I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. . . . They are code words" (Grant, 2010, para. 2).

A few months later in September 2010, Limbaugh declared that President Barack Obama's appeal to Jesus' teaching as a motivator to care for the marginalized was a corruption of Christian faith.

There's an effort by the left to say that Jesus was a socialist, and they are using this to turn many evangelical people into global warming people. We are the stewards of the planet and so forth. There's an ongoing effort here to corrupt Christianity.

That a sizeable number of Mennonites listen to and applaud these conservative cultural icons is a matter of significant disquiet among seminary-educated Mennonite leaders. Social justice is a matter Mennonites have taken seriously for many years and for which biblical underpinnings have long been established in denominational statements. For example, Article 22 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Mennonite Church USA, 1995) declares,

As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. He has called us to find our blessing in making peace and seeking justice. We do so in a spirit of gentleness, willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

The statement is followed by exposition of several supporting biblical passages.

Given the problem of misinterpretation of Scripture in some conservative quarters of the Mennonite church, Mennonites on the more liberal end of the theological spectrum often shy away from Bible study. They sometimes take the position of some post-structural literary theorists, claiming that the only meaning to be found in Scripture is the meaning individual interpreters give it. At the 2011 assembly of Mennonite Church USA, delegates stated that “Scripture has been used in ways in the past which are abusive and harmful, further alienating a generation from it” (Shue, 2011, p. 2). As Jacobs (2013) reports, “This sense of the Bible as violent, racist, and patriarchal creates ‘difficult barriers for modern readers’” (p. 3).

“I’m not sure the progressive wing of the church takes the Bible all that seriously,” a Mennonite denominational leader said recently (J. Pauls, personal communication, July 12, 2011). Confirming his point, a youth sponsor at the 2011 Mennonite Church USA Youth Convention in Pittsburgh stated, “I’ve learned that you can’t discuss the Bible with conservatives so I don’t even try. I’ve decided that when it comes to [this issue], it’s not about the Bible; it’s about my experience” (L. Lauver, personal communication. July 7, 2011).

Mennonite leaders are increasingly naming this growing trend. Dr. Ervin Stutzman, on taking his position as executive director of Mennonite Church USA in January 2010, named Bible study as an area of major concern for the denomination. “Among his goals for the church, Stutzman hopes to revive the practice of reading Scripture together,” the *Mennonite Weekly Review* reported (Amstutz, 2010, p. 2).

Similarly Mennonite Church Canada announced an initiative to reclaim Bible study as a vital aspect of the denomination's life. In an effort to begin addressing the problem of growing disuse of the Bible, its 2012 biennial assembly was devoted to an historic two full days of Bible study and just one half-day of business. The stated theme was: "Dusting Off the Bible for the 21st Century." According to the denomination's website, "for the past 18 months, Mennonite Church Canada's Faith and Life Committee (FLC) has been developing a platform to renew focus on biblical interpretation, equipping churches to respond biblically to the influences and challenges of the 21st Century" (Froese, 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Because the problem of disengagement from and misinterpretation of Scripture appears to be widespread in the Mennonite church, the gap between AMBS and its constituent congregations in the area of Bible teaching must be addressed. A different approach to teaching and learning the Bible in the seminary and church is clearly needed.

Fortunately, some seminary-educated pastors are already leading churchgoers into deeply formative practices of Bible study that draw on tools of biblical scholarship learned in seminary. Defying trends toward misinterpretation and disengagement, these pastors are bridging the gap between their own seminary learning and people in the pew. In the vein of what Pascale, Sternin, and Sternin (2010) call "positive deviance," these pastors are examples of "outliers who succeed against all odds" (p. 3)—people "who have succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others" (p. 4). I believe the Mennonite church and the Christian church broadly, including

congregational pastors, seminary professors, and denominational leaders, would do well to learn from these pastors.

The problem this study sought to address was the tendency of ordinary readers to misuse the Bible on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible.

### **Research Question**

I explored the following question: How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?

### **Rationale**

Even as Mennonite biblical scholars study the Bible in depth and guide Master of Divinity students to do the same, North American Mennonite churches struggle with a growing disuse of the Bible and uncertainty about how to appropriate it. The problem of churchgoers' tendency to misuse or give up studying the Bible has become urgent.

Mennonite pastors are uniquely poised to address this problem, serving, as they do, as vital links in the "chain" or network of relationships—the "ecology of ministry"—that connects congregations, conferences, denomination and seminary in the work of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Further, Mennonite pastors are charged with making God's Word known. According to the denominations' most recent polity statements,

The Mennonite minister's central concern is to know God and to proclaim God's Word to all the world—in the church and outside it. The minister's life is, therefore, a life of study, prayer, contemplation, and action in and on the Word of God, God's creation, the lives of people, and the events of life in the world. (Thomas, 1996, p. 21)

Pastors, however, face multiple obstacles to teaching the Bible well. Most significantly, despite concise denominational statements like the one quoted here, confusion abounds regarding the role of the Mennonite pastor. Both the denomination-wide *Pastorate Project* (Meyer & Sutter, 1995) and the AMBS *Engaging Pastors* project (Longenecker, 2010b) discovered that pastoral responsibilities in Mennonite churches are ill-defined. After participating in an *Engaging Pastors* Pastor-Faculty Colloquy in 2007, AMBS professor Arthur Paul Boers (2007) reported, “Teaching—especially teaching Scriptures—is one place where we again encounter issues of pastoral leadership and authority. It is not clear whether churches see teaching as intrinsic to the pastoral vocation” (p. 1).

Along with lack of clarity regarding whether Mennonite pastors ought to spend time in Bible teaching, questions of authority surround the pastoral role. The *Engaging Pastors* project declared, “There is an urgent need and opportunity for pastoral, biblical and teaching authority to be strengthened in the Mennonite church” (Longenecker, 2010b). This conclusion was drawn from extensive conversations with over 350 North American Mennonite pastors and church leaders over a 5-year period.

At the *Engaging Pastors* Summative Conference in early December 2010, then Mennonite Church Canada Executive Secretary Robert J. Suderman, a member of the event's Listening Committee, reported that a question emerged consistently among the 103 attendees: “How do we read the Bible well, and to whom do we look to tell us that

we've read it well? And who can take the authority and make it so?" (Longenecker, 2010b, p. 108).

Nevertheless, despite great obstacles, there are churches where seminary-educated pastors are leading their church members to high levels of engagement with Scripture, regularly using interpretive tools drawn from the resources of biblical scholarship. The focus of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. The study provides important information to pastors, seminary professors and administrators, and conference and denominational leaders. It sheds light on practices Mennonite pastors might try in their own congregational settings and on what Mennonite seminaries, congregations, conferences and denominational leaders might do to better prepare pastors for the work of equipping church members for informed Bible study.

### **Conceptual Lenses**

This study was informed by the conceptual work of three experts: Wink (2009), a professor of biblical interpretation prior to his death in 2012; Blair (2001), a pastor and practical theologian; and Borsch (1995), a seminary Bible professor who became a denominational leader. While I did not expect any of the pastors whom I studied to follow precisely the recommended techniques of Wink or Blair, or to have experienced exactly the formative seminary experiences promoted by Borsch, I looked for resonance and dissonance between their experiences, behaviors and beliefs and those espoused by these authors.

Wink (2009) offered Bible teachers a three-part approach to group Bible study that combines biblical scholarship with the insights of Jungian psychology. First, said Wink, teachers should lead participants in honoring the “foreignness” of the biblical text by guiding them into the use of interpretive tools. A key part of teaching these tools lies in knowing how to ask good questions, he says.

What kinds of questions are important to ask? The critical questions are provided by the critical problems which the text presents: How do several versions of a saying differ, and why? What are the customs that are presupposed in the narrative? How might the statement have been modified by the church in order to apply it to later crises and conflicts? (pp. 88–89)

Through these and many other examples Wink (2009) showed teachers how they can formulate good questions to help participants discover contextual clues in and behind the text.

Second, participants need to “imaginatively slip into the skins of the characters of the story, or probe our understanding for apprehension of the meaning of the symbols, images, or metaphors employed” (Wink, 2009, p. 39).

Third, Wink (2009) insisted on the importance of application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain, including such things as painting pictures, writing dialogues, miming, doing role plays, making up skits, working with clay, and moving to music, among others. Although it is tempting for teachers to skip this part because of possible resistance on the part of participants, it is a crucial aspect of the transformation process, says Wink.

Blair (2001) draws from both adult learning theory and the field of biblical studies in offering a “Five R’s model” for congregational Bible teaching. The five R’s include: Remembering, Revisiting, Reflecting Critically, Reinterpreting, and Responding.



“Remembering” asks participants to share what they already know about the particular biblical text under investigation. Students share their impressions, perceptions, stereotypes and general knowledge of the text.

“Revisiting” is aimed at helping participants uncover “the story behind and content in the text” through the use of planned questions (Blair, 2001, p. 56). Participants are invited to consult atlases, Bible dictionaries, concordances, commentaries and each other in an effort to gain background information about the text. This step may be carried out over several class sessions, with the goal “to revisit the text a number of times, going deeper each time, and in the process learning some simple tools of Bible study used by scholars and pastors” (p. 56).

“Reflecting critically” calls on participants to think carefully “about two texts and how they meet: the texts of their lives and the Bible texts” (Blair, 2001, p. 61). They might ask questions such as, “How was your understanding changed? What new insights have come to you? What issues in your life does this text address? Are there social-political ones this speaks to? Why?” (p. 75).

“Reinterpreting” invites participants to re-tell the text from the point of view of someone within the text. Re-telling can take many forms; examples include role-playing, story-telling, sermon-writing, skit-making and letter-writing.

“Responding” asks, What does this [text] call me to do? What are the messages for today that speak to the lives of the learners, to the communities in which they live, and to the larger society and world? Participants may make a covenant with one another regarding what action the group might take jointly, or individuals may journal or reflect in silence on how they will live differently in light of what they have learned from the

biblical text. Blair (2001) sees importance in ending the study with both stated plans for action and incorporation of rituals such as prayers of commitment that reflect those plans.

Borsch (1995) lays out several guiding concepts for teaching the Bible in the seminary context as a way to better form congregational pastor-teachers of the Bible. These include what he calls: (a) holism; (b) social setting; (c) dialogue with the text; and (d) biblical theology.

Holism speaks to the importance of both the whole person and “persons in community” in the educational process.

A comprehensive view of education includes a tradition of understanding as well as contemporary information and knowledge. It gives important roles to imagination, the creative intellect, and the interaction between theoretical understanding and the ‘making and doing’ aspects of life. Emotions and the body as well as the mind are part of learning and education. (Borsch, 1995, p. 355)

Holism includes but goes beyond positivist notions of what can be objectively learned, to embrace the “larger context of life and learning. . . . What is seen and understood always involves much more than the measurable and quantifiable” (Borsch, 1995, p. 355).

“Social setting” for Borsch (1995) refers to the importance of highlighting for seminary students the social circumstances in which the biblical texts came to be. This work ought to be a much greater priority in Bible teaching, says Borsch, because it is in getting in touch with the lived experience of people in ancient times that contemporary readers become engaged.

It is through better appreciation of the density and “thickness” of daily life conditions of past ages that we today may also come to sense commensuralities, common denominators, and forms of kinship. An understanding of the circumstances which conditioned the hopes and fears, the dreams and prevarications, the heartbreaks and valor of biblical people, can bring us nearer to them. (p. 356)

Through the notion of “dialogue with the text,” Borsch (1995) challenges seminaries to become “scriptural communities” in which all members are regularly involved in communal reading and reflection on Scripture, and in which “various voices can be heard and all experience and insight have value. Diversity becomes of particular significance in such a community and will be missed when it is not present” (p. 357). This regular engagement with Scripture in a communal context will prepare seminary students for working with the Bible in congregations, says Borsch. In this type of setting,

a context for biblical interpretation is fashioned which has strong parallels with those of other scriptural communities outside the seminary. . . . The student gains not only information but also experience in use of the Bible which can be carried over into other communities. Indeed, one can ask whether, if this does not happen in seminary, it is likely to take place with integrity for seminary graduates in congregational settings. (p. 358)

Finally, Borsch (1995) calls on seminaries to attend to the formation and articulation of a biblical theology that speaks to questions of the role and authority of Scripture and the place of Scripture in the life of believers and the church. Such a theology, says Borsch, will help students integrate the scholarly study of Scripture with the use and study of the Bible in contemporary life. This integration will serve a crucial function as students move into leadership roles in congregations.

Throughout my study I looked for points of convergence with and divergence from the work of these three scholars in the practice of the pastors whom I interviewed and observed.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. This research provides important information to

North American Mennonite pastors, congregational, conference and denominational leaders and seminary professors. Each of these kinds of leaders is deeply interested in the theological and spiritual formation of Mennonite church members. The findings of the study also shed light on what Mennonite seminaries can do to better cultivate emerging pastors to create communities of engagement around the Bible. In addition the study is of interest to pastors, denominational leaders and seminary professors from other denominations who also struggle with the issue of misuse and disuse of the Bible.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Ecology of ministry:** The

network of institutions that must work collaboratively in addressing challenges and in maintaining strong and vibrant religious communities. This network includes congregations, regional and national judicatories, colleges and universities, seminaries, independent agencies, retreat and conference centers, publishers, and other supporting organizations. (Longenecker, 2010b, p. 16)

**Exegesis:** Biblical scholars refer to the study of the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek, utilizing interpretive tools such as those named in “Tools” below, as “exegesis.”

**Exposition:** Biblical scholars refer to study of the Bible done in one’s own language as “exposition.” Exposition requires and builds upon exegesis and aims to express the meanings of biblical texts and to make application from the text to contemporary experience.

**Mennonite/Anabaptist teaching:** For the purposes of this study, “Mennonite/Anabaptist teaching” is defined as the teachings of the Mennonite Church in Canada and the United States as reflected in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Mennonite Church USA, 1995).

**Ordinary readers:** I borrow from De Wit (2004) in using the phrase “ordinary readers” to describe Bible readers who are not seminary-educated or have not otherwise pursued scholarly biblical studies.

**Tools:** The words, “tools,” “interpretive tools,” “tools of interpretation,” “scholarly tools,” “exegetical tools,” and “historical-critical tools,” are used interchangeably throughout the paper and include such things as: Hebrew and Greek language competency that enables translation from Hebrew or Greek texts into English; literary criticism, the study of biblical texts in light of their literary genre and contexts; socio-historical analysis drawing from the fields of history, sociology, anthropology and archaeology; canonical criticism, the use of a wide range of biblical texts and their contexts to understand the specific text being studied; and source criticism, the evaluation of one manuscript underlying the Hebrew or Greek text being studied relative to other manuscripts.

**Tools that nurture a pastor:** Some interpretive tools are intended by seminaries to serve congregations primarily by equipping pastors. Examples include a working knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek and a functional understanding of source criticism.

**Tools that nurture congregations:** Some interpretive tools can and should be passed along to congregational members for use in personal and corporate Bible study. Examples include: identification of the literary genre of a given biblical passage; word studies utilizing Bible dictionaries; and maps of biblical geography.

## **Assumptions**

This study assumes that there are better and worse ways to read and interpret the Bible and that exegetical and expository study methods can provide crucial information needed for interpretation of texts. It further assumes that the inverse is also true: lack of exegetical and expository methods can lead even well-meaning, dedicated believers far afield in their efforts to understand and appropriate the Bible.

Believers on both ends of the theological spectrum shy away from evaluating their own or others' interpretations of Scripture. On the one hand, conservative-leaning Christians sometimes resist the idea that one needs advanced education or sophisticated analytical techniques to understand Scripture. They observe that academic study of the Bible can lead to objectifying it and to a failure to grasp and communicate its simple message and spiritual power for everyday life. They remind us that Jesus' followers were poor and uneducated, and that the religious leaders of the day were often targets of Jesus' anger and rebuke.

On the other hand, many liberal-leaning Christians, seeing the failures of literalism, give up on the Bible's relevance for moral and ethical matters, saying that people will "make the Bible say whatever they want it to say," and therefore, it is not a reliable source for ethical and moral discernment.

I contend that when either the liberal or conservative view is taken to its logical conclusion, relativism reigns and the Bible is stripped of its authority. Such perspectives deny the Bible objective meaning and in turn deny its place as a key source of guidance for the church. Thus, the assumption that there are better and worse ways to read and

interpret Scripture, far from being evidence of academic snobbery, is instead evidence of a strong commitment to Scripture as the Christian's guide for faith and life.

While this study assumes that there are better and worse readings of Scripture, it does not assume that only professional exegetes and biblical scholars can learn from or understand the Bible, or that biblical scholars have a “corner” on truth found in Scripture. Rather, the experience of the church throughout the world makes clear that extraordinary wisdom can emerge from study circles, home fellowships, youth groups and a variety of adult education settings where participants share freely their insights into Scripture texts. Because, as De Wit (2004) points out, ordinary readers often bring a deep hunger to their Bible study, they are full of expectation and hope, and their capacity to learn from Scripture is profound. Similarly, recent efforts to read the Bible cross-culturally among Western Bible scholars such as Ekblad (2005) and De Wit (2004) expose the limits of Western, Eurocentric, positivist exegetical study methods. Such methods, while dominant in seminaries for most of the 20th century, are not the only lens through which we ought to approach Scripture.

Further, as conservatives have rightly pointed out, there are limits to the professional approach. Academic tools are no substitute for spiritually formative practices like prayer and worship, among others. Likewise, there are many other ways to study the Bible that deepen understanding and aid spiritual growth. Ancient practices like *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian spiritual exercises, as well as biblical storytelling, inter-cultural Bible reading and the use of the arts in Bible study are important examples. Seminary professors are beginning to draw more intentionally on these approaches. New

Testament scholar Martin (2008) rightly calls for seminaries to expand beyond historical-critical methods to include a variety of these pre-modern approaches.

Nevertheless, even as we own the concern that Bible study is not only for academicians, we must keep in mind the foundational place of scholarly tools in shedding light on the text. The present study assumes that although exegetical and expository tools are not sufficient for appropriating Scripture, they are necessary. The fact that such interpretive tools are not present and available to every church member should not deter church leaders from utilizing and sharing them to the greatest extent possible. This study assumes that pastors who wish to interpret Scripture well will seek ever-deepening understandings of the contexts, language and history of the Bible, and that they will use these interpretive tools in creating communities of engagement around Scripture.

### **General Methodology**

I chose to approach this research qualitatively because, in recent decades, qualitative inquiry has proven to be a much-needed source of in-depth understanding of teaching and learning practices. In the study of formal educational settings from kindergarten through graduate school, as well as informal educational settings such as the adult Christian education setting that was the focus of this research, qualitative approaches have shone a light on the particulars of contexts, bringing to scholarly conversations crucial data easily missed by quantitative social science methods. As Eisner (1998) points out,

So much of what is suggested to teachers and school administrators is said independent of context and often by those ignorant of the practices they wish to improve. If qualitative inquiry in education is about anything, it is about trying to understand what teachers and [students] do in the settings in which they work.  
(p. 11)



I believe this study has benefited from the growing body of educational research practices represented by qualitative inquiry, including six features typically present in qualitative studies. Qualitative studies: (a) are field focused; (b) utilize the “self” as research instrument; (c) utilize interpretation; (d) employ expressive and/or first-person language and voice; (e) pay attention to particulars; and (f) are judged by their “transferability” as opposed to their “generalizability” (Eisner, 1998).

#### Field Focused

Following Eisner’s (1998) six features of qualitative study (pp. 32-40), this study was first of all field focused. I went into churches, pastors’ offices and adult education classrooms to learn about teaching and learning related to the Bible. I paid attention to curriculum, settings chosen for teaching and learning, and non-verbal and inanimate features of each environment. I sought to “observe, interview, record, describe, interpret, and appraise settings as they are” (p. 11).

#### Self as the Research Instrument

In keeping with Eisner’s (1998) second feature of qualitative study this paper features the “self as research instrument” (p. 11). As the investigator I have named several biases I brought to this work. Naming these biases has helped me and others to recognize potential pitfalls in assessing the research—pitfalls that could result in conclusions that reflect my own experiences at the expense of giving voice to the experiences of those I sought to understand.

### Interpretation

I further utilized a third aspect of qualitative inquiry, namely interpretation. I sought not only to describe what I saw, but also to give an account of why pastors are acting as they do and why things are taking place as they do. I was interested in matters of motive, following Eisner (1998), and in the meaning and quality of experience of those whom I studied. I aimed “beneath manifest behavior to the meaning events have for those who experience them” (p. 35).

### Language and Voice

I have used expressive language and first-person narration in reporting the results of the study, in this way conveying feeling and emotion, in the German psychological tradition known as *Einfühlung* or in English, “empathy” (Eisner, 1998). As Eisner states, “Why take the heart out of the situations we are trying to help readers understand?” (p. 37).

### Attention to Particulars

I have taken advantage of qualitative researchers’ stalwart commitment to pay attention to particulars of each situation. In contrast to quantitative research, where particulars are largely lost as averages are formulated and experiences are generalized from random sampling, in this study particulars have been preserved and the unique experiences of each pastor valued and mined.

To accomplish this I approached research participants with open-ended questions made available to the participant in advance. I offered several of those questions to begin the conversation but then waited to see what direction the participant wanted to take. I

responded to participants by formulating new questions that I could not have anticipated in advance. This allowed me to gain a thick understanding of each pastor's experience.

### Judging Success in Qualitative Research

Because of my previous involvements in adult Christian education and seminary-level biblical study, I expected the experiences of those I studied to intersect at some level with my own experiences. In an effort to ensure that I was hearing not only my own voice but rather the voices of those I studied, I employed five well-known tools for judging success in qualitative research.

First, I sought coherence in the findings through "structural corroboration" (Eisner, 1998) and "member checks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further following Lincoln and Guba, I pursued peer review for the study while it was in process. Further, I sought consensus among other students of this problem. The literature review portion of this study plays an important role in helping me to situate my findings within the wider context of scholarly conversation about this topic. Finally, I sought the "usefulness of comprehension" that enables readers of the study to understand and make sense of aspects of Bible teaching and learning in the adult Christian education setting that might otherwise be unnamed, baffling or unclear (Eisner, 1998).

I approached the notion of "generalizability" in this study as a qualitative researcher. That is, I was deeply interested in the particular experiences of each of these pastors. I did not attempt to do random sampling or make claims that what is happening in these particular situations is representative of what is happening across churches broadly. Rather, I expect the reader to draw connections from this study to other contexts

where this information might be relevant. I expect readers to experience aspects of the study as “ringing true” to their own experience.

Within the broad field of qualitative inquiry I chose to draw most heavily on the “grounded theory” tradition. Grounded theory, which grew out of the field of sociology and is associated with such scholars as Glaser and Strauss (1967), is based on the premise that theory should not be imposed upon research at the outset, but should instead emerge in the process of data gathering and analysis. Research analysis begins with the first interview and continues throughout the study. Initial interviews lead to emerging theories, which are tested and re-conceptualized in relationship to further interviews. This recursive process leads ultimately to a “grounded theory”—that is, a theory growing “from the ground up.”

Through this project I sought to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors motivate ordinary readers to become enthusiastically engaged in informed study of the Bible. I interviewed six pastors who were chosen purposively “for their ability to contribute to an evolving theory” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118).

### **Summary**

The problem this study sought to address was the tendency of ordinary readers to misuse the Bible on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand. Although the problem of misinterpretation of the Bible and disengagement from it appear to be widespread, there are Mennonite churches where seminary-educated pastors are leading ordinary readers in Bible study, where members are engaged with Scripture and are learning to use interpretive tools drawn from the resources of biblical scholarship.

The focus of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how such pastors establish communities of engagement with Scripture.

The next chapter will provide a short literature review focusing on the pastoral and theological education literature, paying particular attention to: (a) history and documentation of the problem, from the perspectives of biblical scholars and theologians and from the perspectives of church leaders and church organizations; and (b) recent efforts to address the problem, both by biblical scholars and theologians and by church leaders and church organizations. I utilize sources from a variety of Christian denominations.

The third chapter describes the methodology of the study, including research design, research question, research instrument, purposive sample, data collection, and data analysis. It also includes a discussion of validity issues, generalizability and ethical issues.

The fourth chapter reports the results of the research and explores the five themes that emerged from the research. These themes include (a) pastors' formative experiences with the Bible; (b) their passion for biblical formation; (c) their understanding of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching; (d) their pedagogical approach; and (e) personal characteristics that support their Bible teaching.

The final chapter summarizes the research design, conceptual lenses and findings of the study. It also offers a discussion of the findings, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

While academic biblical scholarship has flourished since its emergence in the 17th century, church members outside the field of biblical studies often have not taken advantage of advances in biblical knowledge in their efforts to interpret Scripture. As in many fields of human endeavor, in the realm of biblical studies there is a substantial divide between academicians and practitioners. The result is a troubling tendency among ordinary readers to misuse the Bible, on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand. The focus of this study was to describe how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible.

This problem of misinterpretation of Scripture and disengagement from it, resulting from the gap between seminary and congregation in the area of Bible teaching, has surfaced repeatedly in pastoral and theological education literature in the past half century. The present study contributes to the scholarly conversation by generating a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors motivate ordinary readers to become enthusiastically engaged in informed study of the Bible.

In this chapter I review the pastoral and theological education literature, paying particular attention to: (a) history and documentation of the problem, both from the

perspective of biblical scholars and theologians and from the perspective of church leaders, practical theologians, religious educators and church organizations; and (b) recent efforts to address the problem, both by biblical scholars and theologians and by church leaders, practical theologians, religious educators and church organizations. I utilize sources from a variety of Christian denominations.

I limit my review to books and articles that focus on the problem as it pertains to the *intersection* of pedagogy and the use of scholarly tools for biblical interpretation. As I have written elsewhere, many books and articles focusing on *either* pedagogy for Bible teaching *or* principles of biblical interpretation have been published in recent years (Longenecker, 2010a). Books focused on pedagogy have highlighted adult learning theory, brain research and how to teach for multiple intelligences. Bruce's *7 Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults* (2000) and Bracke and Tye's *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (2003) are examples.

Similarly, books focused generally on biblical interpretation have helped to clarify and reinvigorate discussions of basic hermeneutic principles among pastors and teachers. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* by Wright (2005), *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Davis and Hays (2003), *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* by Peterson (2006), and *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask* by Oliver (2006) illustrate this growing field. Also in this vein and of particular interest to Mennonites are *How to Understand the Bible* by Ewert (2000) and *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* by Murray (2000).

These resources, while focusing on either pedagogy or biblical interpretation, stop short of addressing the question of how pastors can create communities of engagement that take seriously the exegetical/expository task. The current chapter therefore excludes review of such resources in favor of resources that address the problem directly.

### **History and Documentation of the Problem**

Biblical scholars, theologians, religious educators and practical theologians have written extensively about the divide between church and seminary in the area of Bible teaching, and the resulting problem of misinterpretation of Scripture and disengagement from it. In the following pages I highlight several examples in the literature.

#### **Perspectives of Biblical Scholars and Theologians**

In the 1960s and 1970s, Smart (1970), a Semitics scholar and professor of biblical interpretation, became an outspoken critic of the divide between academic biblical scholarship and the use of the Bible in the church. In *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (1970), he raised questions about why the Bible is much known and appreciated by expert biblical scholars but is increasingly unread in the homes of many Protestant believers. He pointed to a “disconnect” between seminary and church, blaming this disconnect for increasing disengagement with the Bible among church members:

The primary source of the Bible’s failure to maintain its place in the life of the church and in the lives of Christian people is a multiple breakdown in communication: between Biblical scholars and those responsible for preaching and teaching, between preachers and people, and, not least, between the separate departments into which the faculty of a theological seminary is divided. (p. 27)



In the next decade Farley (1988), a professor of theology in the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, observed a continuing divide between the kind of biblical studies practiced in seminaries and that known and used by church members. Wrote Farley:

Why is it that the vast majority of Christian believers remain largely unexposed to Christian learning—to historical-critical studies of the Bible, to the content and structure of the great doctrines, to two thousand years of classical works on the Christian life, to the basic disciplines of theology, biblical languages, and Christian ethics? Why do bankers, lawyers, farmers, physicians, homemakers, scientists, salespeople, managers of all sorts, people who carry out all kinds of complicated tasks in their work and home, remain at a literalist, elementary school level in their religious understanding? How is it that high-school-age church members move easily and quickly into the complex world of computers, foreign languages, DNA, and calculus, and cannot even make a beginning in historical-critical interpretation of a single text of scripture? (p. 92)

The following decade saw further discussion on the topic. Borsch (1995), a professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, took up this issue in an article entitled, “Teaching the Bible: Between Seminary and Congregation.”

Many returning students told me of their failures to use fully what they had been taught. Sometimes they lamented that people did not seem interested in historical criticism in any real depth—especially if it challenged cherished understandings. . . . On occasion they complained directly about what they saw as the failure of their [seminary] teachers to help them make useful in their ministries the information and historical perspective they had gained. (p. 352)

Many seminary graduates, evidently feeling unprepared to use their learning in their ministries, tend to lapse into biblicist or quasi-biblicist approaches. Or they largely ignore the Bible and instead concentrate on administrative, therapeutic, or other forms of pastoral ministry, often uninformed by scripture. (p. 354)

Borsch (1995) laments these reports and identifies traditional biblical studies curricula in seminaries as part of the problem.

The following decade as we opened a new century, New Testament scholar Borg (2001) identified the increasing hunger he observes among Christian believers for biblical interpretation that draws on scholarly tools.

[Many mainline Christians] are seeking a way of understanding the Bible that moves beyond biblical literalism and makes persuasive and compelling sense. Their numbers are growing; never before has there been so great an appetite for modern biblical scholarship among mainline Christians. (p. 5)

Other scholars continued the conversation. Examples include Rees's (2006)

*Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities*; and Melick and Melick's (2010) *Teaching That Transforms: Facilitating Life Change Through Adult Bible Teaching*.

#### Perspectives of Religious Educators and Practical Theologians

"Pastors in our time tend to rate education as a low priority," wrote Seymour (1983, p. 7), then a professor of Christian education at Scarritt College. He went on to note that the United Methodist bishops had recently made a call "to enhance the emphasis in theological schools on Christian education and to make the teaching of the Bible a major church priority" (p. 6).

Moore (1983), then a professor of Christian education at the School of Theology at Claremont, wrote about the ambiguous nature of the role of the pastor-as-teacher:

I recently listened as two pastors discussed their role in teaching ministry with each other. One expressed his longing to share with the lay members in his church what he had learned about the Bible and to teach them to use the tools of biblical criticism in their own study. The other pastor responded quickly, saying that he was not eager to teach lay members what he knew. He was more interested in being taught by them and in enabling them to teach one another. . . . They were debating whether their role is to teach or be taught. This is an important question to be sure, but to pose the question in this way is to assume that one has to choose between ministering *to* and *with*. (pp. 37–38)

"Bible teaching is the medium of neglect in the contemporary church," declared Wilhoit and Ryken (1988). Wilhoit is a professor of Christian formation and Ryken, a professor of English, both at Wheaton College.

Seminaries have required courses in homiletics, and nearly every month brings the publication of a new book on preaching. But where are the books and courses on teaching the Bible? . . . Effective teaching heads the agenda of the church's unfinished tasks. (p. 11)

The Protestant tradition has been quicker to assert the right and responsibility of Bible study in both the home and the church than it has been to equip the laity for this task. Many pastors have been trained to study the Bible from an academic perspective. In seminary they studied biblical languages and devoted considerable energy to learning the technical tools of biblical interpretation. Consequently, many pastors do not know how someone lacking biblical languages and technical exegetical skills can be trained to interpret the Bible well. (p. 38)

Bender (1997), a Mennonite pastor, religious educator and seminary administrator, asked Mennonites in a denominational periodical in 1990, "How long can we continue to neglect serious Bible study and still claim to be a church that is founded on the teachings of the Bible?" (p. 11). In another essay he called on the church to bridge the gap between the exegetical exercises of biblical scholars and the formation goals of the congregation:

Let us reflect once more upon the task of hermeneutics as it is expressed in teaching the Bible in the congregation. The basic goal of hermeneutics, as of teaching, is to clarify communication, to facilitate a conversation. The conversation we have in mind is the conversation between God and his people today.

The teacher operates on the assumption that this conversation can come alive in the congregation and that once again the living Lord of the text will speak through the text to his people now. . . . The task of interpretation has as its goal the revival of that original conversation. The task of reconstructing the ancient text and deciphering its meaning in its original setting is not the end of the process but one of the means to the end, a living conversation. We reconstruct the original conversation so that we may participate in it.

This requires not only all the cognitive skills of which we are capable in reconceptualizing the original conversation but also the rebirth of the imagination which produced the language which was the medium of that conversation. The early communities were shaped by a living response to the Lord who addressed them. . . . An analysis of that language without a rebirth of the experience to which it bears witness will be somewhat empty, like form without substance. (pp. 69–70)

Blair (2001), a pastor, Christian educator, and practical theologian, observed that pastors, lacking guidance in how to translate the technical tools taught in the seminary Bible classroom into something usable to the laity, typically shy away from teaching them. “In my experience, teachers worry that using historical-critical tools will, at best, bore their adult students, and at worst, shake their faith” (Blair, 2001, p. 91). However, she proposes that this does not need to be so:

Teaching adults how to use these interpretive tools empowers adults by opening them to a mature study of the Bible. It demonstrates that they are respected as learners who are capable of learning these methods of study and of understanding the complex questions raised when they are used. (p. 56)

Similarly, Mercer (2005), a professor of practical theology and Christian education, reports that her students express “frustration with the gap between church and seminary forms of teaching-learning.” One of her students wrote,

It’s been a bit dismaying to note how little of the kind of knowledge and skills I’ve been learning in seminary were effectively transmitted to me as a long time, active church member. Most of the knowledge and critical skills I could bring to bear on my religious experiences were developed almost exclusively outside the context of the church. (p. 285)

An AMBS *Engaging Pastors* pastor participant echoed the concern. “Those who were in [my adult Bible study] class a year ago expressed deep frustration that they had never before heard how the Bible came together and how it represents so many literary forms” (S. White, personal communication, May 27, 2010).

Mercer (2005) quotes a graduating Master of Divinity student as summing up the problem this way:

I know how I was taught the Bible in Sunday School and Adult Education in my church. But when I came to seminary, I experienced a really different way of teaching the Bible through my professors. Now that I’m graduating, it’s my job as pastor to teach the Bible in my church, but it’s clear to me that I don’t want to simply duplicate my own Sunday School experience, or my seminary classes, there [in the church]. Congregations are a different kind of context from

seminaries with different goals for learning. But my question is, what other options are there? Those two experiences plus a college course on the Bible as Literature are the only models for teaching the Bible that I know. I know something about the Bible, and I know a little about teaching. But when it comes down to it, I don't have a clue about how to teach the Bible in a congregation. (Mercer, 2005, p. 280)

Mercer (2005) goes on to say,

Many a seminary graduate, confronted with the inadequacies of their efforts simply to transfer the contents of their biblical studies classes into congregational classrooms, unfortunately decides that their seminary Bible courses were 'irrelevant to the practice of ministry' much to the chagrin of seminary biblical faculty. Or, alternately, some new seminary graduates settle for the myth that lay members of congregations only wish to approach the Bible devotionally, and 'cannot handle' or do not need access to contemporary critical biblical scholarship. They, therefore, treat Biblical [*sic*] education in congregations as a second-tier simplification or 'dumbing down' of the content of their seminary courses, rather than as its own contextually specific enterprise. (p. 281)

Other examples of religious educators and church leaders who have written on the topic include Newell's (2003) *Teaching the Bible Along the Devotional/Academic Fault Line: An Incarnational Approach to the Quarrel Between Love and Knowledge* and West's (2005) *The Bible in the Pew: Congregations and Critical Scholarship From the Pastor's Perspective*.

These works and others expose the divide between academic biblical scholarship and the church that results in misinterpretation and disuse of the Bible. They demonstrate the long history of this divide and its continued relevance as an issue among biblical scholars, theologians, religious educators and practical theologians.

### **Recent Efforts to Address the Problem**

In recent years, biblical scholars, theologians, religious educators, practical theologians and church publishers have proposed solutions to the problem of misinterpretation of Scripture and disengagement from it resulting from the gap between

seminary and church in the area of Bible teaching. In the following pages I highlight examples of their efforts.

### Efforts by Biblical Scholars and Theologians

Several Bible scholars and theologians have sought to address the divide between seminary and congregation in the area of Bible teaching. Wink (2009) offered Bible teachers a three-part approach to group Bible study. First, said Wink, teachers need to lead participants in honoring the “foreignness” of the biblical text by guiding them into the use of interpretive tools. Second, participants need to “imaginatively slip into the skins of the characters of the story” (p. 39) and “probe our understanding for apprehension of the meaning of the symbols, images, or metaphors employed” (p. 39). Third, participants should be invited into application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain.

Borsch (1995) recommends that seminaries employ a more holistic approach to the teaching of Scripture, a comprehensive view of education that “gives important roles to imagination, the creative intellect, and the interaction between theoretical understanding and the ‘making and doing’ aspects of life. Emotions and the body as well as the mind are part of learning and education” (p. 355). A change in teaching practices in the seminary will have an effect on how seminary-educated pastors teach the Bible in the congregation, he proposes.

Bechtel (2002), a professor of Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary, laments the way “the church seems to be suffering from a kind of collective amnesia” (p. 369) relative to biblical literacy. Based on her own experience and observation, she calls on seminary Bible professors to use methods that involve imagination, humor, and even

unorthodox behavior for graduate classrooms. She is more interested in student learning than in maintaining proper scholarly decorum. For example, she created a song to help her students learn the Minor Prophets. The song, sung to the tune of “Five Little Ducks Went Out to Play,” identifies each of the twelve Minor Prophets who “went out to pray.” Reflecting on this experience Bechtel (2002) writes,

Some may question whether this parody of a children's song is suitable for adult learning. Yet I have found that the incongruity created by a room full of adults singing a children's song is precisely what makes this exercise work. Incongruity often creates humor, and humor helps brand the experience on the students' brains. (p. 373)

Bechtel (2002) goes on to defend her learner-oriented approach to teaching, revealing the difficulty of violating the norms of traditional seminary classroom culture:

As I wrestle with my own embarrassment over publishing these undignified ideas in a major professional journal, it occurs to me that the most significant hurdle in using them with adults is not the students' discomfort, but the professors'. The students quickly overcome their fears of feeling ridiculous when they realize that this silly little song will save them hours of study time. The professors, on the other hand, live in fear that their colleagues will find out about the absurdities being stooped to in their classrooms. To that I can only say, ‘Get over it. If it helps people learn, it's worth it.’ (p. 374)

Like Borsch, Bechtel (2002) believes in the importance of engaging different parts of the brain and multiple learning styles. She, too, calls for holistic learning, saying, “Learning for the whole person is likely to involve the whole person” (p. 375).

Mercer (2005), in hopes of addressing the seminary-congregation divide in the area of Bible teaching and learning, requires her seminary students to teach the Bible through the lens of congregational studies. In one of her classes, which is team taught with a professor from the biblical studies field, students teach a particular Scripture text in a local congregation after spending several weeks conducting in-depth interviews and doing participant observations in that congregation. Mercer reports,

Most of the students participating in our course, although having considerable background engaging the Bible in church and academy, had not had formal opportunities to think about the Bible from the standpoint of education. . . . Consequently, our students entered this course . . . with a shared, unreflectively held notion of education as primarily transmissive in nature. In such a view, teaching involves the transmission of information from one source (a text or teacher) to another (usually a student). Accordingly, student reflections indicated similar limitations concerning how they had accounted for congregational contexts at the outset of the course, with some expressing an awareness of their own earlier treatments of context being centered on the degree of depth in the subject matter to be transmitted. In such a view, congregations comprised contexts calling for a less in-depth level of transmission of knowledge about the Bible, whereas seminaries comprised contexts that called for greater depth and detail. Students commented on how the processes of congregational studies helped them to understand congregations as peculiar entities which, while bearing certain elements in common with other forms of social organization and with other congregations, each constitute distinctive sites for teaching and learning. (Mercer, 2005, p. 284)

*Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*, edited by Roncace and Gray (2005), draws on the wisdom of nearly 100 college, university and seminary Bible teachers, providing over 200 exercises aimed at motivating students to grapple with the Bible while making use of scholarly tools. The contributors bring a keen awareness of the pedagogical issues that surround teaching the Bible. Their years of helping students move from a pre-critical approach to Scripture to an appreciation for and appropriation of scholarly tools provide insight into teaching the Bible to people from a wide range of theological backgrounds.

A supplemental volume also by Roncace and Gray (2007), *Teaching the Bible Through Popular Culture and the Arts*, is arranged by art forms (music, film, art, literature, other media) and contains numerous practical exercises for working with the biblical text through these various forms.

Although Wink (2009), Bechtel (2002), Borsch (1995), Mercer (2005), and others draw from their own teaching experience to offer these intriguing ideas for how seminary



professors and pastors might teach the Bible differently, they have not conducted studies to investigate the effectiveness of these recommendations. We cannot know, from the available literature, the impact of these teaching techniques on seminary students, graduates, active pastors or congregations.

### Efforts by Religious Educators and Church Publishers

Religious educators and church publishers have also sought to address the divide between seminary and church in recent years by making tools of biblical interpretation available to lay people in ways that encourage higher levels of engagement with the biblical text. They offer teaching techniques that combine wise pedagogical practice with a solid understanding of the field of biblical studies as well as curricula that provide guidance for teaching specific content.

*Effective Bible Teaching* by Wilhoit and Ryken (1988) bridges the scholarly-congregational divide by offering a unique blend of the traditional fundamentalist position on inerrancy with an unapologetic reading of the Bible as literature. Pastors and teachers can learn to teach well, the authors state, if they avail themselves of the opportunity to learn several basic practices of good Bible teaching as outlined in the book. Chief among the effective teaching practices is helping students approach the Bible as literature, attending to such things as literary genre and literary context.

Blair (2001) offers a “Five R’s Model” for congregational Bible teaching. The five R’s include: Remembering, Revisiting, Reflecting Critically, Reinterpreting, and Responding. Together these steps are intended to empower participants to utilize appropriate scholarly tools in a stimulating, supportive environment, helping participants to learn basic interpretive skills, and calling students to growth and change.

Writers and publishers of adult Christian education curricula vary widely in their apparent interest in bridging the gap between academic biblical scholarship and the life of the congregation. There are several, however, who are committed to making interpretive tools available to lay learners. The widely used Bethel Series, for example, states on its website,

The study uses a historical approach to the Hebrew-Christian heritage of faith with an overview of the Old and New Testaments. Hermeneutics, the study of the Scriptures in the context of the period in which they were written, brings a great understanding of the biblical narrative. (*Bethel Series: In a Nutshell*, 2012, para. 1)

Elsewhere the website declares, “There is no use of proof-texting in the Bethel Series” (*Bethel Series: Materials and Administrative Follow-through*, 2012, para. 2).

*The New Collegeville Bible Commentary* series published by Liturgical Press (Liturgical Press, 2013) does not purport to be a curriculum per se. Nevertheless these short commentaries on the various books of the Bible are used by many study groups of lay people who seek scholarly tools of interpretation in an accessible format. The commentaries provide substantial historical, literary, and canonical background, and, according to the publisher, seek to bridge the gap between academic and churchly study of the Bible:

Comprehensive and understandable, the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* series brings expert insight into the Old and New Testament to Bible study participants, teachers, students, preachers, and all readers of the Bible. Filled with fresh scholarship, the series provides vital background that helps bring the text alive. (para. 1)

Closer to the Mennonite church context, the *Adult Bible Study* curriculum from Mennonite publisher, Faith and Life Press, utilizes a mix of scholarly insights, pastoral wisdom and conversational storytelling to lead people through Scripture passages. Substantial time is given to explication of the text with questions of application growing

from the text. Writers are sometimes, though not always, biblical scholars. It is evident that the publishers are interested in bridging the academic/church divide.

The *Disciple Bible Study* of the United Methodist Church provides many helps for bridging the gap between scholars and lay people. It includes five study guides, each 34 sessions long, designed for weekly use. Weekly lessons include contextual background, maps, timelines and other helps. Each Bible study guide “uses biblical language and images and draws upon the work of scholars to aid understanding of the Bible” (“Bible Study,” 2013).

These curricula represent just a tiny sampling of the adult Christian education curricula available. While many church publishers show little concern for bridging the scholarly/congregational divide, the presence of several who do seek to address this divide points to the reality of the issue.

### **Summary**

As this brief review shows, the divide between seminary and congregation that results in the tendency of ordinary readers to misuse or disuse the Bible is well-established in scholarly and church literature. It has a decades-long history and continues to be a matter of interest and discussion today, and many have proposed responses to it. The present study contributes to the scholarly conversation by generating a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

While academic biblical scholarship has flourished since its emergence in the 17th century, church members outside the field of biblical studies often have not taken advantage of advances in biblical knowledge in their efforts to understand and apply Scripture to their lives. As in many fields of human endeavor, in the realm of biblical studies there is a substantial divide between academicians and practitioners. The result is a troubling tendency among ordinary readers to misuse the Bible, on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand. The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible.

#### **Research Question**

I explored the following question: How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?

#### **Research Design**

Within the broad field of qualitative inquiry I chose to draw most heavily on the “grounded theory” tradition. Grounded theory, which grew out of the field of sociology and is associated with such scholars as Glaser and Strauss (1967), is based on the premise that theory should not be imposed upon research at the outset, but should instead emerge

in the process of data gathering and analysis. That is, rather than beginning a study with a hypothesis, the grounded theoretician begins with interviews that pose open-ended questions. The researcher trusts that through a process of ongoing data analysis, a usable theory will emerge.

In grounded theory, research analysis begins with the first interview and continues throughout the study. After each interview the researcher takes time to reflect on and write about what emerged in that interview. As data are collected and analyzed, the researcher begins to identify categories, patterns, themes and what Corbin and Strauss (2008) have called a “story line.” Initial interviews lead to emerging theories, which are tested and re-conceptualized in relationship to further interviews. Constant, ongoing comparisons among the data lead to adaptations and refinement of these emerging theories. This recursive process leads ultimately to a “grounded theory”—that is, a theory growing “from the ground up.”

By using the language of “theory” as its ultimate conclusion, grounded theory research lends itself to ongoing refinement. Within a postmodern philosophical context this approach is precisely what is needed. A well-grounded theory challenges the post-modern notion that truth claims are outmoded, yet simultaneously honors the post-modern commitment to multiple perspectives. It keeps the researcher ever open to new, emerging information.

The topics addressed by qualitative inquiry are “emotion laden, close to the people, and practical” (Creswell, 1998, p. 19). This study is no exception. Therefore, the capacity to focus on individuals, to construct a study from stories and “epiphanies,” to “bracket” preconceptions, and to describe contexts—capacities associated more closely

with these other qualitative methods—are essential to the successful development of a grounded theory, and I have drawn heavily on them.

Through this project I have developed a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors motivate ordinary readers to become enthusiastically engaged in informed study of the Bible. I interviewed six pastors who were chosen purposively “for their ability to contribute to an evolving theory” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118).

### **Self as the Research Instrument**

As the investigator I want to name several biases I bring to this work. I expect that naming these biases will help me and others to recognize potential pitfalls in assessing the research—pitfalls that could result in conclusions that reflect my own experiences at the expense of giving voice to the experiences of those I am attempting to understand.

First, I am a seminary graduate and an occasional adult Christian education teacher. As a seminarian I learned skills of biblical exegesis that transformed my understandings of the Bible. At that time I began to wonder if the church had failed me in not providing these tools in the lay Christian education setting. While in seminary I attended a church in which a seminary professor/Bible scholar was my adult education teacher. In that environment I saw firsthand the positive difference scholarly biblical tools can make in the adult Christian education setting.

After graduating from seminary and taking a position in the wider Mennonite church, I began to observe Bible study in many churches firsthand. I noted the absence of scholarly biblical tools in many cases and an apparent lack of awareness of the availability of the tools. I experienced discussions leading to conclusions at odds with Anabaptist/Mennonite teaching that almost certainly would have gone a different

direction if tools of biblical scholarship had been utilized. I thus developed a deep desire to see the tools of biblical scholarship put to work widely in adult education classes in congregations.

Eventually I began to teach adult classes in my own church in Iowa. I drew on the tools of biblical exegesis I had learned in seminary in my preparation and in the class sessions. I heard much gratitude from participants in these classes, both for the classroom experience and content, and for introducing the interpretive tools. I received several invitations to teach additional adult classes. As a result of these experiences I concluded that people in my church found new life and hope in the Bible through the use of biblical scholarship, as I had also experienced.

I now work at a seminary as a developer and administrator of non-traditional and non-degree programs for church leaders and emerging leaders. In recent years I have been directing a major grant project funded by the Lilly Endowment aimed at understanding what makes for excellence in ministerial leadership. One aspect of this *Engaging Pastors* project was devoted to exploring the connection between teaching in the seminary and teaching in the church. As part of my overall work with the grant and funded by the grant, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Leadership. As part of my interest in the aspect of pastoral excellence having to do with teaching the Bible, I am pursuing this topic as a doctoral dissertation. Given my experiences as a seminary student, an adult educator, and now an administrator of programs for church leaders, I am deeply interested in the topic at hand.

Contrary to foundationalist notions of the necessity of researcher distance and “objectivity,” I believe my subjective involvement with the proposed research enhances

the project, allowing for thick description, true disclosure from the people with whom I have worked, discovery of deep (versus surface-level) meaning, and opportunities to uncover invisible obstacles and opportunities in the work of both adult Christian education and seminary education. I have tried to listen carefully, empathize, and build trusting relationships with the people I interviewed. Guba and Lincoln (1981) state that one of the “hallmarks of outstanding anthropological and sociological studies to date has been the empathy with which they have presented major actors, performers, and informants” (p. 140). With this in mind, I believe my personal familiarity with and closeness to this research has enhanced the project.

### **Purposive Sample**

I interviewed six pastors who: (a) regularly lead adult Bible studies in their congregations; (b) are consciously utilizing tools of biblical interpretation gleaned in seminary as they prepare for and teach adult Bible studies; (c) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are enthusiastically engaged with Scripture; and (d) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are making use of tools of biblical interpretation. In addition I interviewed participants in the classes these pastors are leading.

Finding pastors for the study required a good deal of initial sleuthing on my part. In a small pilot study I conducted I discovered that the task of finding pastors and lay people in my immediate vicinity who fit the criteria was more difficult than I had expected. Therefore, to find pastors for this study, I asked: (a) seminary Bible professors (at AMBS and beyond) for recommendations of pastors who fit the criteria; and (b) area conference and denominational leaders from Mennonite Church USA for pastor



recommendations. As part of the interview with each pastor I asked for the names of Bible study participants, seven of whom I also interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

My primary methods of data collection included: interviews with pastors; interviews with participants; observations of Bible studies in session; review of study materials used by pastors and participants; and a journal. Data collection was aimed at uncovering information about my research question: How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?

#### **Interviews With Pastors**

To “get at” the research question above I asked pastors several of the questions outlined below. I provided pastors most of the questions ahead of the interview to stimulate thinking. Some questions went unasked in some interviews, and additional questions emerged. I highlighted in advance of the interviews my request for names of participants. Possible interview questions for pastors and participants appear in Appendices A and B.

#### **Observations**

In conjunction with pastor interviews I visited four Bible study sessions. As a participant observer I paid attention to the settings chosen for teaching and learning, inanimate features of the environment, the shape and content of the lessons, the behaviors of the pastor-teachers, and the behaviors and non-verbal cues of participants. I recorded my observations immediately after each session.

## Review of Study Materials

As part of each visit to a Bible study I requested the opportunity to review copies of the curriculum or other study materials the pastor was using to lead the study, as well as materials the participants were using as part of the study. I included observations of these curricula in my journal.

## Journal

In addition to field notes, I kept a journal as I moved through the process of conducting interviews and attending Bible studies. The journal provided a place to “think out loud” about what I was discovering and to help me keep learnings from the early interviews in mind as I moved further away from them in time. I also used the journal to reflect on conversations with colleagues, pastors not in the study, professors and other interested people, as well as my own internal stirrings related to the research.

## Data Analysis

I recorded and transcribed (or had someone else transcribe) each interview. Immediately after the first interview I began the process of “memoing”—recording my reflections on what I heard, including key concepts and relationships between concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This allowed analysis to commence immediately and helped to ensure that insights were not lost in the long time periods between early interviews and later interviews.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) helpfully point out that memos are crucial to the analytic process:

Qualitative analysis involves complex and cumulative thinking that would be very difficult to keep track of without the use of memos. . . . [Memos] force the analyst to work with concepts rather than raw data. Also, they enable analysts to use

creativity and imagination, often stimulating new insights into data. Another function of memos and diagrams is that they are reflections of analytic thought. A lack of logic and coherence of thought quickly manifests itself when analysts are forced to put ideas down on paper. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 119–120)

As Corbin and Strauss (2008) state, the many purposes of memos include: “open data exploration; identifying/developing the properties and dimensions of concepts/categories; making comparisons and asking questions; elaborating the paradigm: the relationships between conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences; and developing a story line” (p. 118).

In earlier work Strauss and Corbin (1990) laid out several steps for memo writing: (a) “open coding” in which the researcher reviews the text looking for categories that can be fairly ascribed to particular words, phrases or ideas; (b) “axial coding,” in which the researcher seeks to connect the categories to each other; and (c) “selective coding” aimed at building a “story” from these interconnected categories. While I find these earlier constructs helpful, it is also interesting to note that in their 2008 work Corbin and Strauss moved from encouraging researchers to think in terms of moving through these stages to calling on researchers to “just get into the habit of writing memos” (p. 118). This shift in strategy came about in response to Corbin and Strauss’s discovery that beginning researchers tend to focus on “getting it right” sequentially at the expense of the “generative fluid aspect of memoing” that they see as much more important (p. 118). In light of their concern I didn’t move through the coding process in a sequential or rigid way, but I did find that identifying concepts, connecting them to each other, and ultimately finding a story line or overarching theory were significant, interrelated aspects of the project.

Along with memos I made periodic use of “conditional matrices” or diagrams to help me see a “wide range of conditions and consequences related to the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 151). Through the wonders of Dedoose software, I used diagramming early on and adjusted it continuously throughout the research process. These diagrams helped me to analyze the data and see conceptual connections among the data as the study went along. Ultimately these memos and diagrams built on data from interviews formed the basis of a grounded theory that addresses the question of how pastors are establishing communities of engagement around the Bible.

### **Validity Issues**

Because of my previous involvements in adult Christian education, seminary education and biblical study, the experiences of those I studied intersected at some level with my own experiences. In an effort to ensure that I heard the voices of those I interviewed rather than only my own voice, I employed five well-known tools for judging success in qualitative research.

First, I sought coherence in the findings through “triangulation” (Merriam, 1988) or what Eisner (1998) calls “structural corroboration” (p. 55) to draw from multiple sources of information. Second, I did “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), asking interviewees to review and give feedback on my summaries and interpretations of our conversations. Third, further following Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (1998), I pursued peer debriefing for the study while it was in process, seeking out “an individual who keeps the researcher honest, asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations, and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (p. 202). Fourth, I sought

consensus among other students of this problem; that is, I looked for clues that what I am learning in my research “rings true” with what others who study in this area have found. The literature review portion of this study plays an important role in helping me to situate my findings within the wider context of scholarly conversation about this topic. Fifth and finally, I sought the “usefulness of comprehension” (Eisner, 1998, p. 58) that will enable readers of the study to understand and make sense of aspects of Bible teaching and learning in the adult Christian education setting that might otherwise be unnamed, baffling or unclear.

### **Generalizability**

I approached the notion of generalizability in this study as a qualitative researcher, believing that it is the readers, rather than the investigator, who will determine whether the findings have relevance to the Bible teaching situations of others. As Eisner (1998) states,

In conventional statistical studies in the social sciences, the construction of a generalization is left to the researcher. . . . The vast majority of conventional research studies in education generalize from nonrandom samples. Thus it is the *investigator* who makes the claim that the study yields particular generalizations or that there are no grounds as yet to reject the theory that was used to generate the findings.

In qualitative case studies the researcher can also generalize, but it is more likely that readers will determine whether the research findings fit the situation in which they work. The researcher might say something like this: “This is what I did and this is what I think it means. Does it have any bearing on your situation? If it does and if your situation is troublesome or problematic, how did it get that way and what can be done to improve it?” The logic of qualitative studies is softer—it’s more analogical. (pp. 203–204)

Following Eisner (1998) I sought to understand what “life lessons” pastors and seminary professors might gain from the experiences of six pastors who are creating

communities of engagement around the Bible. What skills, images, and ideas emerged from these pastors that can be transferred in some way to other situations?

I was deeply interested in the particular experiences of each of the pastors I interviewed. I did not attempt to do random sampling or make claims that what was happening in the particular situations of interviewees is representative of what is happening across churches broadly. Rather, I expect the reader to draw connections from this study to other contexts where this information might be relevant. The extent to which this study provides “concrete universals”—the “use of the particular to say something about the general” (Eisner, 1998, p. 203)—will be determined by readers rather than by me as researcher. This kind of “transferability” emphasizes the one-to-one nature of qualitative research, which is an important part of what this study has to offer.

### **Ethical Issues**

Prior to beginning my research I obtained approval for this study of adult human subjects from the Andrews University Internal Review Board (IRB). Upon receiving IRB approval I described my project to prospective interviewees. I shared with them my intention to report on the findings of this study in a doctoral dissertation and the possibility that I will submit this work for publication.

I described for interviewees my role as researcher. I promised all interviewees a certain measure of confidentiality in the reporting and publication process. I informed them that I expect to achieve confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and careful attention to descriptors. I informed interviewees that I would invite them to comment on and approve the confidentiality level of the report prior to my submission of it. I

explained that I would not seek the approval of participants for my interpretation of events or the content of the report.

Prior to each interview I provided the interviewee with a protocol that described the background to the problem, the problem, the purpose of the study, my research question and an overview of my research methodology. I included in the protocol a request for the interviewee's written consent to participate in the research study and received consent from each participant.

### **Summary**

To explore the question, "How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?" I developed a qualitative research study drawing on the "grounded theory" tradition. My primary methods of data collection included interviews with pastors, interviews with participants, observations of Bible studies in session, review of study materials and a journal. Data analysis began immediately after the first interview and continued throughout the study. I employed five well-known tools for judging success in qualitative research: drawing from multiple sources of information; asking interviewees to review and give feedback; pursuing peer review; looking for clues that what I am learning in my research "rings true" with what others who study in this area have found; and seeking the "usefulness of comprehension" (Eisner, 1998). Through full disclosure of the process to interviewees and the use of written consent forms I ensured an ethical research effort. Through these steps I developed a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are establishing communities of engagement around the Bible. Even as I offer a grounded theory, I believe that readers, rather than the

investigator, will determine the usefulness of the theory for other Bible teaching situations.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

The findings provide insight into the research question: How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?

The study focused on the experiences of six Mennonite pastors and seven participants in their Bible studies. Pastors hold Master of Divinity degrees from six different denominational seminaries, including from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Eastern Mennonite Seminary. Pastors serve in congregations across Mennonite Church USA. They are from five regional conferences. The churches they serve are located in small cities as well as urban and rural communities. Their congregations range in size from 30 to 300. They are lead pastors, church planters, solo pastors and associate pastors. They carry full-time and part-time roles. Two pastors are women; four are men. Three participants are women; four are men.

Pastors lead Bible studies for adults in their congregational settings on a regular basis. Participants in their Bible studies are young adults, adults in their 40's, 50's, 60's, and elderly adults. Relatively few participants are in their 30's.

The frequency of study sessions includes: meeting weekly for a Sunday school quarter; meeting weekly for the summer; meeting weekly for the school year; and meeting bi-weekly throughout the calendar year.

Five major themes emerged from my interviews with pastors. These included (a) pastors' formative experiences with the Bible; (b) their passion for biblical formation; (c) their understanding of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching; (d) their pedagogical approach; and (e) personal characteristics that support their Bible teaching.

### **Pastors' Formative Experiences With the Bible**

Pastors reported many formative experiences with the Bible on their way to becoming pastor-Bible teachers. They were raised in religious households in a variety of denominations. As young adults they engaged Scripture. Also as young adults they made consequential choices, experiencing major shifts in their theology. Their seminary experiences further formed their approach to the Bible. They had mentors who were engaged with the Bible and present at key points in their lives.

#### **Raised in Religious Households in a Variety of Denominations**

Pastors grew up in strongly religious homes from different denominations. One was raised Mennonite. Three were raised in conservative Baptist homes, including two who called their childhood faith "fundamentalist." One was raised United Methodist. One was raised Catholic until his teenage years, when his mother began to attend a Seventh-day Adventist church plant. Whatever the denominational background, family members modeled engagement with Scripture and with the church.

#### **Family Members Modeled Engagement With Scripture**

Family members, especially parents and grandparents, modeled engagement with Scripture by holding the Bible in high regard, studying it, memorizing it, and talking

about it. Daniel, who was raised Catholic, clearly recalls when the Bible first became a factor in his life:

I remember one day my mother was looking for a Bible. She asked my father if we had a Bible. My father said that, yes, there was a box in the other room with a whole bunch of books, and yes, he remembered seeing a Bible in there. And then my father asked, 'WHY?! Why do you want to read the Bible?' She said she just wanted to read it, but he kept saying, 'Why are you going to read the Bible?!' That stuck in my head. My mother had begun to read the Bible when she approached our neighbor, who was a Seventh-day Adventist church member, and asked for help because she was reading the Bible without understanding it. As they got together regularly, they invited more people to come to what became an informal Bible study and then the beginnings of a church plant.

Daniel said this experience made him curious about the Bible and glad to later receive one of his own:

My grandma was a very devout Catholic and she was the one who gave me my first Bible, which I still have with me. To my surprise, my grandparents argued about the Bible. I never saw them reading it but they had open conversations about it and somehow I heard that and became interested. I also remember a couple of relatives who would stay with us quite often and they would always read the Bible quite a lot.

Thomas remembers often seeing his grandfather study the Bible:

I grew up under my grandfather's ministry. I spent time watching him study. He had a library in his home and was surrounded by theological books. He didn't have a formal education for ministry but took correspondence courses from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He preached from the Scofield Notes. My father was a gifted teacher and taught for an insurance company. He trained salesmen and was a natural teacher and had a teaching degree. He also taught Sunday school for as long as I can remember. I can't remember a time when the Bible wasn't important, in terms of studying it, and frankly, it was probably placed in somewhat of an idolatrous place in some respects.

Elena remembered:

Growing up, every time I said I was bored my Dad would say, 'Go read your Bible!' I got so irritated! I remember being so disgusted with him at the time. He would offer to pay us to memorize big sections of Scripture. But it's hugely formative even if you are disgusted at the moment. . . . I feel like I've been studying the Bible for a really long time. When I was twelve or thirteen, my mother stumbled on a box of her old journals. I was going through a hard time and I think she was trying to inspire me to start journaling, so she read an entry

out of one of her journals from when she was a teenager. It happened to be that entry she was reflecting on a psalm. I don't know what the nature of her journaling habits were in general but what really grabbed me—I vividly remember the day—was that I'd never been interested in journals or diaries because they're self-focused, but I was really intrigued by the idea of reflection on Scripture. So when I was thirteen I started keeping notebooks where I would just read Scripture and reflect, and that has probably been the core spiritual discipline in my life since that time. I did not realize until my last year of seminary that what I had been learning was how to write sermons and Bible studies.

Katie recalled:

It sort of sounds like yesteryear, but this is truly how it was for me. On Saturday afternoons after my ballet class, not every Saturday but maybe once a month, we would go to a neighboring community about fifteen miles away that had an old fashioned ice cream soda fountain and a Bible book store. This was this big outing, to go have ice cream and then go choose an Archway Bible Storybook. They were these rhyming Old Testament and New Testament stories. So, that was just a huge highlight and I read them over and over and over again.

### **Families Modeled Engagement With Church**

Parents and grandparents took their children to church or mass regularly and encouraged their participation in educational programs of the church. Church leaders modeled and encouraged engagement with Scripture. At times churches also caused pastors frustration and pain.

“I was fortunate to grow up in a home where my parents took faith seriously,” Don remembered. “My sister and I were very much churchied, so I had exposure to the biblical stories and that sort of thing.” His mother continued to influence his churchgoing even after he went to college. “My faith was sterile, at best, but I went to church every Sunday because my mom called me every Sunday night, and it was easier to go to church than to make up something.”

Katie remembers opportunities to learn from teachers from a nearby seminary:

More than once we had a professor from the seminary come to our church for a series of evening teaching on topic ‘xyz.’ I went to those. Now when I think about

it, did other kids go to those? How old was I? I'm not sure of the answer to those questions. But I was interested. I wanted to be like that in some ways.

Seth's church placed a lot of emphasis on the Bible, and particularly on allowing only the King James Version. The church also promoted certain study helps:

My pastor had a Scofield Reference Bible, Thompson-Chain. He would often say in his sermon, 'If you have a Bible like mine, turn to page 1678.' And a lot of people had Thompson-Chain Scofield Bibles with Strong's reference numbers. My dad did.

Along with being a place of biblical formation, the church was sometimes a hurtful place for pastors as they grew up. One pastor stated:

I didn't find the church to be a particularly friendly place for interpretation or for any serious discussion about how the Bible might invite a life change. I grew up in an area of the country that was very Mennonite. I grew to be really discouraged with the church by my late teens because I was discovering so much life and power in Scripture, and feeling such a compelling call from Jesus. I was looking for some kind of vision of Scripture to live out. I often had the feeling that for the church it was much more of a cursory cultural practice. So it took me a lot of years in my early twenties to sort of process the vision of God and the brokenness of the church.

Seth also simultaneously felt grateful for the church's teachings and disillusioned with the church's brokenness:

I've personally been connected to five different congregational splits, in the sense that my [childhood] family has been the victims of them. It was usually in the context of leadership failure in the area of sexual immorality, or turf wars, when the pastor stepped down. . . . My wife told me about the Mennonite views but she was willing to go with me to the Baptist church, because there is something to be said about the passion in which people pursue the Word there. And maybe that's something I don't regret.

### Engaged the Bible as Young Adults

As young adults, pastors engaged the Bible. They studied informally with peers in homes, dorm rooms and churches. They studied formally with mentors and professors in Bible studies and classrooms. They taught vacation Bible school and Sunday school

classes. They led Bible studies. As they pursued theological education they taught in assigned teaching practicums.

Don remembered studying the Bible with friends as a young adult a few years after college:

In those early years I was in a Bible study where I'm not sure there was any particular leader. We just read the same stuff and talked about it. I hope it wasn't just shared ignorance. There was a lot of the blind leading the blind because we had people who really had a hunger for Scripture.

Katie, who went to a secular liberal arts college, remembered:

When I was in college, I knew two or three other people who were Christians that I could tolerate being around. There was a small group of very conservative Christians on campus and I didn't really identify with them. At the time one of their big ways of demonstrating their Christian witness was to interrupt the rituals of the neo-Druidic gang. And so it was like, 'Oh man, that's not where I'm at.' So I got together with my buddy, and we would say, 'Okay, we're going to study Philippians,' and we'd read a chapter or half a chapter and discuss it and pray. There was also a group, maybe the Navigators. A woman came to our campus and I knew she was a Christian and she was hanging out, trying to build relationships with students. And to a certain degree, I felt sorry for her since on our campus this was not at all a popular thing. And so I thought, 'Well, if she's looking for people to encourage in faith I'd be more than happy to read the Bible with somebody.'

As a young adult Daniel studied the Bible daily in Bible institute and seminary settings and also taught Bible in his practicums. "I was sent out to some of the congregations during the weekend," he remembered. "And I always remember the people saying, 'As a preacher you're going to die! But as a teacher you're going to survive!!' And I loved teaching!"

Elena studied the Bible as literature in a course during her first year of college:

I have a vivid recollection of writing a reflection as a teenager on Mary and Zachariah and the contrast between them. My first year of studying Bible in college I took a class on the Bible as literature and learned about how the narrative function is designed to make that contrast. I remember that being one of those moments, so exciting, where I was like, 'Wow, it's actually meant to be studied this way. It wasn't that I just happened to notice, but it was written to be noticed!' And that was just such an exciting, validating moment. I thought,

‘There’s something to this! This genre study gives weight to the things that excite me about Scripture.’ It was a great moment!

Thomas remembered:

When I was in college I had opportunities to do ministry through a friend of mine in the city who had converted to Christianity in his high school years. A bunch of our mutual friends were interested in what was going on with that. I was going to the Bible College in the corner of town. My friend looked me up and asked me if I’d come and talk with these guys about the Bible and becoming a Christian.

Thomas also remembers teaching in several local churches while in seminary:

I was attending churches in the area. When they found out I was in seminary, they would ask me to teach the Bible class. So I taught a large college-age class of about 300 at one of the churches and the adult class in a small church. I also taught a youth group in another city to fulfill requirements for my seminary practice.

Elena reported that already as a high-schooler she was substitute teaching for the young adult class at her church. Her second year of college she joined the residence life staff and taught weekly Bible studies in the dorm for the next 2 years. As she looks back on the intervening 10 years, she realizes she has been teaching Bible studies in some context regularly ever since.

Katie taught one of her first Bible studies as a young adult living abroad:

I was studying in Berlin for a year of college. I was staying with a host family of an evangelical pastor, by God’s hand—that certainly was not the design of the program—and they had this youth circle. We met every week together for Bible studies. I signed up to take my turn and lead a few sessions. It was very hard to try to do that in German but I loved preparing that. I have such vivid memories of that.

### Made Consequential Choices and Shifts in Theology

As young adults, pastors made consequential choices regarding faith. They experienced major shifts in their theology. Some pastors had conversion experiences;

some experienced a crisis of faith. All made decisions that set them on a trajectory toward teaching the Bible using the tools of biblical scholarship.

Daniel remembered:

When I was seventeen or eighteen years old I was afraid of dying and that's how I committed my life to Christ. So then the Bible became something I needed to study. As I began to read the Bible I developed a passion. I became very, very intrigued and interested. And then I began to see changes in my own life. So I decided that I wanted to become more knowledgeable about the Bible.

At age 18 he moved to the Anabaptist Bible Institute, a ministry of the Mennonite Church in Guatemala, and devoted himself to full-time study of Scripture for 2 years. After completing the institute program he began seminary studies on the same campus. These experiences were decisive in setting his life's course as a pastor and church planter.

Don also had a conversion experience:

By the time I reached adulthood, in my early twenties, what I observed I had was maybe a marginal commitment to the church, but not really any personal relationship with Jesus. When my wife got pregnant with our first child it was as though God had conspired on a variety of fronts. Some people came our way who were very strongly committed Christians. Then there was just this deep sense within me that I was getting ready to take on the responsibility of parenting and had virtually no spiritual resources. And where that sent me—and I suppose it was because something had clicked growing up—but where it sent me was to begin to study Scripture. . . . That process really resulted in an adult conversion for me.

Seth started attending a Mennonite church with his girlfriend shortly after college. There he found himself studying the Bible in a new way. “Just the questions, their willingness to wrestle with the text, was modeled for me,” he remembered. At age 23 he gave up the fundamentalist approach to Scripture with which he was raised:

My underpinning philosophy when it comes to the Bible is a reaction to how I grew up. I don't have this inerrancy view. I dumped that around '99 or so. I had always struggled with how it can be inerrant if we don't have the original autographs, but I didn't know where to go. When you only know what your context is, you don't know where you want to flee to. I could have very easily



landed outside of the church or in some other place. I had a lot of training in debate; my emphasis in theatre was rhetoric and persuasion. So I knew the arguments and I knew how to take the arguments apart and none of them held up. But I didn't know what to replace it with.

Thomas also remembered:

I had my own crisis of faith, so I thought. It was really more a crisis of faith in relationship to fundamentalism because I didn't know anything else. I was taught that there wasn't anything else. So I thought maybe this was a choice between being a Christian and not being one. So I went through three or four years of just searching, to sort some things out. I ended up in seminary because of my searching, not because I was going to be a minister or something. I wasn't sure if I was going to be a Christian at that point. . . . I ended up at my [Baptist] denominational seminary and it actually trained me right out of the tradition I had grown up in.

Katie also reflected on a turning point in her young adult life:

I had kind of a crisis in college when I heard a Bible story at the 'Reimagining' conference. At the time I didn't know the conference was controversial. I was taking a feminist theology course. There was a Quaker woman at the conference who was writing children's Bible stories and perhaps making a more deliberate effort to include stories of women and having some regard for them. And I heard the story of the daughters of Zelophehad from the Old Testament. I had never heard it before. And I sort of felt like, 'What? Did somebody conceal this story from me? This story rocks! I mean, all the girls have names! It shouldn't be so obscure.' So later in the mix of considering what direction I was going to move in life, when I decided to go to a seminary or a divinity school, I really wanted to learn how to read the Bible all over again. I mean I had a very strong sense that Christians ought to read the Bible and live it out. I wanted to find a place where I could work on that.

### Seminary Was Formative

Pastors report that their seminary education played an important role in their biblical formation, even as they wish seminary had better prepared them to teach the Bible. The Scripture "opened up" to them as they learned to exegete and exposit texts and discovered new biblical concepts. They found new ways to access the Bible for spiritual formation. They learned a great deal and simultaneously offered a challenge to seminaries regarding their additional needs.

## Exegesis and Exposition

Seminary studies opened the Scripture by giving students skills in exegesis and exposition. “Seminary taught me to learn to use resources and to be attentive to texts,” says Elena. “It made me a good interpreter of texts.” Thomas also valued his exegesis and exposition courses:

I was fortunate enough to be at a seminary at the time that really had some gifted teachers. They allowed the text to critique the tradition we were a part of in some pretty significant ways. The Bible was a very important part of the curriculum. They had Greek and Hebrew classes, New Testament Studies, Old Testament Studies, classes in hermeneutics. My New Testament professor taught me to think about the Kingdom of God for the first time, versus other ways of construing the gospel, and grounded it exegetically.

Katie echoed gratitude for what she learned about the Bible in seminary. “I think everything I did in Bible classes has been valuable. The language study was great for me and I encourage other seminarians to pursue that, even if it’s not something they totally groove on.”

“Seminaries have a lot of wisdom and a lot of tools that we need,” says Daniel:

The whole seminary training for me was a blessing and a challenge. It was awesome. I loved researching and writing papers. My papers became *my* papers. My papers and my research were something that really created awareness. And I became more detail minded.

Likewise, Don gained tools for exegesis and exposition, some of which he continues to use as a pastor:

There are times in a Bible study where we’ll do a word study, and we’ll do it on the basis of the Greek or Hebrew word, not just an English word, and try to draw the different shades of meaning for how that word can be translated. My seminary gave me ability to work with that.

Don also found his seminary’s English Bible classes helpful. “When I’m doing my own Bible reading I find I still use some of the same symbols that I learned, like for contrast and cause and effect, those kinds of things. . . . It gave me tools.”

## **The Bible and Spiritual Formation**

Pastors found new ways to access the Bible for spiritual formation while in seminary. Seth was able to sort out some of his biggest questions about the Bible:

At seminary I had a lot of different voices from different faith traditions but most of them were at a place where they still really saw the Scripture as being faithful and trustworthy. So when I say to people, ‘I don’t believe in inerrancy anymore,’ I say, ‘It does say, ‘faithful and true and trustworthy, and usable for rebuke and encouragement.’ These are words that are used in Scripture and they were modeled in seminary.

One pastor had a Bible professor whose prayers were important models:

[The professor] always led prayers that were clearly prayers that grew out of Scriptures we were studying for the day. Nobody ever sat me down and said, ‘Write a prayer that is emerging from the Scripture.’ But I learned that from [the professor]. And *Lectio Divina* . . . I learned that with [another professor]. The seminary introduction was very good in terms of having multiple models for engaging the Scriptures in a valuable way.

## **Challenge to Seminaries**

While pastors greatly appreciate the many ways their seminary education helped to form them, they also offered words of challenge regarding how seminaries could better prepare graduates to teach the Bible in the congregation. All pastors encouraged seminaries to place greater emphasis on cultural hermeneutics. Additionally, they recommended seminaries pay greater attention to integrating biblical studies with theology, use a more holistic approach to theological education and place higher priority on communication and pedagogy.

All pastors encouraged seminaries to place greater emphasis on cultural hermeneutics. One relatively recent seminary grad said, “I felt like seminary taught me really well how to exegete the text but not to exegete human existence.” Pastors who

attended seminary years ago agreed. “Seminary didn’t equip us very well to learn the culture and DNA of local churches,” remembered Don. Likewise Thomas stated:

It didn’t give me skill sets to critique economy, politics, or the shape of modern life in relationship to technology. I was taught to interpret the Bible but not to interpret culture. And since that time things have shifted in significant ways.

Thomas also put it in philosophical terms:

It was grounded in Enlightenment epistemology in a significant way and so the text was approached too objectively and too atomistically, and focused on one authorial intent and all of that kind of stuff. There wasn’t much attention to the history of the interpretation of the texts. I’m realizing that now we have the other ditch to deal with. That’s the subjective interpretation of texts, that maybe there’s no intention anywhere. I don’t think that ditch is any better than the too-objective one. So I’ve been trying to read my way and find my way to people who can help me learn what I believe to be a right critique of the Enlightenment way of reading the Scriptures—something besides a post-modern solution. Just what is the seminary doing to sort out post-modern and Enlightenment epistemologies, and how they affect significantly the reading of texts—the interpretation of texts? That’s a pretty huge deal.

Another pastor stated:

There was too much emphasis on the Anglo. It’s not the reality of what we’ll live in. We’re going to be a very multicultural church and we need to live that reality right now in our seminaries. My Bible studies and my congregation reflect that reality. It’s quite common to have three to ten countries represented. We don’t always understand each other. I have to be very careful in my Spanish because otherwise I end up insulting people. That’s the reality of Bible studies—how are we going to do that? This is an opportunity for seminaries to grow. Let us not forget the context of the people where we live. Context matters. I heard that in hermeneutics classes a lot and that’s true. But it’s not only what’s going on in the Bible.

One pastor reflected on seminary biblical studies courses:

A lot of attention was given to scholarly minutiae. I learned to be very good at using resources and diagramming things, but not how to pull back and look at a question like, ‘What does it matter?’ or ‘How is this formational?’ It didn’t contribute much to helping me be a good interpreter of people or filtering what is important or relevant in the life of the church.

Seminaries sometimes fail to work in contextually appropriate ways with their own students, said one pastor:

It's a boot camp for people, like the Marines in some ways. You do have to be stripped down and remolded in seminary. I think that at some level that is an appropriate analogy. But the attitude in which it's done shouldn't be the same. You have to be careful about how you critique where somebody's at, particularly in the early stages. Because if you tear it down, what are you going to replace it with? You take it away and suddenly my whole framework crumbles. If you're going to take the Scofield away from me, what are you going to give me as a lens to understand Scripture through? Sometimes in the congregation someone will say something like, 'I'm a simple man. I just do what the Bible tells me to.' And I can see in some seminary settings, somebody just jumping all over that.

One pastor called for seminaries to work at integrating biblical studies and theology:

I had no idea how much theology I would be called upon to do. In the academy, theology and biblical studies are done so separately. Theology classes rarely, if ever, engaged Scripture directly and my exegesis classes did very little to draw theological conclusions. I think maybe the thing that has surprised me the most as a pastor is how deeply intertwined in pastoral ministry theology and biblical studies are. I'm not doing in the parish what I did in my exegesis classes where you get this whole volume of information. In the parish you take that and draw a theological conclusion that you communicate.

Since seminaries don't model or teach this integration, "I feel like you either end up sinking or swimming when it comes to connecting those yourself," she said.

Likewise, one pastor who graduated from seminary in the past decade challenged seminaries to offer a more holistic approach to education:

Seminary helped me to be more academic. And we need to be a seminary of the intellect. But also of the heart. Sometimes in seminary the intellect is overemphasized. It's also the case that outside of academia we use a lot of heart and emotion. But we need both.

Two pastors recommended that seminaries place a higher priority on communication and pedagogy. "I would say the biggest gap in my seminary education with regard to teaching the Bible would be adult pedagogy," said one pastor. Another pastor stated:

I think the big missing element in seminary education is an emphasis on creativity, on how to make theology conversational and engaging. I think there's

been a bit of arrogance, like it doesn't matter how people feel about things or how interested they are. We assume inherent value to what we do and what we bring.

### Mentors Were Present

Pastors had mentors who were deeply engaged with the Bible and available to them at key points in their lives. Katie remembered several childhood mentors:

I went to summer camp every year and we always had a Bible teacher for the week. And for probably my first five years the Bible teacher was this woman we called 'Pastor Penny.' Now the Baptist General Conference did not have women pastors but that's what she was called because we were at camp. And she was great. And the first year we didn't have Pastor Penny, I thought, 'Well how is this going to go? and who is this guy?' But he was fabulous! He had us memorizing verses and he seemed totally excited about Scriptures. I can remember him teaching us, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.' I remember him having the expectation that, 'This is going to be really important for you now or later.' And it was important in his life.

I also had a junior high youth pastor. She was a woman who was studying at the seminary and it was this big deal because she was a woman and why was she getting an M.Div., and what was she going to do with that? And she would bring her Greek New Testament to our junior high Sunday School class. Whatever our lesson was for the day, she would be reading in Greek and saying it in English slowly because she was reading the Greek. And I just realized, 'Who does this? You only do this because it really matters.'

Daniel remembers studying the Bible with "Diego," his pastor and professor in Guatemala, who continued to be his mentor and friend after both of them moved to the United States. "I was inspired and intrigued," Daniel recalled. He also remembers Diego's constant encouragement to go to seminary in the U.S. "Every time I'd see Diego he was like, 'So when are you gonna do it? When are you gonna do it?' and I'm like, 'Shut up! Come on!'" Other church leaders also encouraged Daniel. "With 'Alvaro' it was the same thing," recounted Daniel.

It was, 'When are you gonna do this?' Back before the [Mennonite church] merger I saw them a lot and it was always, 'When are you gonna do it?!' In the

end when I was exploring the idea of seminary it was Diego and Alvaro who actually inspired me to do it.

For Thomas, an influential mentor opened up the possibility of bringing his questions to his faith:

I spent some time in L'Abri over in Switzerland with Francis Schaeffer, who was very helpful to me. He gave me the possibility of asking questions and not being afraid to put them to God and to the church. And of course he was very helpful in answering those questions, too. But it was more the environment of openness to the questions that impressed me. So I asked him what I should do and he said, 'Well, you should probably go to seminary and get some of this sorted out.' So I asked, 'Where should I do that?' He gave me a couple ideas of seminaries. One was in a different tradition [from mine] and he said where it was, and then he said, 'But the tradition you come from, there's a school right down the street from there, two miles away. You could probably find some help there, too.' So I actually ended up there.

As we have seen, pastors reported many formative experiences with the Bible on their way to becoming pastor-Bible teachers. They were raised in religious households in a variety of denominations. As young adults they engaged Scripture. Also as young adults they made consequential choices, experiencing major shifts in their theology. Their seminary experiences further formed their approach to the Bible. They had mentors who were engaged with the Bible and present at key points in their lives.

### **Passion for Biblical Formation**

Pastors passionately desire biblical formation for themselves and the people they serve. They believe that biblical formation *matters*. They have confidence in the overarching coherence and unity of Scripture. They demonstrate a commitment to Scripture's authority. They long to participate more fully with their people in "the biblical story," a metaphor they use for Scripture.

### **Believe That Biblical Formation Matters**

Pastors believe that biblical formation *matters*. They lead congregants in practices that engage the Scripture deeply and frequently over long periods of time. They provide biblical resources to congregants.

Don's Bible studies meet for 32 weeks each year. When they break for the summer, people often ask for Bible-related resources to sustain them during the months off. Don offers them a simple process:

You take a text—usually a short text. We're not trying to read through the Bible in a year; we're not trying to do what we normally do in a larger group Bible study. Just take a text each day, of maybe three or four verses, those little pericopes, and begin to meditate on the text. Ask, 'What is God saying in this?' 'What is God saying in this?' and then move on and ask the question, 'How does this intersect my life where I'm living right now?' Then shape some sort of prayer, based on your responses to the first two questions. Almost every text in some way invites us to a point of surrender. I say, 'There's something in your life that this text is inviting you to surrender.' So, what I've done is given them 'MAPS.' It's a little brochure that explains the process. And I've given them a reading schedule that will take them through, depending on where they want to go. I gave them one for Philippians, one for Colossians, one for James, one for First Peter.

Daniel has been using humor to continuously remind people of the importance of reading their Bibles:

I am making jokes right now. I tell them I didn't need my glasses before, but thanks to [spending the last four years in] seminary I need glasses. And I say, 'Open your Bible. Or turn on your Bible!' I've heard so many people quoting me on that. Another way I have of saying it is another joke, just a little sarcastic. I say that we have to let the Bibles come to church. I tell them, 'We have a lot of pagan Bibles; these pagan Bibles aren't coming to church!' I'm trying to get them to bring their Bibles because if you don't bring your Bible to church, are you reading it at home? I doubt it.

Katie encourages lay people to help *teach* the Bible as a way to be formed in Scripture. "I think you learn a lot more as you are facilitating and leading and making some of the decisions, even if it's just a peer kind of thing," she said. For this reason, in her most recent study she co-taught with a woman from her congregation.



I think if somebody else who doesn't necessarily have a seminary degree is in the situation of, 'Okay, I'm going to try to make a decision about what Scripture we'll read, or how we'll respond to it,' I think they learn so much, and they gain skills that are useful for ministry, no matter what shape it takes.

Thomas's passion for biblical formation is long-standing. Thirty years ago he was serving on staff in a non-denominational mega-church:

I recruited sixteen people in the congregation to join me and I created a Wednesday night Bible study called, 'Communal Learning.' In Communal Learning we paired each of these sixteen people up into twos and then assigned them an adult class. So we had about fifteen hundred people in all adult classes at the time, ranging from young college students up to retirees. From there what happened is we would get together every Wednesday night. I basically taught them how to study the Bible, built them mini-libraries that they could use, and then taught them the start of the lesson. Then they could go from there and develop their own ideas about how to do it. I was trying to develop their skills as Bible teachers so that that they, in turn, could teach well on Sundays.

## Confidence in Coherence of Scripture

Pastors believe that despite its many different authors, genres, contexts, and sources, Scripture has an overall coherence and unity. Pastors value making connections across the biblical canon and reconciling seemingly disparate messages.

Seth remembered:

[Growing up] I pretty much heard the New Testament only. And I was always fascinated by the fact that the Old Testament was just these stories. They weren't always lessons as much as they were just stories about brothers killing each other or people having to work fourteen years for two wives, and it never really was connected. So I've been trying for the last six, seven, years to look at my ministry as reconciling the Old and New Testament. Not understanding the Old Testament means we can't understand what the New Testament is offering to us. . . . My joke is that whatever book it is, to me it represents another chance to just talk about the Bible. It really is a unified whole.

Bible study participants notice and appreciate the regular connection-making that happens in pastors' Bible studies. Jane stated:

[Seth's teaching approach] really makes you feel like the Bible is a whole. You know, you can't understand part of it without the other part of it. It just all comes together. I get that feeling a lot from his teachings.

Ken similarly appreciates when Katie provides information that makes connections across texts. "[She'll say] 'Turn to this book. It's talking about this. Let's see if we can learn something more about what it says in this book.' Cross-referencing—it's a way of tying the pieces together," he said.

Jim, a participant in Don's Bible study, commented:

Last year we studied Genesis and Exodus and then went to the Gospel of John. It showed us the covenant made with Abraham and then the Israelites' failing and coming back, failing and coming back, and then we jumped to the New Testament to one of the Gospels, and it had a relationship to what we had talked about in Genesis and Exodus. Don pulled that together. Now we're studying the prophets and then after the first of the year we're going to study the letters of Paul, and again there'll be a continuation there, showing the similarities between what Paul did and what the prophets did, and it will build on that.

The desire for a better understanding of the Bible as a whole was one reason for Jenna's participation in Thomas's Bible study:

I'm not as familiar with the Bible as I would like to be. I took an Old Testament class this past year in college and I realized how much that helped me understand the New Testament. So I was like, all of us [young adults] were sort of like, 'We really want to do something like this [Bible study].'

### Commitment to Scripture's Authority

Pastors' posture toward Scripture is humble, emphasizing a desire to learn from, be shaped by and submit to Scripture rather than to master it as information. While pastors spent little time describing their views of Scripture in doctrinal terms, they repeatedly and consistently demonstrated Scripture's "functional authority" (Schertz, 2013) for their lives.

Don sees it this way:

Something I took from Eugene Peterson is the notion that we don't approach the Bible from a strictly utilitarian point of view. It's not up to us to handle or manage the truth, or to use the Scriptures, as much as it is to place ourselves before the Scripture and allow the Scripture to exercise authority over us. If we're going to teach the Bible, I think we need to begin there. We need to be people who are in the process of being shaped by Scripture, not simply people who have learned how to handle Scripture.

Thomas states:

Most people I teach the Bible to are trying to figure out how to apply the Bible to their life and to their world. But I'm more and more inclined now to try to get the traffic running on the bridge the other direction. How does our story, and how do our lives, I mean the narrative of our history, get caught up into the narrative of the text and the narrative of how God is narrating the world, or 'storying' the world? I don't want you to apply Easter resurrection to your life; I want you to be caught back up into the resurrection so that something more interesting happens to your life. So it's about traffic and direction on the bridge . . . moving from applying the text to our lives to applying our lives to the text.

Katie views her role as a Bible teacher as an opportunity to reflect the glory of God and the glory of the biblical text to the people:

I can't remember where I learned this; I think it was an in-service for teaching children's Sunday School. . . . There was this idea of opening the Bible and looking at the story that we are about to read. And then, raising your face and your gaze, and with the shining glory of the Word, 'Now look out at the children that you're going to talk to and teach.' I want to be that kind of person because I believe that I have met Christ through the Scriptures and that I continue to have transformative experiences because of my engagement with Scripture.

Elena is eager to see the Scripture shaping people's lives:

I've been reflecting on where we have been the last four years and where I think we need to grow, and I feel like the church is in a whole new place in terms of understanding some of the ideas like context and genre and having a little bit wider view of what interpretation means. But where we're struggling right now is bringing it home, when it gets to the application piece.

### Desire to Participate in "The Biblical Story"

Pastors view the Bible as the story of God's activity in the world and God's invitation to human beings to participate in that story. Elena says:

The chief goal in interpreting the Bible, teaching the Bible, is trying to help people figure out how the one piece you're dealing with fits into the broader story. My philosophy of preaching and Bible teaching is always making the broad framework a part of it. 'This is the big story,' and every text I'm working with in any setting, helping people see the story in the text. What I think is distinctive about that as an approach is that most people are sort of attuned to that when you're dealing with parables or Old Testament narrative or Gospels, but I don't see as much common awareness that, for example, the Law occurs within a story. It was given to a certain people at a certain time for a certain reason, and it is then exercised in particular settings. Paul is also a great example. Everything that Paul wrote is occasioned. So what you're seeing [in the text] is a reflection on a story. Part of my technique in getting people to engage with interest is to place passages in the context of human stories. A lot of the research and exegetical work I do on my own, that's how it comes to the people. If I can tell a cohesive story that includes the details of the setting and the geography and family connections of the characters involved, or whatever you might learn in exegeting a text, and give it to them, not in narrative form, it just creates a whole different experience. To me that's where exegesis is meant to lead, to the reconstruction of the story.

Don also shares the belief that the point of exegetical work is to better understand the biblical story. Reflecting on the exegetical tools he uses at times, he observed:

There's that wonderful line in Kierkegaard where Kierkegaard says, 'We don't go to a mirror to examine the mirror. We go to the mirror to look at ourselves in the mirror.' And I think if all we do is examine the mirror we've done the people a disservice. But on the other hand, and Kierkegaard didn't say this, but it struck me, if you go into a fun house where the mirrors are at least slightly distorted you don't get a clear picture sometimes. Sometimes it's helpful to examine the mirror and ask the question, 'What kind of mirror are we looking at?' But if that's all we do I think we do the people a disservice. We just need to help them see how to find their story in the biblical story and allow the biblical story to help shape and form their stories.

Don's approach seems to be working. Jim finds himself developing a type of relationship with Bible characters as he participates in Don's classes:

If I'd have been asked before the Bible study last night, 'What sense did you get from reading Amos of Amos' personality?' I would've said, 'I didn't see any personality! It was just vanilla.' And yet when we left after the Bible Study last night Don had developed a personality in my mind! And personality is a relationship kind of thing. The book of Amos now means a whole lot more to me because in my mind I've developed a personality for Amos and I can relate to him a little better.

Elena takes steps to ensure that people are following the thread of the unfolding narrative:

In Bible studies it's the transitional piece that's so important. It's making sure you're not just going, 'Next question.' Instead it's, 'So we just saw this,' and then, 'Look at this,' and, 'Isn't that crazy?' or 'Look at how he said that.'

Throughout the study Elena is paying attention to the way the narrative is unfolding and pointing that out to participants:

If you pieced it together and took the conversation out, I feel like there would be some sense of a sustained story that's being interrupted. It's like you're reading a storybook to a kid and after each page you say, 'Why is that blue?' and you stop and talk about it, and then you flip it over. But the story continues. It's just story, pause, questions, conversations, story, in snippets, in little pieces.

As we have seen, pastors passionately desire biblical formation for themselves and the people they serve. They believe that biblical formation matters. They have confidence in the overarching coherence and unity of Scripture. They demonstrate a

commitment to Scripture's authority. They long to participate more fully with their people in "the biblical story," a metaphor they use for Scripture and God's unfolding work in the world.

### **Pastoral Identity and Bible Teaching**

Pastors reflected on several aspects of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching, including their sense of call, their understanding of the purpose of teaching the Bible in the congregation, how teaching fits into their pastoral assignment, and the church and seminary's role in calling pastors to teach.

#### **Sense of Call**

All pastors reported feeling called to make Bible teaching part of their ministry. Some experience that call in the form of support from the congregation. Some hear it as an inner call from God. One talked about it as the support of the lead pastor and two as the support of seminary professors. In most cases more than one of these forms of call is present, helping the pastor to know that teaching the Bible is part of what she or he should be doing.

Katie gained a helpful lens on her calling while in seminary:

[The Gospel writer] Luke acknowledges that some of the people who have passed on this stuff were 'servants of the Word.' That was one thing that became available to me in seminary. At least I learned that Mennonites historically had this idea of a leader in a congregation being a servant of the Word. I really latched onto that.

"The people have given me permission to teach them," said Seth. "I started a Bible study because I felt called to do it. I have all these good feelings. I feel called to teach. I feel embraced. I feel empowered."

Don recalled:

The people who were at the Bible study [last year] certainly seemed to appreciate it. And they've already started trying to recruit people for the fall. So it's gratifying to see that if you do what you're supposed to be doing, people are responsive.

All pastors stated that they *love* teaching the Bible. They find it thrilling and deeply satisfying when people in their studies experience “aha moments” as an aspect of the Scripture’s meaning becomes clear. This, too, is part of how they know they are doing what they were created to do. “It’s like watching them rediscover the Bible, and they say over and over and over to me, ‘I didn’t know the Bible could be read like this. I wish someone had told me,’” says Elena.

Daniel reflected on how the church where he taught on weekends during his young adult years gave him positive feedback on his teaching:

It was a local congregation in Guatemala, age-wise very mixed, with mostly adults. I loved teaching! I became very passionate about it, doing my own research. Seeing people grasping information—that made my day! I was nineteen years old, twenty years old, and I was the official professor of my local church!

### Spiritual Formation and Mission

Pastors understand the purpose of their congregational Bible teaching as nurturing spiritual formation in congregants and extending God’s mission in the world. Bible teaching is not primarily for the sake of passing along information, but for transforming lives and communities. Pastors believe that people are hungry for Scripture study. As congregants find meaningful spiritual challenge and growth opportunities through their Bible studies, others from outside the church are drawn in and enter into the process of spiritual formation, as well.

Elena has incorporated a direct focus on listening for God into some of her Bible studies:

I had a young adult Bible study two years ago where I was teaching them the practice of how you listen for God's voice in Scripture. I invited them to do daily readings and write questions, or what did they notice. It didn't have to be formal reflections, but 'Did a phrase jump out at you?' 'Was a question raised?' 'Where did this touch home?' And then every week we would get together and I would ask them, 'What was something this week that jumped out?' People were excited to be able to come back and say, 'Guess what I learned this week!' or 'Look at this crazy story.' Somehow that rhythm helped people develop that habit.

Daniel said:

I have a small Bible study that I have written down. I am studying the Bible with two families that are very new believers. So they want to know more about the Bible and the Mennonite Church, and what does it mean to be evangelical. So I developed a Bible guide. It's very simple. They have questions. And then a Bible verse. Then the next question forces them to go to the Bible and actually copy a Bible verse, just to get them to look at their Bibles. And it works.

Don remembered:

Every church I've been in I've made it a high priority to offer at least one Bible study. The last church I was in before I retired I was teaching three Bible studies, just because once people got a taste of it, it wasn't like they came and left. They came and stayed and invited other people. I was probably overextended there. Three was probably too many. But I had a group come to me and say, 'We can't come on Monday morning, we can't come on Tuesday evening, but we've got a group of people on Thursdays, during the day, all these young mothers. We would love to have a Bible study.' And they had been meeting for a while and doing stuff like Joyce Meyer and Beth Moore. Which is, great—at least they were studying. But they wanted to do a more intentional Bible study kind of thing. So it's hard to say, 'Sorry, I'm doing too many of them!' If they're willing to get people together and give it the time, I'm more than willing to do that. Every place I've been I think the level of biblical literacy is pretty low. But every place I've been I think there's a hunger in people for biblical preaching, biblical study. Since I started my first full-time appointment, which would've been in 1984, I've always had people who, if you do a Bible study and you prepare well for it, and give them something worth having, people will come. At least that's been my experience.

Elena noted:

I'm just surprised again and again at the hunger for, not just reading the Bible, but another way of reading than what people are familiar with. Right now we have quite a few new people that are coming into the church. And one of the most common things I'm hearing from them is that one of the reasons they're drawn to the community is how we engage Scripture. What they keep telling me is, 'Rather than your church telling us what to believe, you teach us how to engage.'



George stated explicitly that it was Elena's Bible teaching that drew him to the church 2½ years ago. He greatly appreciated her work with the Bible in the sermon the first Sunday he visited:

Everyone knows that I have stayed true to form about my enthusiasm about finding this church. I mean, I had friends and relatives say, 'Oh, the Mennonite church is so conservative; it's not going to be the right place for you.' Well, that first Sunday, I knew it was the right place for me, and I haven't looked back since then. I knew that was the right decision and Pastor Elena was a big part of that decision. . . . Her Bible teaching is there all the time. You might say that she doesn't let up on, not only how to read and practice reading the Bible, but she never lets up on the messages that she can find in the Bible, that sound new and refreshing every Sunday.

Pastors make sure their studies are accessible to visitors. Jenna recalled:

Every once in a while someone will bring a friend. Or someone will visit the church, and we'll invite them and they'll come for a couple weeks. . . . Even if you don't do the reading, it's about the parables. So we read them before we start discussing them. . . . So if you bring someone who doesn't have access to the book, they can still engage.

Jolene notices that lack of preparation doesn't mean people will feel unwelcome.

"Don encourages us to do the daily readings but he doesn't go through it point by point," she said. Jim agrees:

You'll get more out of the Bible study on Tuesday nights if you're able to do the daily readings,' but he doesn't check you at the door and dismiss you if you haven't done it. He doesn't check homework assignments. He encourages you, but lets you make that decision. . . . Each week doesn't necessarily build on what you learned before. He relates back to it. He'll say, 'Remember what we saw there?' 'Remember this?' But thirty-two weeks can seem like a long commitment to people who either haven't got the burning desire or haven't experienced doing this. So if people come and go on Tuesday nights Don will say, 'It's okay; come when you can.'

Katie envisions a future church more consciously in mission, gathered around

Scripture:

When I think about what will be the future of the church, I think we need lots more people who see themselves as witnesses for Christ and as starting new clusters of believers, or seekers, or doing church in smaller scale ways where you

don't have the benefit of a building and a staff and programs; where you just have each other. . . . So I think more people should feel that [teaching Bible] is 'something I'd like to cultivate.'

Bible studies are indeed speaking to the hunger of participants. Ken observed:

Whenever you can get historical context it's always very helpful. And whenever a Bible study can take events that happened thousands of years ago, and you come away with, 'Oh, they're not much different than we are today,' or, 'This chasm of time isn't all that big on another scale of people being human,' or 'We haven't changed. We don't act much different than the experiences they're having, that are being talked about.' . . . When I was younger, there was such a disconnect with the Old Testament and maybe even with parts of the New Testament, from the stance that, 'This happened long ago and we just don't think or act or do things this way.' And so there was a little bit of, 'It's not so relevant to me today.' Whereas . . . this kind of historical thing is saying, 'My feelings are—this is VERY relevant. This is 'right on' kind of stuff here.

Jolene stated:

I find it hard to just sit down and read the Bible, because it doesn't make a lot of sense. Especially the prophetic books, like Amos. I sat down and read Amos last week and it was like, 'This is not a fun book. It's not!' But I enjoy having somebody prod me to do that, because I don't have the incentive or there's just too much else going on otherwise. But if I know it needs to be done, I do it. I just enjoy it because it's good to learn and the studies are interesting.

Jane commented:

I wanted to go to the Isaiah study because I remember when I was reading through the Bible I got to Isaiah and by the end of Isaiah I just quit reading. It was soooo hard to understand and put together and I thought, 'Okay, I have to have somebody explain this to me, so I can keep going.'

Jenna was sorry to see the summer Bible study for young adults wrap up:

I've learned so much, studying the parables. . . . It makes me really wish I could be here during the school year, because then we could just do this so much more often. I really want it to keep going!

### Teaching in the Midst of Many Tasks

Pastors find ways to teach Bible even as they carry out complex pastoral assignments, including regular preaching, pastoral caregiving, and administration. They

serve in full-time and half-time roles; they are lead pastors, church planters, solo pastors and associate pastors. They serve congregations as small as 30 and as large as 300. Some pastors reported that at times it has been helpful to combine Bible study with other church activities, including preaching, worship planning, mid-week meals and children's programming.

Pastors use the sermon as an opportunity to teach the Bible. One pastor stated:

In all the different places where I've preached I often hear somebody say something about, 'You're really a biblical preacher,' which I never quite know what that means, because I sort of feel like, 'Well isn't that the task?' But, for whatever reason I know that's how I am regarded. So, I think I have used preaching as one significant place in which you can teach Bible. . . . I realized why I say and do some of the things in preaching that I do, from the simplest thing of using hand gestures to indicate a biblical time line as I'm preaching, or just anytime. I rarely say anything about a passage in a sermon without giving serious attention to the context, even if it's only with a few words. Even if it's just saying, 'Once again,' or 'Once again, the Gospel of Luke has a pair, a man and a woman.' So that if you wanted to be studying Luke that would help you out. Not that anybody necessarily notices that, but I started realizing I do that and I think that's a good thing, because I want to always be equipping for reading the Bible.

Daniel says, "In the pulpit I preach and I teach at the same time. Or I teach and I preach! That's how the congregation has been shaped." Typically he preaches and teaches from whatever biblical book the small groups are studying in their communal interpretation groups. In the sermon he is able to offer contextual information and address questions that came up in the small groups:

We're a small church, so I've got my hands in everything. Part of my style is to kind of poke my nose around. When I hear about something that is being said in the small groups I can address it. For example, I heard that someone said, 'Galatians has nothing to do with peace.' In my sermons I'll talk about it. I love it! I really love it.

Along with regular preaching assignments, pastors are also highly engaged in pastoral caregiving. Cal said of his pastor:

For a young person, he does way more hospital visitation than most pastors do at that age. . . . He shares that, but he does it with eagerness. That's the one thing he wouldn't have to do if he chose not to, actually, because that could get covered without him. And yet he is very anxious to do it.

Jolene says of her pastor Don and his wife, Alicia:

Their caring for the congregation has just been amazing to me. They live in [another town] twenty minutes away, and still have a ring of friends there, but it's like they just know everybody and care so much for everybody. It's just strange. I've never seen that sort of thing before.

Jim shared two accounts of Don's extraordinary pastoral care sensibilities:

Don was called to our church quite suddenly because our pastor became terminally ill. He had decided to retire from his large church and work for us quarter time and our pastor would work the other quarter time. But then our pastor quickly became unable to serve, and so Don agreed to serve half time. But before his term was up at the church in [the other town], one of our members was dying. He had never met them, never met anybody, but he showed up and ministered to this person the last two weeks of the person's life. My brother and sister-in-law attend a church nearby, but my sister-in-law's mother has been a lifelong member of our church and is in a nursing home now. After the first time Don preached at our church, I made the comment to them, 'You'll have to come sometime and meet Pastor Don. I think you'll really like his style of preaching.' My sister-in-law said, 'Oh, I've already met him. He's been to visit Mom every week for the last month.' I said, 'He hasn't even started here yet!'

Some pastors reported that their Bible studies serve a pastoral care function, directly and indirectly addressing pastoral care issues. One pastor said:

If I were to tell new pastors one thing, it's that I have gotten more relational collateral out of that [senior] Bible study. It's freed up our worship and it's freed up our leadership decisions because they love it and they feel my investment in them there. The leadership team keeps suggesting I drop it and I keep saying, 'You have no idea what's coming out of this.' I just can't believe everything that's coming out of it, talking about theology and politics and family and legacy.

Similarly, Seth said that he finds that Bible study substantially increases people's capacity for dealing with life:

[In the previous generation] people wouldn't come to us with the kind of spiritual angst that they come to us with now. The spiritual underpinnings of the average American are so shallow. . . . People are not equipped to handle the questions of death and loss and pain and separation and brokenness like they used to. And I

think they're creating more situations of brokenness and hurt and pain than they did. . . . There's a component [of the church] where there are people who face a crisis and they are not prepared to handle it. And so I feel like biblical literacy gives people the framework. For example, if anyone makes a regular habit of reading the Psalms, there should be no lack of language to use when you're praying about problems. . . . I want people to fall in love with the Word of God and I think if they fall in love with the Word of God a lot of other things fall into place.

George's experience with Elena's Bible studies validates Seth's point:

Some [other] pastors get sort of stuck on what you might call dogma. I think this hurts the progress of the person learning how he can help himself with his daily problems, with the suffering that we go through—with loss of friends, loss of relatives, illness, problems with children, and this sort of thing. I think that if you look at the Bible in a way that you can use it as a personal, problem-solving thing, it really can be a self-help book. Even though we rely upon God's help, God gives us the strength to understand and, I believe, work out our problems.

### Role of Church and Seminary in Calling Pastors to Teach the Bible

A few pastors shared their wish that the wider church and seminary take a more active role in supporting pastors' call to teach the Bible. One pastor contrasted the Mennonite church's approach to Bible teaching with the practice of some evangelical churches of appointing (and paying) "teaching pastors" and wondered whether that model might not be useful for Mennonite churches, too.

Two pastors noted that as seminary students they got the impression they would be letting their Bible professors down if they "merely" became pastors rather than pursuing a Ph.D. in Bible. They wish that both the seminary and the church would do more to actively encourage Bible teaching as legitimate pastoral work. One pastor stated:

If they really believed that a lot of pastors ought to be teaching the Bible every chance they get, I would have left seminary with a sense that 'This is what churches need.' I would have left seminary and been able to say, 'I know that one of the things our churches really need is for pastors to focus on teaching the Bible in multiple settings.' I wonder if there are ways of naming gifts and roles that are available, of at least letting people know what's possible. I wonder if there are ways of not only making that identity available, but making it attractive, or even

making it like, ‘We have to have some people doing this.’ That wasn’t necessarily an assumption in the [seminary] ministry department. This is just a funny example. Should you be reading the Bible and teaching the Scriptures or praying with the Scriptures when you make a pastoral visit? I think you should be. And when I’ve made a pastoral visit and not had a Bible with me I’ve sort of thought, ‘What does that mean? That means, that either I’m going to be relying on something that I know by heart, which is great, or, I’m not going to share anything.’ Nobody [at the seminary] ever said that I had to do that. They said that if I carried a Bible that would be sort of a signal that I was clergy.

### **Pedagogical Approach**

Along with sharing many formative experiences, passion for biblical formation, and an understanding of pastoral identity, the findings also show that pastors give substantial attention to the pedagogical process. They lay the groundwork for their Bible studies, including preparing, expecting participants to prepare, and using “marketing” sensibilities to inspire participation. They use a learner-oriented teaching approach, including attention to discovery, interaction, comprehension and integration. They provide needed guidance for sessions by offering a framework, stimulating conversation, guiding participants to contextual information, and offering summary remarks that draw meaning from the conversation.

#### **Lay the Groundwork**

Before the study begins and prior to individual sessions, pastors lay groundwork for their Bible studies. Pastors spend significant amounts of time in preparation. Rather than simply depending on previous learning, they take time to “dig into” the text they will be teaching, researching the text and preparing questions and comments to guide the conversation. “I’m very into lesson plans so I have all my lesson plans [from last year’s study] and I’ll share them with you,” said Katie.

Thomas reports:

I do quite a bit of work during the week of. I'll read at least six different kinds of commentaries—an exegetical commentary, a theological commentary, a narrative commentary—I just try to get my head around the text well and get the hot points, where there are exegetical questions to ask and sort out.

“He'd often come with two to three chapters prepared and we'd only get through one to two,” said Cal of Seth. “I think he could've taken us through faster if he'd taken where he was coming from and what he had prepared.” Indeed, Seth, whose arrangement is to preach every other Sunday and lead Bible study every other Sunday evening, takes preparation seriously:

I've worked on this ahead of time, for several weeks ahead. Then the day of the study—it starts at 6:30 p.m.—usually at about 4 o'clock I go to Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks and I just read the text over and over again until it's the only thing I'm thinking about.

Don has been using the *Disciple Bible Study* curriculum for 28 years, repeating the cycle of texts every three years. Nevertheless, he prepares carefully before every session, approaching them as if he had not prepared before. He stated that if he tries to rely on past experience the material is hazy. Participants say Don's preparation keeps the Bible study fresh for them, too. “He has taught this particular study several times. We were talking on the way home last night that it's as if it's the first time,” said Jolene. “You think, ‘He's had to have heard that answer several times before,’ but he never lets on that way. It's always new.” Jim concurred, laughing, “He makes it seem as if he just figured it out, too!” A woman from the Methodist church where Don pastored prior to his current assignment agreed. “We've been coming for ten years and every, single time we learn something new!”

Pastors also invite and expect participants to prepare for Bible study prior to each session. They provide participants with relevant texts, translations of the texts, questions and background resources. While pastors encourage and welcome everyone to come

whether or not they have prepared, they teach with the expectation that many of the participants will have done the recommended homework.

Thomas says of his weekly Sunday morning adult Bible study:

Before they get to class they receive an e-mail that has the text for the week worked up into a kind of teaching outline. So the text is in it, and is translated a particular way, as well as some study questions to use as preparatory for the class time. They get those about Wednesday every week.

Don provides a published curriculum to each participant. The curriculum includes daily Bible readings for each week which are related to and provide contextual clues to the text that will be studied in the session. The curriculum also provides limited scholarly background material relevant to the text. While rarely used during the session itself, the curriculum serves as a foundational framework for the conversation that takes place.

Daniel provides two questions to each group of two or three learners and invites them to learn as much as they can about the text they are assigned. Some read commentaries, some find things on the internet, and everyone brings what they've learned to the conversation.

George reported:

[My pastor] will make sure that you're studying along with what we're reading and will give us reading assignments for what we're going to study for the next session. She'll say, 'Next time we're going to be studying Jonathan. Study what Jonathan's role was in David's life, and be ready to be discussing that particular part of 1 Samuel.'

Elena confirmed:

I tell them in advance what chapters we're going to talk about so they've already read the text when we get there. So typically—and this is an important logistical detail—we recap. We always start with recap, which I've found is really crucial in all church settings, like sermons and Bible studies, because church membership is so much more sporadic than it used to be.



Participants in these studies rise to the occasion. While not all of them prepare every time, the starting point for the conversation safely assumes some preparation among the majority. “Sometimes I am a little more timid about saying things because I haven’t done all of my reading or haven’t spent as much time with it as I should I have,” says Jenna, noting that you’re always welcome to attend whether or not you’ve prepared, but it helps you engage if you do.

Pastors use marketing sensibilities to inspire participation. The nature of these efforts varies but pastors share a willingness to take steps to persuade congregants to participate. They choose books of the Bible they believe will grab interest. They schedule Bible studies at times that work for the highest number of people. They utilize their sermons to pique interest in attending the Bible study. They give their studies attention-grabbing titles and use brief teasers to encourage attendance from week to week.

“Here’s the pitch for the Revelation study I put [in the announcements],” says Thomas. “‘Jesus has been raised and the end of the world has begun!’ That’s from Pannenberg.” Seth is intentional about keeping interest alive from study to study:

I usually try to end with a question and sometimes a teaser to say, ‘When we come back together again, guess what. We’re going to talk a little bit more about this 144,000. Some people say it’s Israel; some people say it’s the church; some people say it’s a combination. Come back to find out more.’ I don’t know, maybe a marketing side of it or something that I try to get them to think about that.

Cal remembers a tactic that worked well for Seth:

[When we were studying] Isaiah he kept referring to it—I think maybe Martin Luther gave it that title—as ‘the Fifth Gospel.’ Every week he’d talk about, ‘Okay, now we’re going to study the Fifth Gospel.’ Well, who can be a Christian and not know the Fifth Gospel? You’ve got to know it! So I think it was kind of motivating and kind of interesting.

Daniel is running three Bible studies but has added another to accommodate the schedules of two new families:

I have two families, and they are new Christians. I go to their house Mondays and have lunch with them because that's the only time they can do it. They work the graveyard shift so they can't come to the other studies.

Pastors' sermons help to "sell" people on coming to Bible study. "We appreciate [our pastor's] teaching so much during worship hour! That was a big draw. His teaching is pretty amazing," said Jolene. Jolene's husband, Jim, agreed:

We had a GREAT desire to go. He just makes the Scripture come alive! Last September [when he first arrived] he started preaching and immediately went into a twelve-week series on the Sermon on the Mount and it was just amazing. It was just amazing. So he had been preaching at the church just two or three weeks when he told us at a church board meeting that he'd like to do a Bible study if we thought the church would be receptive. We encouraged it. So the Bible study didn't start until the beginning of October, but people had heard him preach for the month of September. Half of the people that came to the Bible study probably would not have come if it hadn't been for how they were taken with his preaching on Sunday morning. The very first time we had Bible study, twenty-one or twenty-two people show up. And that's in a congregation that has sixty on Sunday mornings in worship, counting kids and everybody.

Jane believes Seth's preaching also helps to draw people to his Bible studies:

His sermons aren't exactly like the Bible study but they resemble it. He is very well prepared and always has visuals and connections. People know that about him. So to the people who really are drawn to that, I think they felt like, 'Oh, I'd like to sit under him for something more than just a Sunday morning sermon.'

### Use Learner-oriented Teaching Approach

Pastors' pedagogical approach is learner-oriented. Pastors seek to ensure that participants discover texts' meaning(s), speak to others about what they are learning, comprehend what is being taught and discussed, and integrate their learning into their lives. They accomplish these goals through using an inductive approach to the text; creating an interactive classroom environment; employing effective communication techniques; and making contemporary applications.

### **Participants Discover: Employing an**

## Inductive Approach to Scripture

Pastors use an inductive approach to Scripture. They make the biblical text the centerpiece of their studies. They do not impose structures, overarching themes, or dogma onto the text. They seek to understand the contexts in which the text occurs. They are willing to go slowly through texts, paying attention to particulars, reading closely and noticing detail. They use Hebrew and Greek language resources and compare many English translations.

Pastors prioritize the reading and hearing of the biblical text in the Bible study setting. They employ a variety of techniques for giving the Scripture a fair hearing. Katie said of a study she led on Genesis:

We did lots of different things. Sometimes it was a readers' theatre. Sometimes I would have, maybe, six nametags that say, 'Hello, my name is.' I'd give them to people who were more or less willing, and pass out the script. . . . So we might do a readers' theater. Sometimes we would listen. I have *The Bible Experience*—it's MP3's of the Bible. So sometimes we'd listen to it. Sometimes we would just take a chunk and read these verses, going around.

George commented:

We read the Scriptures over, maybe two or three times. We read it slowly. Usually over the years [before these Bible studies] I've been a little bit of a speed reader and I pick up the key things and then I move on, but I've learned, on the Bible, that if I read it slow, and read *before* the subject Scriptures, and *after*, I find that I get a better feel on what this Scripture is trying to tell me. Slowing down is a very important thing. And it doesn't hurt to go back after a day or two and read it over, maybe once or twice, again, and see this develop. It's almost like a light bulb coming on, in a certain sense. In other words, you feel the message there; you see it through this reading process.

Pastors look to the text for guidance in shaping the conversation. Cal says of Seth:

He lets the Scripture specify the outline. The content is driven by the chapter, not by some outline that he's laid on top of it. Which I think is really important because that drives him to find things that enhance what's already there. A lot of the visuals and the audios that he has really do come to life, because they come out of the content, not the other way around.

Don observes:

Some texts lend themselves to different organizational approaches. Some texts are almost rigidly outlined. In one of our classes when we started the book of Proverbs people were really frustrated because it felt like the text was put together in such a shotgun way. So I said, 'Now you've read a lot of proverbs. What are some of the themes that showed up?' And they started to name some of the different themes. I said, 'Now let's reorganize what we've read. Let's identify texts that deal with money. Identify texts that deal with sexuality. Let's identify texts that deal with criticism, family, childrearing, submission.' For a lot of people there was such great relief. It was almost like one of those little coin machines where you dump coins in the top and they all go into their own slot. Being able to identify some of those slots for people was really a gift. We studied Proverbs over three sessions. When they came the first time there was that element of frustration. When they came back the second time I could just see there was this sense of achievement because they were putting the pieces together just by reorganizing it. Now if we were studying Romans, and we were in the eighth chapter or something like that, I think Paul's structure is pretty clear. You don't have to redefine that. You can just look at the text and ask, 'How did Paul organize his thoughts here?'

Pastors take ample time with each text, choosing small chunks to work with in short time periods or devoting long time periods to more extended study. Some pastors are eager to study whole books as a way of fully engaging the literary contexts of texts. "We did a whole year on Genesis once," recalled Elena. "Isaiah took almost three years, verse by verse," said Seth.

Cal says of Seth's approach:

It's usually pretty much a chapter by chapter approach. But when we're working with it we're usually working within two or three chapters. We did in Isaiah, and now we're doing it in Revelation. . . . It's sequential. We're studying the book sequentially, but then all of a sudden we'll stop, and we'll do a whole bunch of something else that actually reflects on it. A lot of times it will be imagery or history.

Seth remembered:

I felt like our church was lacking any kind of inductive and expository Bible study. So I decided, 'I'm just going to go all out on it. Some people may not like it but I know that a lot of others will.' Now when I talked to [one of my professors] at [my] seminary about the fact that I've taught every single verse in John, Isaiah, and now Revelation, and that I have people who have stayed with it

for two and three years, he said, 'I've never heard of that!' I said, 'Well, that's funny because I thought you were the one who told me that's what the church really needed.'

Pastors' inductive approach to Scripture stands in contrast to other experiences their congregants have had with Bible study. Said one participant:

Don teaches in a way that we hear the Scripture speaking. It's what the Scripture is saying, not what Don is saying and not what an author of a Bible study book is saying. I've been to other Bible studies where we read a book, where the author quotes a lot of Bible. But it's the author's opinion; it's not the Bible speaking. With Don's Bible studies I am hearing the Bible itself speak.

Ken said:

I think the *Uniform Series Study Guide* certainly serves a point in using the Bible as a text for discussion, as much as you can within a 45- or 50-minute period. But at church the criticism of it was that it just selected texts from a wider topic. There's never been enough material so you have to read a bunch before that section, or what comes after it, and it jumps around a little bit too much. So we've taken a quarter and, for example, studied Exodus. Or we've used a Gospel text or an epistle. You come away with something more than you might feel like you come away with in the *Uniform* lessons.

One pastor remembered:

Here at the church, anyone who wanted to participate in a Bible study was involved in Bible Study Fellowship which is a fine organization. The problem that I have with it is that it has a very strong sense that you should only use Scripture to interpret Scripture. It's only what you find in your reading at that time that is allowed. You're not allowed to use any study resources, just the Bible and your opinion. And I find that people try to be faithful enough but they never have the faithful witness of others before them, and it's easy to come up with some heretical position and not have any kind of pushback on it. So I have a number of people in my studies that have been a part of Bible Study Fellowship. And I keep hearing people say, 'This is not anything like anything I've ever done before. It's not the kind of study that I've done in the past.' And that's because I'm bringing in those other resources. And I'm also approaching the reading of Scripture differently. When I came there weren't any Bible studies going on at the time. Anyone who wanted to participate would go some other place. They had had some from time to time that would be like a Beth Moore study. They have that whole line of studies that people call Bible study but I would call them more cultural and thematic study rather than direct Bible study. It's picking and choosing the stuff that supports what you're trying to teach. Whereas if you teach through a Bible book in an expository way, you're not going to skip over the hard parts.

## **Participants Speak: Creating an Interactive Classroom Environment**

Pastors create interactive learning environments where participants feel free to speak their ideas and test new understandings. Pastors value participants' perspectives and contributions and regularly invite their observations and questions. Ken says of Katie:

I appreciate that she isn't too lecture-heavy. She presents something and then she'll say, 'Let's think about this,' or 'Let's talk about this. What do you think?' I've heard her give a Bible study in a larger audience for the district and there it was more lecture-style. But in a Bible study at church it's more intimate, more 'Get people involved by talking about it,' kind of thing. Sometimes she gives us time to ponder some kind of question. She might say, 'Everybody get into groups of two or three and discuss this.' That way in a larger class you can have some feeling of participating, of being able to say something and being heard. I think that's a good model.

Jenna appreciates the safety she feels in Thomas's Bible study:

In this setting it's okay if you don't say something quite like you mean it. Working through that and being able to talk about it has helped me a lot, especially with being more confident to speak about what I think about these things with other people.

Seth lectures regularly but mixes it up with times for comment every 15 or 20 minutes. "He stops after some time and says, 'Now before we move on, does anyone have anything you want to know about this, or something you can add to it, or a question?'" says Jane. Cal adds:

And he always has a mike so he'll walk and give you a mike if you start talking. And people do comment. Now I wouldn't describe those Bible studies as discussions, at all. But there are comments made frequently. There's a lot of feedback, but not a lot of, 'What do we all feel about this text?'

George says of Elena's Bible studies:

It's an open discussion and in most cases, whatever you say is okay. It's how you're thinking about it. This is a good way, I think, for people to look forward to, and anticipate it. I think part of teaching is to get your students to participate, and to encourage them.

Pastors have a variety of techniques for increasing participants' level of comfort and likelihood to speak. Some groups need more encouragement than others. Says one pastor:

In my young adult Bible study I always start with ice breakers. I find young adults are harder to get comfortable so I always have some social questions before we get to anything spiritual, just to get them comfortable with each other. Senior citizens, they love to talk, so I don't bother.

Some pastors make hospitality part of the Bible study process. Some studies happen around or immediately after a meal; others involve a break time with snacks and drinks. One pastor lays conversation ground rules to ensure that people coming from different theological perspectives are respectful of each other.

Pastors use questions as a way to get participants speaking. They find that questions open up rather than close down engagement, as exclusively presenting information is likely to do. Some pastors provide participants questions to work on ahead of the session. Some pastors prepare a set of questions to guide the discussion. Elena says:

It really changes the nature of the conversation when I start with a question. We get to tease it out in all sorts of ways. I get to hear what everybody's thinking and respond directly, person to person, and then whatever point I wanted to make at the end, that can pull together the threads we've drawn out of other answers. It keeps people engaged and often they'll point out things to me that I didn't notice, that end up moving us in a good direction.

### **Participants Comprehend: Employing Effective Communication Techniques**

Pastors prize effective communication. In an effort to ensure meaningful communication, they are selective in how and when they share information. While they believe it is important to provide background material that sheds light on the texts under investigation, they are sensitive to overwhelming participants or using knowledge to

serve their own egos. Therefore they seek to give the minimum amount of information needed for understanding, sharing only what is vital to allow “big picture” concepts to become clear.

Elena emphasized the need to “filter significant details from insignificant”:

If I were going to teach people to teach Bible study, that’s one of the first things I’d say. You can overload people so easily and once they get overwhelmed, they disengage. I just did a disastrous job of this in my early Bible studies because I was so excited about everything. Everything seemed significant. . . . I could easily talk for four hours about some obscure verse. But when you’re working with laity who don’t have that background, assuming your fascination is their fascination is not safe.

Katie also believes in sifting for crucial information:

I would be selective as to ‘Which things do I think I must share that would equip other people for reading, for engaging?’ Sometimes I would make those comments early on and sometimes I would delay them. It just depends. Like when we were studying in Exodus. After Moses has run away and he’s heading back to Egypt with Zipporah, there’s this whole crazy thing about the circumcision and Moses’ attack. There are certain things about it; it’s kind of too baffling for words. So it’s helpful to say, ‘These are a few approaches,’ or ‘This is a very baffling text for the following reasons.’

Thomas also balances the need to share information with the desire to keep people engaged. “I seldom just lecture. I might let a five-minute rant happen, down through a page or two I wrote, but for the most part it’s just question and answer, working it out that way.”

Jenna described Thomas’s “both-and” technique as helpful in the young adult study:

He leads the beginning and then lets us go a little bit. He starts out grouping us together and then he’ll give us some time to discuss between ourselves, which has been really nice because we discuss things that we wouldn’t have gotten to in the larger group or with him guiding us. Then it’s nice when he comes back and asks us questions, which are probing and make us think even more. Some parables are harder than others to understand and we need some help. So he’s there if we need someone to help spur on the conversation. But there are some times when we just go and so he doesn’t intervene as much.



Don also strikes the balance between making use of biblical scholarship and not overwhelming participants with it:

There are times in a Bible study where we'll do a word study and we'll do it on the basis of the Greek or Hebrew word, not just an English word, and try to draw the different shades of meaning for how that word can be translated, if it's essential to what we're studying in a particular text. . . . But it's not necessarily a regular part of Bible study; it just shows up when it seems to fit, when it seems helpful. There's a section [in the curriculum] that gives a whole range of tastes of biblical scholarship. Some of it people push back against because they've not been exposed to it before. I try not to overwhelm them with that, but it gives them some historical background.

Pastors use a variety of means of communication. For example, they make use of the arts and visual aids. They “show” rather than only tell. They repeat key concepts.

Pastors find the arts and various visual aids to be helpful tools for strengthening communication about texts. Whether they use paintings, movie clips, musical renditions, words on a flip chart or a few squiggly lines on a white board, pastors and participants report that employing media helps participants better understand the text. “A visual always helps,” observes Jim.

Seth is always on the lookout for images that can help to communicate key concepts. He found one recently in a popular magazine:

In Revelation, this thing that [scholar] Loren [Johns] talks about, this little lambie that dies, it's not a sacrificial lamb; it's a tiny little baby lamb. It's faultless and so it's a murder of the lamb. So at the same time we were studying this, *National Geographic* had just come out with a ‘dying languages’ series. And there was this picture of a little boy holding a little lamb. And the word for lamb that is in his dying language is something like, ‘a one-year-old white male lamb.’ That's what the word meant. And in their culture there were like, 29 different words for different kinds of sheep. And so I try to find connections like that, where, so, we are a culture that has one word for lamb—‘lamb.’ So instead of tearing apart what they know of Scripture, I try to use an example from *National Geographic* that says, ‘Look, other cultures have more than one word.’ Then I go back to the Greek and Hebrew, and I say, ‘There are seven words here,’ and ‘There are twelve words here,’ and ‘The one that's used in Revelation is hardly used anywhere else. It describes a little baby lamb that's not ready for the temple sacrifice.’

Elena says:

I have a lot of giant pads of those huge stick-notes. I like to do brainstorming with people and add that visual element a lot, for a variety of reasons. I think when you're having conversations stuff flies out of people's heads really easily. So during most Bible studies I'll get that out at least once and we'll have some sort of free-flowing question. We get a bunch of things thrown out there and put it on the wall, and can look at it and refer back to it. I use it as a memory device because for some people visuals really help, however you use them. People tease me about that, that my giant pad goes everywhere. It works in a lot of ways. I typically use it more at the beginning of studies than the end. . . . Anything that can get a wide group of people talking early helps loosen the crowd. I like to have open-ended, generative kinds of questions early just to get people's tongues moving and break the discomfort.

Pastors show rather than tell. To help participants engage, pastors create experiences that will help them grasp key concepts rather than merely talking about them. They use examples and highlight particulars that shed light on general principles and themes related to their studies. They give participants opportunities to practice interpreting Scripture. In Seth's words:

If there's a chance to show them, sometimes what I'll do is show them how a theological bias is reflected. For example, I use the English Standard Version in my personal study and I know a number of people have that. I really like it because it's much less about opinions and more about history and things. But it's a Reformed framework. It's the Calvinist TULIP through and through and I try to point that out from time to time.

Using examples, Seth highlights where interpretive choices are made that reflect Calvinist commitments and contrasts them with other viewpoints on the same passage:

I also try, with Revelation, to bring in historical context. For example, we might look at Clarence Larkin's graphs. He used a lot of these graphs to describe what the churches [in Revelation] meant. For the Dispensationalists, the churches represent ages. And of course there's a bias there because the best age is, there's no criticism of it. See, there's no criticism of this church, Philadelphia. There are no faults. And that church from 1739 to 1850 was the great renewal and awakening and it had no faults, you see! So the minute you show somebody on the graph you're able to start saying, 'Really, it didn't have any faults?'

Jenna appreciated being gradually guided into a helpful process of learning skills of interpretation:

The first week was a lot more structured because it was our first week. We weren't sure how to do it so he stayed with us a lot more. But as the summer has progressed, he's walked away for a bit and then come back to try and spur some more conversation. . . . He's not saying specifically, 'This is how you should read it,' but it's the questions he asks, the general questions that he gives us at the beginning, that have helped me. Now when I look at a parable I understand what to look for in interpreting it. And I can use those questions with other Bible passages, too.

Some pastors intentionally repeat key concepts throughout Bible study sessions to increase participants' understanding and familiarity with interpretive processes. They sometimes use the same phrases from week to week, or find multiple ways to say the same thing within a session. This accommodation helps participants to remember big-picture concepts, become familiar with interpretive processes and grasp potentially confusing ideas. In Elena's words:

There are some things I say to them over and over and over. One of them is, 'Watch for details and ask why they're there.' Another one, for every story I've read is, 'What comes before and what comes right after it? Why are they connected?' A third question I always ask is, 'Why did Israel maintain this? Why did they keep this story?' Adapting language, the ability to say the same thing in multiple ways. . . . I feel like I was doing this for a long time before I understood why. But when I make points I usually have three ways to say the same thing. I will even write that in my notes. I'll have a phrase, comma, a phrase, comma, a phrase. And all of them are functionally equivalent. I find that most of what I say in studies, if I can give people three different versions of the question, or three different angles on it, it helps. I feel like for good teachers, that happens naturally. When they say things in the classroom they'll repeat it with slightly different language, and somehow that just really seems to help. . . . I just started noticing and I thought, 'This is an, this is an odd rhythm I'm in. Why do I say everything two or three times?' But it works.

### **Participants Integrate Learning: Making Contemporary Applications**

Pastors demonstrate why concepts being studied matter. They make connections between the Bible and the contemporary experiences of learners. Elena believes this is a crucial ingredient in successful Bible study that receives too little attention:

How is it possible that I went through whole courses on the book of Hebrews, for example—exegeting Hebrews—and never got to the question of, ‘What does this have to do with the church?’ I felt like seminary taught me really well how to exegete the text but not to exegete human existence and to be able to convince people that something matters. I have this conversation with friends who are learning to preach. One of the things I say to them over and over is, ‘You have to convince people at the beginning why it matters. You can’t assume that they care. Just because it’s there in the Bible doesn’t mean they care. If there’s not some sort of hook that says this touches your life or your world, some hunger, some need, some questions, something. . . . If you don’t give that to them at the start and then often in the middle, it doesn’t matter how true it is or even how important it is; they’re not going to hear it.’ I know some Bible study theories where you keep the application ‘til the end. But I think you have to do it early. You have to do it early and often or people just fall off the side. I work on a spiral. Exegesis-application, exegesis-application, ‘round’ and ‘round’ and ‘round.’ . . . A spiral honors the flow of what people can deal with. You have to be able to exegete human life, not just the text.

Ken appreciates Katie’s efforts to tie learning to life:

There’s an element in her teaching and also in her sermons to make connections with today. It’s like, ‘Here is the story. This is what we heard. What do we do with it?’ Making it relevant, making it so that you get it, so that you catch it and you’re going to pay attention to it. It’s something that can move you to do something. It affects your life. She does that pretty regularly and I think that’s an important part of what she does.

Katie agreed that making connections with life is something to which she gives attention:

We would open with ten minutes, sometimes it was only five, but often it was as much as ten minutes with something contemporary. It wasn’t always something from there, but my blogosphere buddy would often start with something that was related to a theme that emerged in the story we had. Sometimes it was interactive but sometimes it was just, ‘I’ve been studying . . .’ She was go great. She would say, ‘When I read this story, one of the things that I can relate to is this theme, because in my own life this is going on.’ But then she would share something that wasn’t just personal narrative. It might have to do with her family. It might have to do with her work. It might have to do with things that she sees in the news or something like that. And then she would share some kind of other texts that she

had read or found to be valuable. . . . We always ended this class with about a minute or two of quiet. Everybody got a card and they were just encouraged, if they wanted to, to write something down that they wanted to remember or hold onto from this class. That was good because sometimes the end of Sunday School hour is a little ragged. The bell rings and the children are coming. So we tried to be very intentional with, 'We are going to end with enough time to have a little bit of quiet, so that we can let something sink in.'

Elena reported on a class in seminary that helped her to grasp the importance of contemporary connections:

I had a course with [one professor] called, 'The Life of Paul.' It wasn't an exegesis course for one class specifically but the goal of the class was to construct a cohesive life of Paul and then to place all of Paul's writings in the narrative line of his life. What I found very fascinating and really excited me about this course was that most of the grade for the course was on the final paper. When I saw the grading rubric, I'd never seen anything like it. Fifty percent of his assessment was, 'Did you get the exegetical facts right? Did you understand the background?' But the other fifty per cent was, 'I have to be interested. You have to tell this in a way that I am entertained and engaged.' To me that was a revolution in teaching, to understand that if you can't do anything interesting with those facts it doesn't matter that you have them. It won't matter to your church. . . . I think that project is more similar to what I actually do as a pastor than anything else I was asked to do at seminary, and the same skills he was drawing on are what I would view as crucial to effective Bible teaching or communication.

George really values Elena's priority on connecting the biblical text to life. "I think the main thing for pastors [coming out of seminary] is that they can teach the Scriptures and how they apply to modern life. I think that's a very key part of it. I think that's the main thing," he said.

Some pastors make a point of reading popular literature related to the study. Elena said:

I took this class on Revelation with [another professor]. He's a Revelation scholar. He didn't just have us read the commentaries and things that were academically focused, but he actually required us to read pop culture things because people engage Revelation a lot in the popular literature. We read Tim LaHaye's book on interpreting Revelation and one of the things he said to us was, 'This is what your average parishioner is going to know about Revelation. If you want to talk to them about it at all, you'd better know what they're bringing to the table.' It was a wonderful class because he was reading Anabaptist readings of

Revelation and we'd discuss that with LaHaye as well. The other thing he did was use art and music as a part of interpretation. I'd never really thought of that, and I found it really useful to ask, 'What are the mediums that truth is communicated in?' Whenever I teach Revelation now, and it applies to other Bible topics, too, I feel free because of that class to talk to people about imagery and how we receive truth. It was so incredibly engaging. I feel like I took more away from that class exegetically and practically than most.

### Provide Guidance for Sessions

Pastors provide needed guidance for Bible study sessions. They offer a framework for the study, stimulate conversation, provide contextual information, manage the flow of conversation and keep the focus throughout the session. At the end of the session they summarize where the class has been and offer concluding points. Don described using a curriculum that provides direction:

The material gives us a framework to work from. It's well put together. We do two books from the Old Testament the first sixteen weeks and two books from the New Testament the second sixteen weeks. It follows a three-year cycle. It also gives people daily readings for six days out of the week, to help them prepare.

"The first session was kind of an introduction," Jim explained. "It laid out what we were going to do, and some basic information to tie everything together as we started." Other pastors create their own framework and review it at the beginning of each session. "Seth usually starts with a bit of a review of what we had talked about the last time and how things go together up to the point where we are," says Jane.

Seth elaborates:

This last Sunday I said, 'Revelation 1 is the recognition that there's an apocalypse and there are two different kinds of apocalypse going on here. Revelation 2 and 3 are the cities and the messages that are for them and for us today. Revelation 4 and 5 are the throne room of God, which basically means you've got the revelation of God sitting on the throne.' I try to give people a framework. And I tell them in every study, 'Even if you don't remember that order, you've heard it, your brain's got it in there somewhere, and I'll just keep saying it until you remember it.' And it's my own personal challenge to internalize that structure.

Elena reports:

I start every sermon with, ‘Here’s where we’ve been and here’s where we are.’ I do the same thing in Bible studies. I try to remind people, ‘Here is the story we heard,’ very briefly, and ‘This is the conversation we had,’ and ‘This is where we left it.’

Pastors take steps to stimulate conversation in the Bible study. Some pastors use questions that have been distributed in advance, sometimes with the whole group or in smaller groupings. Thomas says:

Every once in a while we start by getting people into groups of five or so and taking one or two of the discussion questions and the text, and just go after it, and see what they can come up with.

“I’ll often ask if anyone’s coming with any questions or if anybody remembers anything from our last study,” says Seth. Elena uses questions she’s prepared throughout the discussion:

I try and have a balance of some questions that are about the text itself, like, ‘So why did this happen?’—questions that are just making sure that people got the gist of the story. I start with those kinds of questions. The questions I use are designed to call their attention to details. I use a lot of, ‘Did you notice this?’ ‘Why was this here?’ Some questions people jump all over and sometimes they need a sort of boost into it.

Pastors provide information about geography, literary context, historical context, translation decisions and more. “Someone from the group reads a section of the Scripture and then [Seth] talks about things he has found. He makes the connections, makes the historical application. He gives us a place to start,” says Jane.

Jolene and Jim are grateful for two lists their class received at the beginning of their current study of Amos. One list showed the biblical prophets and the approximate time periods of their prophetic activities. The other list showed the kings whose reigns correlated with the prophets’ lifetimes. Jim remembered:

I think one reason the prophecy books are hard to read for a lot of us is because they're taken completely out of the historical books. So what Don did on the first night was give us this chart and talked a little bit about how, as we go through this, he wants to help us realize that this prophet relates with this king. This prophet is talking about the event that took place in this section of Scripture, in First or Second Kings or Samuel or Chronicles. He said, 'As we read the historical account we're going to go back and get this prophet and plug him into that.'

Don also finds his curriculum helpful in this regard:

When it's helpful I give them background information. But the [*Disciple Bible Study*] workbook is helpful. It'll have little maps in there, and little explanations, give some historical context. And I will try to emphasize, in the places where I think it's helpful, the historical context. I don't do too much with textual criticism, but I do some.

"After we read the text itself, [Katie] gives information that might be helpful that's not in the text, something that's related," says Ken.

Pastors manage the flow of conversation, helping to keep the focus while supporting participant contributions. Jenna appreciates the balance Thomas strikes of letting things flow but also directing. "Within the Bible study he gives us time to discuss what we want and then comes back and guides us a little bit, as a teacher. It has been really cool."

Jolene appreciates Don's balanced way of guiding the conversation:

I like the style of involving us, but not too much. He doesn't let us run away with it, but he also doesn't just lecture for the hour and a half. He lets us participate, and I think you are actually thinking more and learning about it that way, rather than him just telling you and you taking notes.

Seth is free to redirect questions. Cal says of Seth:

A lot of times the response is, 'I'm going to deal with that question in a couple chapters from now. That happens a lot because of the kinds of questions. The other response is, 'I'm going to have to look at that a little bit more myself and then come back next week and talk more about that.' If it doesn't go smoothly for him, he'll bypass it in the right kind of way to keep the thread going.



Sometimes Seth redirects because of tension or high emotions about a particular interpretation:

I try to redirect the questions. People are so worked up about, for example, the ethnicity but they forget the reason for the mark and the recognition that the mark of the beast is only mentioned once, but the mark of God is mentioned several times in Revelation. So, which one is more important? I find myself doing that at every study at some level.

Pastors summarize where the Bible study has gone and make concluding points. “She’s pretty good in summarizing things,” says Ken of Katie. “Massaging issues and discussion and reviewing. She’ll say, ‘Where do we go from here?’ I think she is articulate that way.”

Elena says:

Almost always at the end I summarize what are the things I think are worth thinking about. With the young adult study, I’m almost always thinking one point. There’s one thing I want them to walk away with at the end. Usually I’m pretty explicit about that. I’ll say, ‘If there’s one thing to remember tonight, it was this piece that we talked about.’ To me it’s like the end of a paper, summarizing the point. It’s an active summary.

As we have seen, pastors give substantial attention to the pedagogical process. They lay the groundwork for their Bible studies, use a learner-oriented teaching approach and provide needed guidance for the sessions.

### **Personal Characteristics**

Along with attention to the pedagogical process, formative experiences, passion for biblical formation, and a shared understanding of pastoral identity, pastors share several personal characteristics. These include eagerness to learn, emotional and social intelligence, rejection of ideology and adaptability. All of these characteristics serve their desire to be effective Bible teachers.

## Eagerness to Learn

Pastors demonstrate strong eagerness to learn. They have scholarly inclinations which are evident in their biblical expertise, fearlessness with “tough” texts and critical thinking. They are drawn to questions, using questions heavily in teaching and regularly inviting participants to share their questions. They seek knowledge from a wide range of sources.

## Scholarliness

Pastors’ scholarliness is evident in their significant biblical expertise. Their Master of Divinity degrees gave them depth of background in biblical studies, including learning Hebrew and Greek. They used these languages in exegesis courses in seminary. One pastor took six semesters of Greek, several of Hebrew, and “lots of other exegesis courses,” initially thinking she might pursue a Ph.D. in Bible. Two others reported that because they also engaged their respective biblical studies curricula deeply in seminary they were urged by their professors to pursue Ph.D.’s in Bible. All three of these pastors believe they are called to pastoral ministry and chose to draw on their biblical expertise in the local congregational setting rather than in an academic setting.

Whether pastors prepare for teaching and preaching in the original biblical languages or in their first language, they respect the complexity of the translation task. They use a range of scholarly resources and compare many translations as they work with a text. One pastor reported that because he was nearly crushed by being required to learn the languages in a distance format while in seminary, he doesn’t study in Hebrew and Greek but instead makes use of many scholarly English resources. A challenge from one of his seminary professors has stayed with him and shaped his approach:

[The professor] took it upon himself to learn Akkadian and all kinds of ancient languages. He knows Hebrew fluently. He has large sections of the Hebrew Scripture memorized in Hebrew. And I would argue he has most of the Gospels memorized in Greek. And he always told us in class, 'If you're not going to be an expert on the Hebrew language, you need to know your English Bible really well.'

My visit to this pastor's office revealed his extraordinary interest in esoteric and wide-ranging scholarly biblical resources. He owns and regularly uses rabbinic commentaries. A participant in his study described how his pastor's familiarity with such literature pays dividends in the study sessions:

He tries to think like the 21st century Jewish mind might think. . . . It has a large bearing on the way he reads and studies both the Old and the New Testament. . . . There are a lot of people who interpret the Scripture in terms of reflecting Christ back on the Old Testament, but very few people think of reflecting Judaism onto the New Testament, which is what he does.

Pastors' scholarliness is evident in their eagerness to work with biblical texts that others find intimidating or off-putting. They teach both Old and New Testament books, including those that are puzzling, obscure or especially long and dense. For example, four pastors reported they are teaching Revelation currently or have done so in the recent past. Other books they've taught recently include Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of John.

One pastor recently taught a whole year on tough texts chosen by congregants. She invited participants to pick Bible texts they struggle with and these became the basis for study. "It was really tough for me," she said. "But I got really good feedback from them on that being exciting, to be able to ask questions they have." Similarly, she has been teaching from the Minor Prophets. She reported:

I have been doing quite a bit of teaching on Hosea in my church and other churches, and I can't tell you how many people have come up to me and said, 'I was too scared to touch the book of Hosea, like it was too ugly, and now I love this book.'

Pastors' confidence in dealing with "tough texts" sometimes surprises their peers. Said Thomas, "All the ministers I meet in town, when I'm carrying around my books on Revelation, say, 'You're doing what?!'"

Pastors' scholarliness is also evident in their critical thinking. They do not accept easy answers. As young adults they did not simply believe what they were taught at church or home but sought additional information and understanding. As adults they respect the complexity of Scripture and deal with it honestly, admitting what they don't know and seeing difficult passages as challenges rather than threats to their ego.

For Seth, critical thinking in college opened the door to rethinking the inerrancy doctrine of his childhood church. While studying rhetoric and persuasion in the context of theatre arts and literature in college, he analyzed many Greco-Roman plays and literary pieces. "That analyzing made me realize that a lot of the New Testament does not take the framework the classical writers took. It's there, but there's something else informing it, other than the Greco-Roman culture."

Thomas's critical thinking played a role in his decision to help plant a church more than 20 years ago:

We split off of the large church. The people who split off were about eight or ten of us on staff, who were asked to leave at once, plus all these people who were teaching adult Sunday school classes together, and all the people in the Sunday school classes. We essentially split off all at once. Our Bible study created a certain contra-vision to the church. It was not so much invested in making the market central but in theological reflection, in questions like, 'What is the Gospel?' 'What are the tools for transforming people's lives?' . . . Those teachers became the elders that started our new church. In fact, every one of them was out of that group.

Elena finds herself helping congregants learn to think critically:

I can't tell you how many times I've heard Mennonites use this phrase, 'The Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it.' When I talk to groups I often start with that phrase. We'll just talk about it. 'So let's just put that on the table and say why this

doesn't work before we talk about anything else in Scripture.' People don't realize that they're interpreting all the time. For example, you don't stone your children for disobedience, and that's an interpretive choice on an Old Testament text. Even the most 'flat Bible' person I've ever met doesn't stone their children for disobedience! I don't put it in those words exactly, but I try and pick examples that are clear to Christians of all stripes.

## **Drawn to Questions**

Pastors' eagerness to learn is also evident in their interest in questions. Pastors use questions heavily in teaching. Instead of simply lecturing, they regularly invite participation and engagement through the questions they prepare for their studies. Similarly, they welcome and encourage questions from participants. They are comfortable with not having all the answers to the questions that emerge. They allow congregants freedom to wrestle with questions and doubt.

Thomas prepares several questions and e-mails them, along with the biblical passage, to participants several days in advance of the study. These questions form the basis of the study for the gathered group. Likewise, Elena's questions are integral to her Bible teaching process:

I see my role as a Bible study facilitator to be first and foremost a role of asking questions. I spend a lot more time identifying the questions, really, than the answers. And so usually I create outlines that have a whole lot of bolded questions.

Don begins each study by asking a variety of questions that will be helpful to participants once they begin looking at the text. These typically aren't about the Bible passage itself:

Usually I'll poke around at some concept that's related to the text, but isn't the text, and just invite people to begin to think about things. Lately I was getting ready to begin teaching on Revelation. My sense of the book of Revelation is that it's kind of a culture war. It's the culture of the world that we live in, in conflict with the culture of the Kingdom. So I just started by inviting the class to reflect on the values and priorities of the culture in which we live. So we weren't unpacking

Scripture at that point but we were doing things that were getting us ready to address the concept of, ‘How do we understand the culture in which we live? How does that stand in contrast and how does it come into conflict with the culture of the Kingdom?’

George reported:

[Elena] will ask questions in the class. In fact, there’s more asking of questions that she does, to see where we are, to see what our thoughts are. She does not come in with, ‘Well, this is the way I see it. This is the way it should be.’ She will say, ‘What do you think about this?’

Daniel’s Bible study participants break into small groups of just two or three people:

We have assigned readings. Right now we’re reading Galatians. They get together and discuss whatever it is they’re reading. So they get together and do communal interpretation. It’s important for the community of believers to allow the Bible to speak to us. I give them two simple questions: ‘What is God saying to us?’ and ‘What are we going to do about it?’ I try to keep it as simple as possible. This exercise allows everybody to read the Bible, ask questions about the Bible, and bring whatever they can contribute to the discussion.

Like Daniel, other pastors invite participants to share their questions. Seth begins each Bible study session by inviting participants to ask questions or make comments about the passage under investigation. As the study progresses he provides multiple other opportunities for questions and comments. Elena reports that a lot of people who have not felt comfortable in other church settings say they like her Bible studies because they are able to ask questions:

They feel like they can ask questions and think for themselves. . . . I think one of the important things I bring to my community in that is a sense that you can ask those questions and think those thoughts and not lose either an active faith or engagement with Scripture.

Jenna is grateful that after each study is over, a meal follows, and during the meal there is time to push out questions that were not addressed in the study itself:

“Another thing I like about it is that because we eat afterwards, if there’s something we didn’t delve into enough, we can ask a question,” she said. “Or say

we had a question that just popped into our head that had nothing to do with what we were talking about but it was something we wanted to discuss. We can talk about it then.”

Pastors don't feel anxious about receiving questions they can't answer. On the one hand, they prepare intensely to have more to offer to people's questions. On the other hand, they recognize that they cannot prepare for all the questions that could emerge. When they can't address a question that surfaces, they often offer to do further research and come back with something the following session. They are also comfortable with sometimes leaving questions unanswered.

### **Seek Knowledge From Range of Sources**

Pastors also demonstrate their eagerness to learn by seeking knowledge from a wide range of sources. They learn from novels, blogs, scholarly books, continuing education programs, seminary libraries, museums, movies, travel, and ecumenical dialogue, to name a few. They also learn from congregants, other pastors and personal experience.

Daniel has been in learning mode since becoming a Christian. “I developed a passion as I began to read the Bible,” he stated. He completed a 2-year Anabaptist Bible institute program in Guatemala and began studies at the Anabaptist seminary there. In addition he earned a degree in marketing. After moving to Florida he served in church planting and ministry for many years and earned a degree in counseling. He often found himself encouraging others to pursue education. “Ironically, I always encouraged people within the congregation to get a college education and go to seminary whenever possible, but I had never gone [to seminary in the U.S.],” he said. “It was one of my dreams for the longest!”

A few years ago when a unique opportunity to attend seminary in the U.S. presented itself, at age 44, Daniel relocated to a new community that was geographically and culturally far from his home. While in seminary he helped to plant a church and to teach Bible classes for the community. “I did seminary over four years,” he reflected. “I went part time and took only nine credits each semester.” He finished his degree earlier this year, completing his classes in the midst of many responsibilities.

Thomas has made an effort to keep current on theological resources being published since he graduated from seminary in 1984 and eventually pursued and earned a Doctor of Ministry. In summer 2012 he took on the challenge of leading a young adult class through scholar N. T. Wright’s (2012) *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, a book that had just been published that year.

Seth also reads widely. “I read so much, Jewel. I just love to read,” he says. “It’s my favorite thing.” Congregants agree. “He reads and reads and reads and reads and reads,” says Jane. “Yeah, he does,” Cal chimes in:

He reads an awful lot. He tends to be very culturally aware. I’m talking about 21st century American culture. It isn’t just a teenage thing. He’s fairly widely read and he’s fairly widely aware of where we are as a nation, where we are as a people, where he is. Racial issues, he has an opinion. Economic, national issues, he has an opinion. He doesn’t always state these things but he’s that kind of a person. He has a lot of ideas and opinions about his culture and about this time. . . . He’s really attuned to that and it has a lot of bearing on the way he speaks and the way he teaches.

Pastors also travel. One pastor has led study tours to Israel-Jordan and recently traveled in Ethiopia. Along with learning many things about the cultures he encounters, he continuously builds on his undergraduate background in art to learn about art from many ancient and modern communities. As a result he makes use of a wide array of visual arts in teaching and preaching.



Katie reported dismay at never having had an arts history class in college and stated that in a limited way she is now pursuing her interest in the arts. She is especially interested in how art can become an entry point into Scripture and often finds ways to use it in Bible teaching.

Don, after retiring from a large church of another denomination, began pastoring a small Mennonite church part-time. At age 63, at the encouragement of the Mennonite conference minister, he took a seminary class on Anabaptist History and Theology. Jim reported as a member of the church board:

We told Don he didn't have to go for us. But he said, 'The conference minister would like me to go; that's not too much to ask.' And he came back and said, 'I learned so much! It was so great!' He probably could've been teaching a similar class in his own denomination, but he was so humble about it and he loved it. He corresponds with the professor on a regular basis and the professor will be the main speaker for our men's retreat! He doesn't take his level of knowledge and flaunt that. Instead it's like, 'I just learned so much.'

Don also finds relationships with other pastors to be a source of important learning. He has been part of a covenant group for support and accountability in ministry for almost 30 years and finds it deeply sustaining and nourishing. He gains teaching tools from other pastors as well. Of the MAPS resource he said, "I just pirated it from a friend of mine, and put a different form to it, and he pirated it from somebody else, who pirated it from somebody else."

Elena has found that experience is also a good teacher. As she teaches the Bible she learns a lot about what works and what doesn't work, and changes her teaching strategy accordingly. She recalled:

Last summer I did a Sunday school course for the whole church on how to interpret the Bible. That was sort of the bigger picture. We talked about translations. We talked about genre, we talked about context. . . . I've taught that before with other churches but I feel like I've learned a lot from doing it about how much information people can take before they get overwhelmed. And so this

year I was able to back off and not flood people so much, and try and give them more manageable pieces. And just the level of energy and excitement! People were asking for notes when they were gone!

Katie has learned a lot from partnering with congregational members to teach adult Bible studies:

If I do the class with somebody, some of what I do may be unreflective and I will have to reflect on it because I'm sharing the process with them. I definitely learn from them. The woman I worked with most recently reads the blogosphere like there's no tomorrow. I do nothing like that. And so she would try to find things that were . . . connected with a theme from Scripture. It was great.

Cal noticed that Seth also has a learning posture toward congregants. Cal recalled a time when he wanted to share something with Seth from his own field of mathematics.

He found Seth to be a ready learner:

I remember when he preached a message on chaos. I have a math degree, and there were some things that I've studied, and things that are fairly deep, philosophically, that have to do with relativism. . . . So I took the risk and said, 'Okay, I'm going talk to him.' So we talked for about an hour and a half and I was able to explain to him . . . and he chose to follow me, about how what he had preached was consistent with what I had learned in mathematics. . . . But that's Seth. He's easy to talk to about things that are deep. Even if he doesn't have all the background, he'll listen to you.

As we have seen, pastors are eager to learn. They have scholarly inclinations which are evident in their biblical expertise, fearlessness with "tough" texts and critical thinking. They are drawn to questions, using questions heavily in teaching and regularly inviting participants to share their questions. They seek knowledge from a wide range of sources.

### Emotional and Social Intelligence

Along with eagerness to learn, another personal characteristic that serves pastors in their Bible teaching is emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 2006).

Pastors perceive their own and others' emotions, effectively managing their own behavior

and building positive relationships with a wide range of people. They attend to non-verbal cues, are self-aware, are authentic in relationships, are open to others and listen well. They are aware of some of the potential emotional and social pitfalls of pastoral ministry and take steps to avoid them.

Pastors perceive their own and others' emotions. They are attuned to confusion, boredom, fear, tension and apprehension. Before my interview with Elena began, she was already talking about the importance of emotional intelligence:

It's people's intuitive ability to read other people and to shape things that are appropriate for the situation. It's not always obvious what those are. Emotional intelligence—I feel like it's so much of ministry. Where does that come from and what would contribute to it in those who are low in it? I don't know. . . . This is really jumping the gun on our conversation, but that's what I kept coming down to. My seminary education was so focused on the intellectual but I think at least fifty percent of the skills we need are much more emotional and relational.

Jim agrees. "The people have to feel a relationship with the pastor so that they want to spend time with him or her. If the people relate to you, that's going to keep them involved," he said. Jim's pastor, Don, pays close attention to the emotional cues he receives from participants during his Bible studies and uses that feedback to shape the study:

I don't know that it's as cognitive as much as it is intuitive. I mean, when the dialogue screeches to a halt that usually says to me that maybe we've turned off on an alleyway that isn't very helpful. If people are engaged, it's not just a matter of me talking and them listening; it's a matter of how the dialogue occurs, how they interact. I suppose over time you get used to reading some of the signs in the interaction. If people don't have much to say that is usually an indication that I've either not framed the questions very well or that we've wandered off into an area that's not bearing much fruit at the time. So we try to back up a little bit and see if we can find where we got off the road and get to a place to reengage. . . . It's not hard to tell when people have checked out.

Because of non-verbal, emotional cues Don has made several adaptations to the study materials he uses. For example, he says:

They've got videos that have a whole range of biblical scholars who do a twenty-minute piece. I've stopped using the videos, not because they're not of value, but they're of limited value to the people in the class. Out of a class of fifteen or twenty people, two or three might be really on board with the video piece. Most of the people who don't have much biblical exposure are really at sea with it, so it just felt like by the time I turned the lights on when the video was over I inevitably had one or two people who were just waking up again.

Pastors believe that fear is a powerful emotion that can get in the way of participants' learning. They take steps to build trust and reduce anxiety. Elena remembered:

My theology has changed a whole lot. I went to an evangelical undergraduate program and took a long time to process the use of Scripture that I learned in that community versus where I am now. It's a whole different picture. And so I know what that fear feels like, the fear I think people have with these labels, conservative and liberal, the fear that if you take a different view of Scripture, you lose the vitality of faith.

One pastor commented that the Scripture itself is a huge help in establishing trust:

I use so much Scripture that it smooths over any tension somebody might have. . . . It is a tactic of mine to use enough Scripture that although I may be saying something new for somebody, it's not coming from Tom Smith over here. It's coming from Scripture.

He also uses humor to ease apprehension. "I try to have a funny story in there, too, if it works, some kind of strange story that illustrates the passage. . . . I keep that in hand if things get heavy or touchy.

One way Don attends to reducing participants' anxiety is by choosing carefully which aspects of his exegetical work to share:

You're not going to simply try to transport everything that you learned in seminary into a local church. That would be deadly. But if it equips me so that my personal study can be more fruitful, I've just got more ammunition when it comes time to teach. Hopefully I have a better grasp, a broader grasp, a deeper grasp. But I don't have to get all my church people to that same point or tell them, 'Here's all the neat stuff I learned.' I listened to a guy preach, and he's a wonderful preacher, and he has a wide reputation as a preacher. But he got to the end of his sermon and he started dismissing a part of the text because of some historical criticism. I thought, 'You could do that in front of a group of preachers, maybe, but if I

trotted that out on a Sunday morning—now I might have allowed myself to shape what I said on the basis of my understanding of that historical criticism, but, I don't need to trot out the historical criticism and say, 'Well, this text is corrupted,' or something like that. I don't know where the benefit of that is. But I actually went up to him afterwards and said, 'Would you have done that in a local congregation?' And he said, 'Sure!' I said, 'I just don't know how that would've played.' I mean, Couldn't he have gotten to the same place without having beaten the congregation over the head with that particular stick?

Don adapted his curriculum with his congregants' fears in mind, choosing early on to stop using the fifth unit:

They put together a fifth class which was a historical Jesus thing, and that was badly received. The people just couldn't grasp the concepts. They felt like the attempt was to undermine the legitimacy of Scripture. There may have been a couple of people in there who were really getting what was going on, but for most of the people, we were still trying to build foundations. We weren't trying to build towers.

Similarly, Seth believes it's important for pastors to monitor their responses to people who are more conservative and uncertain about exegetical tools:

People have to be very careful to not put down those [more conservative] individuals. When I look at my father, who still uses his Thompson-Chain, he's a person of faith who's trying to be faithful. So the first thing you don't say to them is, 'Well, I can't believe you're still reading the King James and, boy, what's up with the Thompson-Chain? That's so last century.'

George noted that he appreciates his pastor's sensitivity to others' feelings, and her ability to be firm without being patronizing or derogatory:

She's pretty gentle about what a person might say. In other words, she would not blurt out, 'No, that's not right at all.' She would not say that. She might say, 'Well, that's one way of looking at it.' But she never uses a putdown. She's also very good about not being weak in that set of circumstances. She's very firm in her statements about how it should look in informed Bible study practice. If there was someone way off, she would say, 'No I don't think it reads that way. Let's look at that again and see if there's another way of looking at it.' She receives a tremendous amount of respect by anyone I've ever seen around her. You might not think that would exist. She's a young pastor and this is her first church. But people hold her in high respect.

Elena is concerned that emotional intelligence is not receiving adequate attention in the Mennonite church and believes this is getting in the way of effective communication:

I think we've been really hesitant to say that emotions have a role. I've engaged a lot of conversations on worship around the Mennonite church in the last few years and when we start talking about what is good worship or what is biblical worship, there's a real fear of acknowledging the role of emotion. Which I think also applies to preaching and to some extent to Bible teaching. To me, the fact is that people are inherently emotional creatures and whether you acknowledge emotion or not, people are experiencing emotion all the time. I would be so bold as to say emotions are as important to spiritual life as the intellect. I think the spiritual life is meant to shape desire and not just thought. And you can only shape desire as you're engaging it and stirring it. I don't see a reason to be ashamed of that. It's not about manipulating it. I can ignore the emotion the song produces in worship. I can ignore the emotion the story produces. But that doesn't mean it goes away. You can either ignore it or you can be deliberate about it and ask, 'How do we shape our liturgy?' 'How do we shape our music?' 'How do we preach and teach in a way that engages those emotions in healthy ways?' When I preach—and this applies less to teaching than to preaching—I'm constantly thinking about, 'What is the emotional feeling that this moment produces?' And I'm looking for a sort of cohesive emotional movement. When I first came to the church it was hard to teach how you feel your way through a service. I've been trying to work with my worship committee on that and it's hard to articulate, but people feel the difference. They're like, 'Everything flowed today,' and I'm thinking, yeah, that's because what I'm looking at isn't just topical connection, but emotional movement.

One pastor has seen what can happen when emotional cues are ignored:

I had a parishioner teach a [Bible] class, and you could just see the glaze falling over people's eyes, like seven minutes in, because the theory was just so far removed from what they were ready for. And the teacher was so fascinated. It was awesome, but you have to be able to exegete human life, not just the text.

Likewise, Thomas's self-awareness leads him to monitor carefully how much he speaks in the Bible study setting:

For the most part I hide my [exegetical] work so that I don't talk too much, so that I don't set too much of an agenda, because I can. It's just my personality; I have to watch that. And I'm used to preaching for so many years that . . . I have to be careful that I'm not just giving a sermon in class.

Don believes that part of self-awareness is knowing your own personal teaching style and being true to yourself rather than mimicking others:

I think what works for me isn't going to work for everybody. We have to be authentic to our own personality and to the ways that are genuine to us. I've got a good friend who is very theatrical and dramatic and I could not pull that off; I just couldn't do it. It would be as phony as a three-dollar bill.

Pastors are also authentic in their spirituality. Both pastors and congregants commented that they are aware that it's possible for a pastor to fall prey to simply going through the motions of spiritual leadership while neglecting their own spiritual center. Congregants notice the deep spirituality of their pastors. "He isn't doing Christianity; he *is* a Christian," said one congregant. Another congregant said:

She has a way of always presenting information as to what *God* is doing. Not so much what the church is doing, not so much the programs that we're doing. Not so much the stances that we take against war or anything like that. It's more being awed by the Creator, being awed by happenings, and having a sense of amazement. It's just kind of an overall attitude of being a God-centered person, a person called to reveal what God is doing in the world. And doing it with a sense of passion about it, a joy about it, and being amazed by it and trying to convey that amazement to your hearers.

Another congregant said:

It's not about him. You can tell it's very sincere. He's the kind of leader I would like to emulate. It's not a forceful leadership. He doesn't lead from behind, but he leads from within. It's, 'I'm not the leader; God is leading this group. I'm part of the group. Hopefully I can help answer questions and help give directions, but God is leading us, not me. I want to try to help everybody make sure that they're following the Leader.'

"He's very convicting without being convicting!" said Jolene of her pastor. "And he's not holding himself above it, either, at all. And even though he doesn't say that, you can just tell that he's including himself in all the teaching."

Pastors' authenticity is also evident in their open postures. They are willing to share of themselves and are open to new ideas as well as to feedback and suggestions.

Ken has noticed this kind of openness in Katie:

I'm thinking of how she crafts her sermons . . . the personal notes she brings into it. . . . She's personable. I mean, she brings in how she's feeling about something, what has moved her and such. She'll give her personal experience; she's open that way.

It was Thomas's open posture that led to the launch of the summer young adult Bible studies he's been leading. Jenna reported that 2 years ago the young adults approached him to ask if he would consider leading a study for them. "He was very open. Excited, even!" she remembered. She was impressed with his "being willing to lead it on top of the other things he does as the pastor, meeting with people and doing all that stuff."

Along with being open, pastors are good listeners. Jane and Cal marvel at how well Seth listens, especially for a pastor of relatively young age. Likewise Ken sees similar qualities in Katie:

She's a good listener. Her responses are thoughtful. In other words, in being a good listener, you give time for what somebody wants to say. So it's not a position of somebody who uses their authority. If a person wants to say something about something, she is eager to let people speak. 'Let's hear them and do all we can in terms of trying to understand what the person is saying.' That would be her way.

Pastors are aware of some of the emotional and social pitfalls that can undermine effectiveness. Poor communication, failure to connect with participants and a tendency to overwhelm participants with too much information can come from pastors' unmet ego needs, they noted. Don regularly teaches a class on spiritual formation for local pastors:

I say to the people there, 'You need to recognize some of the boundaries in terms of how to do what you're called to do.' One of the things we spend time on is a piece I put together, which I called, 'Occupational Hazards.' I tell them, 'One of



the occupational hazards is that we get self-impressed with our own learning and we don't manage to put ourselves in the places of the people that we're called to teach, or preach to. It's just an occupational hazard and like any occupational hazard you need to learn to recognize it and not allow it to poison the good thing that you're trying to do.'

As we have seen, pastors perceive their own and others' emotions, effectively managing their own behavior and building positive relationships with a wide range of people. They attend to non-verbal cues, are self-aware, are authentic in relationships, are open to others and listen well. They are aware of some of the potential emotional and social pitfalls of pastoral ministry and take steps to avoid them.

### Rejection of Ideology

Pastors' theological commitments transcend ideological categories. Pastors appreciate aspects of both conservative and liberal views and challenge aspects of both conservative and liberal views. They value having multiple cultural and religious perspectives on Scripture. Cal says of Seth:

His theology tends to come from an orthodox position but not very rigid fundamentalist. He tends to treat the Scriptures with the same kind of respect that maybe a rigid fundamentalist would do, but still gives a lot of freedom.

Likewise, Elena's approach to Scripture makes it hard to place her on the conservative-liberal spectrum:

In a sense I feel like I make my liberal people more conservative and my conservatives more liberal. I'd like to think that's success! But it's interesting the way good engagement of Scripture can offer something to both the liberal end of the spectrum and the conservative end. I often get the comment from conservative folk, 'I love that you teach the Bible.' They feel the Bible being taught and sometimes don't even realize how much they're being stretched. If I can find ways to explain things that aren't sort of throwing their errors in their face, but instead, 'Look at this possibility,' they get excited. And then from the liberal end I feel like I have a good number of people in the church who just give up on the Bible. They won't even touch it. And for them, they are finding, 'Wow, there's a way that I can engage this. I can read this!' I feel like I really push my liberal group to realize that this is something worth taking seriously. These are the stories

of the people of God and it's messy. The nature of Scripture is to be messy because the nature of human experience is to be messy, but we should hold it with all the more respect for that reason. It's not whitewashing life.

One pastor says he takes a developmental approach when working with fundamentalist-leaning congregants. He doesn't shy away from the questions but takes the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversation:

You've got people who want to talk about biblical inerrancy, and I say, 'Well, what do you mean by that?' They say, 'Well, the Bible is inerrant in the original manuscripts.' I say, 'That's wonderful! But what happens if you don't have the original manuscripts?' And so it offers us an opportunity to talk about the historical development of the text and we can do some things. We can look at the end of the gospel of Mark and say, 'Does the text stop at verse eight? Or does it go through verse twenty?' And 'You see right there in your Bible there's a dividing line that says, 'The original text.' And so we'll talk about that, and try to give them some understanding of it.

Recently one pastor led the congregation through a lengthy discernment process of sexuality issues. The process ultimately led to the congregation opening membership to gay and lesbian members, a stance often associated with more left-leaning pastors and churches. Yet a participant told me that his pastor insisted that the discernment process be anchored in study of Scripture:

[The pastor] said that if we're going to take this on, this is not about trying to be able to know what everybody is thinking, but about what we can find out about what the Bible is ready to teach us about it. And I don't know that [the pastor] would go about it any other way.

Daniel is glad for the theological and political diversity in his congregation and finds it to be both challenging and energizing:

I have a group in the church that are committed Christians but they're not Mennonites. So their views are very interesting. But sometimes it becomes a challenge. One of them said, 'I love peace but I think I'm not a Mennonite. They're so passive. They think peace belongs to them.' We Mennonites take for granted that peace belongs to us, but it's not true. We need to be converted to peace. All this made me think, 'There are people that can express their own views. That's beautiful!'

## Adaptability

Another personal characteristic pastors exhibit is adaptability. Pastors readily adapt to the settings in which they work and to the people they serve. They are patient, flexible, pragmatic and imaginative. Pastors are patient with the Bible teaching process, believing that transformation happens cumulatively rather than as the result of any one event. Elena says:

I feel like what forms people over time is more like the drip, drip, drip on the rock. A thousand different ways, a thousand different angles, but slowly a new image of God is emerging. That's definitely what I see happening in my congregation. Week to week people may not remember what I said in Bible study or in my sermon, but gradually the image of God begins to evolve as you tell enough compelling stories and shape who people are. Part of it means getting over thinking that for me to be successful they need to remember what I said. It's been really hard for me to break out of that mind-set. I don't know how AMBS teaches preaching, but [my seminary] teaches lectionary preaching, so in that kind of preaching it's very much about the event of that one Sunday. 'This is the text for the week.' Next week has a different text and a different aim. I believe very strongly in series preaching because of the way I think people are formed. It's cumulative. People forget sermons week to week. But their odds of remembering—if I did one sermon on fear, they probably would not remember it by next week. But last year I did eight. We talked about all different fears in Scriptural terms. The cumulative effect of that is radically different because it gave people time to think, 'Oh, we're talking about this again,' and we cycle around it again and again and again and finally I heard people start to say—a couple of people made some big changes. One of them invited an international student from one of the Mennonite Women programs, and one went overseas on a trip. And they said, 'Well, I finally asked myself what would I do if I wasn't afraid?' And that can be achieved in one sermon, one spectacular, especially when it's—I feel like my odds of achieving that in one sermon are better when it's not in my church because I'm a fresh voice and people will hear me. But when it's my church, cumulative is everything in terms of actual pastoring. You give people enough time to mull over it, you talk about all the different angles, and I doubt they could tell you a single sermon of that series a year ago.

Both patience and flexibility shape how pastors move through their studies. For some pastors, taking a year or more to teach through a book of the Bible is nothing new.

One pastor reported:

We're currently doing the David story, which has been fascinating, because I had it plotted to be a three-month series. We've now been going for eight months and it's showing no sign of stopping. It's just every week they get so excited; I come in and they're mapping out the story on the big board before I get there.

For Seth, the amount of material covered in each week's study is determined, in large part, by the nature of the questions and comments that emerge from participants. While Seth may prepare to teach a particular set of materials, the question time "might be the reason why we only get one chapter done instead of two, depending on what comes out of that," said Cal.

Thomas describes a typical study: "We usually start with reading the text. Then we work through the questions I created for them to prepare and then I just let the conversation flow and let it go where it needs to go." Jenna appreciates Thomas's flexibility. She recalls that this past summer's study evolved considerably from the previous summer's study, based on feedback from the young adults:

We came to the first one this year and talked about, 'Do we want to change the time? Do we want to change the flow of things? How is it working?' So the first night this year we hashed everything out and decided everything. We had been in conversation about what we were going to discuss. Thomas had some ideas and we settled on the parables. I think he got feedback that solely studying the [Wright] book last year as opposed to studying something of Bible—that idea [to study Bible] definitely came from us, in conversation. So he listens and is willing to hear and try to change it and give us some more [Bible].

Another aspect of pastors' adaptability is a certain kind of pragmatism. While they understand and are committed to ideals, they find it more important that people learn than that everything is done in ideal conditions. For example, they will use and adapt resources that are theologically somewhat different from their own commitments if they find them helpful in some regard. One pastor commented:

Sometimes I get the feeling that Mennonites feel insecure about their value to the church, so there's greater pressure to sort of defend it. I've heard so many people throwing fits about Greg Boyd writing things on pacifism and America and it's

like, ‘Well, we said that first; why do people not listen to us?’ And the two things I’d say to that are, one: Why does it matter? If what we care about is the truth, and not our stake in it? And, two: he says it more interesting than we do. He speaks the language of the people and he does it in a compelling way, and frankly, I’ve read Boyd’s book and I’ve read a lot of books coming out in the Mennonite church, and his is the most entertaining version of the facts that I’ve read. If I want to introduce someone to the concept, that’s the book I give them. Because they’re not going to be bored. . . . It’s not to say that he perfectly grasps Mennonite understanding or that I agree with every bit of it. But I think we keep choosing purity over—maybe I’m just being a pragmatist—but I have the feeling right now that we are often more inclined to choose theological purity over actual communication. And the result is that nothing gets communicated.

Jim appreciates Don’s helpful adaptations to their Bible study curriculum. “They have five days of Bible reading and then on the sixth day they tell you to read the background commentary on it. Don says, ‘If you want to cheat and read the commentary first, that will be an advantage for understanding what you’re reading.’ And it really has been helpful.”

Even as pastors raise a high bar by expecting participants to prepare for Bible study, they understand the limitations of those expectations. They are pragmatic in working with what people bring. Don said:

The idea is that folks have read before they’ve come to class. And not everybody reads and I encourage them to come even if they haven’t read; I tell them that it’ll still be of benefit to them. . . . I’ve had to make some changes. The first course [in the curriculum] is an overview of the Bible. In thirty-one weeks the class is supposed to read about seventy percent of the Bible. I’ve used this material now since 1985 and what I’ve discovered is that that overview class just overwhelms a lot of people because the reading is so intense. So they have a second, third and fourth class, and what I’ve taken to doing is just the last three classes. . . . If the people who put together the *Disciple Bible Study* came in they’d probably be a bit appalled. We don’t use it the way they train people to use it.

Pastors’ pragmatism also shows up in their relationship to the original biblical languages. Even as they see great value in Hebrew and Greek exegesis, they use whatever resources are at their disposal, including English translations. They value the original

languages but are not paralyzed by lack of time or facility to work in them on a regular basis. Instead they exposit the text using a wide range of tools.

Pastors use imagination and creativity as part of the process of adapting to their teaching situations. They find different ways to make the text come alive depending on the text and the group. Don reports:

Sometimes we'll read significant portions of the text. We'll always read some of the text. But sometimes when we, the class I was teaching on Revelation, when we came to the end, we pretty much read the last three chapters of Revelation. Just because I felt like it was important just to get the [full effect], and you can't do that just by hitting the highlights. You need to read it because there's such a sensory way that John is writing what he's writing. You just need to hear it, and see it, and smell it and taste it and feel it. And then we played the Hallelujah Chorus! I try to do things that get us into the nature of the text because different texts are trying to do different things.

Likewise Seth has found ways to stretch learners' imaginations. "People really like images," he says. "Even if it's just a map, so they can see it in context." According to participants, however, he doesn't stop with maps. Cal says:

We're studying Revelation. So you go through the seven churches. And one of the seven churches is Pergamum. We weren't looking at those as some symbolic things; we were looking at them as cities. And then it was Pergamum where he said, 'Do you know this?' And he says, 'Look at this. This is a great big marble throne room, a king's throne. It's still in a museum today. Where do you think this is? It's in Berlin. Hitler moved it from Pergamum to Berlin because it was the strongest statement of 'I am the king,' he could make.' So we're reading that stuff and I said, 'Man! Where'd you get that?!' And actually, if I went to this museum I could still see that today. There in Berlin, this great big, big marble platform. A throne on it. From Pergamum! . . . So there it is! Holy Schmoley! I didn't even know that existed, let alone, that Hitler moved that thing from Pergamum. It's that kind of stuff that makes interesting Bible study.

## **Conclusion**

Five major themes emerged from my interviews with pastors. These included (a) pastors' formative experiences with the Bible; (b) their passion for biblical formation; (c) their understanding of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching; (d) their

pedagogical approach; and (e) personal characteristics that support their Bible teaching.

We turn next to a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for practice and further research.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

Even in the face of widespread misuse and disuse of Scripture, there are seminary-educated pastors who are creating communities of engagement around the Bible. Defying trends toward misinterpretation and disengagement, these pastors are bridging the gap between their seminary education and people in the pew. The focus of this study was to describe how pastors are successfully leading “ordinary readers” (De Wit, 2004) to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. The research question for the study asked how pastors are establishing communities of engagement around the Bible.

#### **Research Design**

Within the broad field of qualitative research I chose to draw most heavily on the “grounded theory” tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were gathered through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A purposive sample included six Mennonite pastors, chosen “for their ability to contribute to an evolving theory” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). These pastors (a) regularly lead adult Bible studies in their congregations; (b) are consciously utilizing tools of biblical interpretation gleaned in



seminary as they prepare for and teach adult Bible studies; (c) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are enthusiastically engaged with Scripture; and (d) perceive that congregational members who participate in these Bible studies are making use of tools of biblical interpretation. In addition I interviewed participants in the Bible studies these pastors are leading.

### **Conceptual Lenses**

The study was informed by the conceptual work of three experts: Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995). All three offer strategies for bridging the gap between the work of biblical scholars and the biblical understandings of people in the pew. In doing so they also indirectly offer a response to the problem raised by this study, namely that ordinary readers tend to misuse the Bible on the one hand, or to give up reading it entirely, on the other hand. Throughout the study I looked for points of convergence with and divergence from the work of Wink, Blair, and Borsch in the experiences, perspectives and behaviors of the pastors whom I interviewed and observed.

Wink's (2009) three-part approach to group Bible study begins with a call for teachers to lead participants in honoring the "foreignness" of the biblical text by guiding them into the use of interpretive tools. A key part of teaching these tools lies in knowing how to ask good questions: "What kinds of questions are important to ask? The critical questions are provided by the critical problems which the text presents" (p. 88). Wink showed teachers how they can formulate good questions to help participants discover contextual clues in and behind the text.

Second, participants need to "imaginatively slip into the skins of the characters of the story" (Wink, 2009, p. 39), or "probe our understanding for apprehension of the

meaning of the symbols, images, or metaphors employed” (Wink, 2009, p. 39). Third, Wink insisted on the importance of application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain, including such things as painting pictures, writing dialogues, miming, doing role plays, writing skits, working with clay, and moving to music, among others.

Blair (2001) draws from both adult learning theory and the field of biblical studies in offering a “Five R’s Model” for congregational Bible teaching. The five R’s include: Remembering, Revisiting, Reflecting Critically, Reinterpreting, and Responding. “Remembering” asks participants to share what they already know about the particular biblical text under investigation. Students share their impressions, perceptions, stereotypes and general knowledge of the text.

“Revisiting” is aimed at helping participants uncover “the story behind and content in the text” through the use of planned questions (Blair, 2001, p. 56). Participants are invited to consult atlases, Bible dictionaries, concordances, commentaries and each other in an effort to gain background information about the text. This step may be carried out over several class sessions, with the goal “to revisit the text a number of times, going deeper each time, and in the process learning some simple tools of Bible study used by scholars and pastors” (p. 56).

“Reflecting critically” calls on participants to think carefully “about two texts and how they meet: the texts of their lives and the Bible texts” (Blair, 2001, p. 61). They might ask questions such as, “How was your understanding changed? What new insights have come to you? What issues in your life does this text address? Are there social-political ones this speaks to? Why?” (p. 75).

“Reinterpreting” invites participants to re-tell the text from the point of view of someone within the text. Reinterpreting can take many forms; examples include role-playing, story-telling, sermon-writing, skit-making and letter-writing (Blair, 2001).

“Responding” asks, “What does this [text] call me to do?” (Blair, 2001, p. 70). “What are the messages for today that speak to the lives of the learners, to the communities in which they live, and to the larger society and world?” (p. 58). Participants may make a covenant with one another regarding what action the group might take jointly, or individuals may journal or reflect in silence on how they will live differently in light of what they have learned from the biblical text. Blair sees importance in ending the study with both stated plans for action and incorporation of rituals such as prayers of commitment that reflect those plans.

Borsch (1995) lays out several guiding concepts for teaching the Bible in the seminary context as a way to better form congregational pastor-teachers of the Bible. These include what he calls: (a) holism; (b) social setting; (c) dialogue with the text; and (d) biblical theology.

Holism speaks to the importance of both the whole person and “persons in community” in the educational process. A comprehensive view of education includes a tradition of understanding, as well as contemporary information and knowledge. It gives important roles to imagination, the creative intellect, and the interaction between theoretical understanding and the ‘making and doing’ aspects of life. Emotions and the body as well as the mind are part of learning and education. Holism includes but goes beyond positivist notions of what can be objectively learned, to embrace the “larger

context of life and learning. . . . What is seen and understood always involves much more than the measurable and quantifiable” (Borsch, 1995, p. 355).

“Social setting” for Borsch (1995) refers to the importance of highlighting for seminary students the social circumstances in which the biblical texts came to be. This work ought to be a much greater priority in Bible teaching, says Borsch, because it is in getting in touch with the lived experience of people in ancient times that contemporary readers become engaged.

It is through better appreciation of the density and ‘thickness’ of daily life conditions of past ages that we today may also come to sense commensuralities, common denominators, and forms of kinship. An understanding of the circumstances which conditioned the hopes and fears, the dreams and prevarications, the heartbreaks and valor of biblical people, can bring us nearer to them. (p. 356)

Through the notion of “dialogue with the text,” Borsch (1995) challenges seminaries to become “scriptural communities” in which all members are regularly involved in communal reading and reflection on Scripture, and in which “various voices can be heard and all experience and insight have value. Diversity becomes of particular significance in such a community and will be missed when it is not present” (p. 357). This regular engagement with Scripture in a communal context will prepare seminary students for working with the Bible in congregations, says Borsch.

Finally, Borsch (1995) calls on seminaries to attend to the formation and articulation of a biblical theology that speaks to questions of the role and authority of Scripture and the place of Scripture in the life of believers and the church. Such a theology, says Borsch, will help students integrate the scholarly study of Scripture with the use and study of the Bible in contemporary life. This integration will serve a crucial function as students move into leadership roles in congregations.

## **Findings**

The findings provide insight into the research question: How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?

The study focused on the experiences of six Mennonite pastors and seven participants in their Bible studies. Pastors hold Master of Divinity degrees from six different denominational seminaries, including from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Eastern Mennonite Seminary. Pastors serve in congregations across Mennonite Church USA. They are from five regional conferences. The churches they serve are located in small cities as well as urban and rural communities. Their congregations range in size from 30 to 300. They are lead pastors, church planters, solo pastors and associate pastors. They carry full-time and part-time roles. Two pastors are women; four are men. Three participants are women; four are men.

Pastors lead Bible studies for adults in their congregational settings on a regular basis. Participants in their Bible studies are young adults, adults in their 40's, 50's, 60's, and elderly adults. Relatively few participants are in their 30's.

The frequency of study sessions includes: meeting weekly for a Sunday school quarter; meeting weekly for the summer; meeting weekly for the school year; and meeting bi-weekly throughout the calendar year.

Five major themes emerged from my interviews with pastors and participants: (a) pastors' formative experiences with the Bible; (b) their passion for biblical formation; (c) their understanding of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching; (d) their pedagogical approach; and (e) personal characteristics that support their Bible teaching.

Pastors described many formative experiences with the Bible prior to becoming Bible teachers. They were raised in religious households in a variety of denominations. As young adults they engaged Scripture. Also as young adults they made consequential choices, experiencing major shifts in their theology. Their seminary experiences further formed their approach to the Bible. They had mentors who were engaged with the Bible and present at key points in their lives.

Pastors passionately desire biblical formation for themselves and the people they serve. They believe that biblical formation *matters*. They have confidence in the overarching coherence and unity of Scripture. They demonstrate a commitment to Scripture's authority. They long to participate more fully with their people in "the biblical story," a metaphor they use for Scripture and God's unfolding work in the world.

Pastors reflected on several aspects of pastoral identity as it relates to Bible teaching, including their sense of call, their understanding of the purpose of teaching the Bible in the congregation, how teaching fits into their pastoral assignment, and the church and seminary's role in calling pastors to teach.

Pastors reported that they give substantial attention to the pedagogical process. They lay the groundwork for their Bible studies, including preparing, expecting participants to prepare, and using "marketing" sensibilities to inspire participation. They use learner-oriented teaching techniques, including attention to discovery, interaction, comprehension and integration. They provide needed guidance for sessions by offering a framework, stimulating conversation, guiding participants to contextual information, and offering summary remarks that draw meaning from the conversation.

Pastors' personal characteristics include eagerness to learn, emotional and social intelligence, rejection of ideology, and adaptability. All of these characteristics serve their desire to be effective Bible teachers.

The study revealed that pastors are establishing communities of engagement around the Bible by manifesting deeply formed passion for the biblical story and by drawing on an understanding of pastoral identity, a pedagogical approach and personal characteristics that support effective Bible teaching.

### **Discussion**

Although pastors came from diverse backgrounds and ministry settings, their experiences, perspectives and behaviors share a great deal in common. While pastors do not share a teaching *technique* in common, they do share an overall pedagogical *approach* in common, and they share much more in common than a pedagogical approach. This is particularly striking because the data were drawn through a “grounded theory” approach. Interview questions were open-ended and assumed no hypothesis regarding what kinds of experiences, perspectives and behaviors pastors might share. Theory-building began only after the first interview and continued throughout the data collection process as new information emerged. Nevertheless, remarkable consistency is present in the findings.

It is noteworthy that pastors do not share a teaching *technique* in common. Their techniques differ greatly from each other's and from those offered by scholars. For example, one pastor begins by inviting a lay co-teacher to share findings from blogs or other experiences that intersect with the passage being studied, then has the group hear or read the Scripture, then leads a discussion that involves a minimum of input from the

pastor, and often closes the session by asking participants to sit in silence for several minutes. In contrast, another pastor begins every session with a few minutes of open time for questions and comments brought by the people, then lectures for 15 or 20 minutes, then opens the study again for questions and comments, then continues with another 15- or 20-minute lecture. This pattern continues over the course of an hour-long session. Yet another pastor has participants meet in small groups of two or three for an hour or more to read the Scripture and generate observations. On a different day, in the context of worship, they meet with others to hear the pastor's teaching on the passage being studied.

Another pastor also uses small groups regularly, giving participants questions to discuss for 15 or 20 minutes during which he leaves the room. When he comes back he guides a question/discussion process that builds on the small-group discussions. Another pastor typically begins by using questions to focus on a current event or other experience that paves the way for discussion of the Bible passage being studied that day. Another works through a carefully prepared set of questions, moving sequentially through the passage in a "spiral" from exegesis to application, to exegesis to application, over the course of the session. Some pastors use art heavily; others' occasional visuals are more likely to be quick, hand-drawn sketches on a flip chart or maps of Israel/Palestine.

No pastors reported beginning with Blair's (2001) first step of "remembering"—asking participants to share their impressions, perceptions, stereotypes and general knowledge of the text—nor of following the additional four steps she lays out. Likewise, no pastors reported regularly using embodied application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain, as recommended by Wink (2009). Thus we see that pastors' teaching techniques differ significantly from one another's and from those of scholars.



However, even as pastors' teaching *techniques* vary widely, pastors do share an overall pedagogical *approach*. This approach involves laying the groundwork for sessions, using a learner-oriented teaching approach and providing guidance for sessions. This approach resonates with aspects of the conceptual work of Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995). It also has resonance in progressive learning theory and in Palmer's (1998) "subject-centered" pedagogy.

#### Resonates With Concepts of Wink, Blair, and Borsch

Pastors' pedagogical approach resonates with aspects of the conceptual work of Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995). It confirms several of the larger principles they identify, namely: (a) using tools to establish context; (b) asking, "How does Scripture speak to my life?" and (c) studying Scripture in diverse communities. It also bears resemblance to some aspects of "holism," a concept named by Borsch that also runs through Wink and Blair.

#### **Using Tools to Establish Context**

The first general concept that gets attention from Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995) and resonates with pastors is that of using tools of scholarship to establish a contextualized understanding of the text. Wink's (2009) first step calls for teachers to honor the foreign nature of the biblical text by guiding participants into the use of critical tools, with the goal of decreasing their "fusion" with the text, objectifying it so that it can be examined apart from the encumbrance of tradition (Wink, 2010). He recommends that teachers use carefully crafted questions about critical issues posed by the text as the primary tool for this process (Wink, 2010).

Blair's (2001) second step, "Revisiting," aims to help participants uncover "the story behind and content in the text" (p. 56) through the use of planned questions. In this phase Blair recommends that participants consult atlases, Bible dictionaries, concordances, commentaries and each other in an effort to gain background information about the text.

Borsch's (1995) focus on "social setting" also speaks to the value of using scholarly tools to uncover the social context of the biblical texts. His focus, however, is on creating a sense of connection between contemporary students of the Bible and the ancient peoples and events in the Bible.

Pastors regularly encourage participants to take advantage of scholarly tools to contextualize the text. They point to maps, Bible dictionaries, multiple translations, timelines, ancient works of art, curriculum, commentaries, and internet resources to illuminate geography, literary context, historical context, translation decisions and more.

Pastors also use questions heavily in their teaching processes, and some pastors reported developing questions in advance to guide the early stages of discovery in their sessions. However, the extent to which this question-posing reflects the kind of question-posing envisioned by either Wink (2009) or Blair (2001) is unclear. No pastors cited the goal of decreasing participants' dependence on traditional interpretation, although that may very well be part of their expectation.

Borsch's (1995) focus on creating a sense of connection between contemporary students of the Bible and the ancient peoples and events in the Bible is validated by both pastors and participants, who reported participants' feelings of wholeness, joy, delight, and deep satisfaction when they discovered the stories of "real people" underlying the

text, through the contextualization of the text. Borsch's insight is further confirmed by pastors' belief that the primary purpose of exegesis is to uncover the "biblical story" and to invite people to "find their story in the biblical story and allow the biblical story to help shape and form their stories" (Don). Borsch's emphasis on appreciating "the density and 'thickness' of daily life conditions . . . the hopes and fears, the dreams and prevarications, the heartbreaks and valor of biblical people" (p. 356), rings true in the stories of both pastors and participants.

### **Asking "How Does Scripture Speak to My Life?"**

A second general concept emerging from the work of Wink (2009) and Blair (2001) and resonating with pastors is the notion of asking, as a part of their Bible studies, how the Scripture is "speaking to my life." Wink (2009) says participants need to "imaginatively slip into the skins of the characters of the story, or probe . . . understanding for apprehension of the meaning of the symbols, images, or metaphors employed" (p. 39). In this step participants imagine not only what the biblical characters felt, thought, and experienced, but also, "How does this text resonate in me, in my life, in my being?" (p. 39).

This latter part of Wink's (2009) second step has parallels in Blair's (2001) third phase, "Reflecting critically." This step invites participants to think carefully "about two texts and how they meet: the texts of their lives and the Bible texts" (Blair, 2001, p. 60). They might ask questions such as, "How was your understanding changed? What new insights have come to you? What issues in your life does this text address? Are there social-political ones this speaks to? Why?" (p. 75).

Pastors and participants resonated strongly with the value of reflecting on how the biblical texts intersect with their lives. Typically in their studies, after participants have investigated the text in some of its contexts and surfaced some of its meanings, questions of intersection with contemporary life consistently come into focus and are engaged. For some pastors this sequence happens multiple times per session. Pastors did not report using imaging exercises (Wink, 2009) to achieve these goals. The exception may be the use of the arts by some pastors to open up imagination and illuminate texts' meanings.

### **Studying Scripture in Diverse Communities**

A third general concept is proposed by Borsch (1995) and affirmed in pastors' experience. Borsch believes that pastors-in-training ought to study the Bible in the context of a diverse community. In his priority on "dialogue with the text," Borsch challenges seminaries to become "scriptural communities" in which "various voices can be heard and all experience and insight have value. Diversity becomes of particular significance in such a community and will be missed when it is not present" (p. 357). Borsch believes regular engagement with Scripture in a communal context will better prepare seminary students for working with the Bible in congregations.

Indeed, the scriptural communities in which pastors are teaching the Bible are diverse. Cultural and theological backgrounds of participants vary widely. Educational and economic levels likewise fall on a wide spectrum. In fact, diversity was named by several pastors as one of the challenges they face in leading Bible studies. It is reasonable to think that exposure to various kinds of diversity in Bible study in seminary, had they had it, would have been helpful in anticipating aspects of the diversity they now experience.

## **Holism**

A fourth general concept that runs through Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995) but is unclear in pastors' stories can be summed up by Borsch's term "holism," the importance of both the whole person and "persons in community" in the educational process, giving "important roles to imagination, the creative intellect, and the interaction between theoretical understanding and the 'making and doing' aspects of life. Emotions and the body as well as the mind are part of learning and education" (p. 355). In his third step, Wink (2009) called for application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain, including such things as painting pictures, writing dialogues, miming, doing role plays, writing skits, working with clay, and moving to music, among others.

Similarly, Blair's (2001) fourth and fifth phases call for a holistic approach to application. The fourth stage, "Reinterpreting," invites participants to re-tell the text from the point of view of someone within the text. Re-telling can take many forms such as role-playing, story-telling, sermon-writing, skit-making and letter-writing. The fifth and final stage, "Responding," asks, "What does this (text) call me to do?" (p. 70) "What are the messages for today that speak to the lives of the learners, to the communities in which they live, and to the larger society and world?" Participants may make a covenant with one another regarding what action the group might take jointly, or individuals may journal or reflect in silence on how they will live differently in light of what they have learned from the biblical text. Blair sees importance in ending the study with both stated plans for action and incorporation of rituals such as prayers of commitment that reflect those plans.

These kinds of efforts at embodiment were mentioned by relatively few pastors. One teacher mentioned the practice of pausing for several minutes at the end of each class to ask people to sit in silence, reflecting on their learning, and then to write down on a card what they wanted to remember from the class.

Pastors do believe and demonstrate that learning must happen in ways that embrace not only the intellect “but also the heart” (Daniel). Pastors found ways to create emotional engagement with texts, and participants showed evidence of being emotionally engaged with texts. It is unclear whether similar ends to those envisioned by Wink (2009) and Blair (2001) were achieved in pastors’ studies.

### Resonates With Progressive Learning Theory

Along with resonating with aspects of the conceptual work of Wink (2009), Blair (2001), and Borsch (1995), pastors’ learner-oriented pedagogical approach resonates with many aspects of progressive learning theory as established in education literature. While only one pastor spoke of having studied adult learning theory, all the pastors demonstrated several of the key concepts of progressive learning theory in their teaching practice, including the importance of discovery (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), guiding a process of “emerging relevance” (Brooks & Brooks, 1999), making the student’s learning paramount (Brookfield, 2006), the value of dialogical encounters and question-making (Fleischer, 2006), the importance of trust-building (Daloz, 1980), and the goal of education as movement toward living compassionately and justly in the world (Daloz, 1980).

For example, Knowles et al. (2005) lay out a theory of adult learning that values the adult learner’s need to know, self-concept, life experience, readiness to learn,

orientation to learning and motivation for learning. In contrast to traditional approaches built on Locke's *tabula rasa* and on models of efficiency in the industrial age, which assume individual students bring little of importance to the learning process, Knowles et al.'s theory of "andragogy" is based on a "process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content" (p. 35). Similarly, Montessori (1870-1952) taught that the most effective learning happens through discovery rather than by transmission (Lillard, 2005).

Pastors consistently incorporate inquiry and discovery into their teaching, seeking to ensure that participants discern texts' messages and meaning(s) through use of an inductive approach. They make the biblical text the centerpiece of their studies, rather than making it a "launching pad" for disseminating their own ideas. They do not impose structures, overarching themes, or dogma onto the text. They invite participants to read closely and to interact with each other around what they are finding. Participants report that through these processes they do, in fact, *discover* the Bible's messages and meanings in new and deeply satisfying ways.

Brooks and Brooks (1999) focus on the importance of honoring the learning process by guiding the process of "emerging relevance"—that is, making what might not seem relevant to students at the outset relevant through certain kinds of experiences or questions, paying attention to "essence" or primary concepts, learning and valuing the student's point of view and prior understandings, and making adaptations to the curriculum in light of what teachers learn about their students' point of view.

Pastors' behaviors repeatedly mirrored Brooks and Brooks's (1999) concerns, including careful and regular use of questions and other relevance-generating

experiences, being highly selective in choosing only essential contextual content to share, drawing out participants' perspectives, comments and questions, and regularly adapting curriculum to better serve participants.

Brookfield (2006) offers three "core assumptions" of good teaching:

Skillful teaching is whatever helps students learn; skillful teachers adopt a critically reflective stance toward their practice; and the most important knowledge skillful teachers need to do good work is a constant awareness of how students are experiencing their learning and perceiving teachers' actions. (p. 17)

All of these core assumptions were present in pastors' reports of their teaching and learning processes. Brookfield's (2006) notion of "whatever helps students learn" resonates strongly with the pragmatic approach of pastors whose deep desire is that participants comprehend the material, integrate it, and through it experience spiritual formation and growth. Likewise, pastors' comments demonstrated a critically reflective stance toward their own practice, showing that they seek to learn and grow as teachers. Further, pastors reported monitoring how participants are experiencing their teaching by drawing on emotional and social intelligence as an important feedback mechanism that allows them to "read" students.

Fleischer (2006) applies educational constructivism to the adult theological education setting. In a review of Mezirow's (1978) theory of transformative learning, Fleischer (2006) focuses particularly on the important place of critical reflection in the learning processes of adult learners, including seminarians. She highlights Mezirow's (1978) priority on creating dialogical encounters that surface deep questions and open doors to new "meaning perspectives" and "meaning schemes." She goes on to reflect on the work of theological anthropologist Lonergan (1978) who states that the self-transcendence made possible through transformative learning is ultimately fulfilled in



love of God. Lonergan also claims that question-making, which is core to human experience, grows out of the fundamental intelligibility of life, making it a faith-reinforcing activity. Fleischer (2006) concludes that religious and theological educators should not fear, but rather engage and embrace transformative learning educational models.

Indeed, pastors view dialogical encounters aimed at bringing deep meaning to the surface (Mezirow, 1978) as a central part of their teaching efforts. They make continual use of questions, both inviting them and posing them, and would almost certainly concur with Lonergan's (1978) claim that question-making is a faith-reinforcing activity, as evidenced in their own faith-formation stories and in their teaching.

Daloz (1980) calls on teachers to make trust-building a foundational part of their teaching efforts. Quoting Erickson (1959), Daloz states,

Trust flows at the source of the entire developmental process. It is the well from which we draw the courage to let go of what we no longer need and to receive what we do. . . . Courage and trust are sister and brother. (Daloz, 1980, p. 212)

Pastors described their efforts to lower anxiety and fear and increase trust in their Bible study settings. Participants spoke of how relational their pastors are. Their comments demonstrated trust in their pastors, showing evidence of friendship and loyalty.

After conducting a multi-year study of adult students and their mentors, Daloz (1980) reports that growth moves the learner from dualistic to contextual thinking through encounters with diversity. Daloz defines growth as movement toward wisdom, which he says is the ultimate goal of education. A truly educated person, he states, is one who demonstrates the capacity to value all other human beings and to live compassionately and justly in the world.

Pastors did not precisely articulate the vision Daloz (1980) offers. Nevertheless, their commitment to enabling contextual thinking through encounters with diverse perspectives and their desire for growth for participants toward wisdom and living compassionately and justly in the world resound in their pedagogical approach.

### Resonates With “Subject-Centered” Pedagogy

Even as pastors’ learner-oriented pedagogical approach is evident in their commitment to discovery, interaction, comprehension and integration, their behavior doesn’t consistently mirror what is known in educational circles as “student-centered pedagogy.” Rather, it transcends the polarities of “student-centered pedagogy” and “teacher-centered pedagogy” and resonates strongly with Palmer’s (1998) “subject-centered” pedagogy.

Student-centered teaching is a complex term which is defined in a variety of ways, but is often understood to include considerable student choice about the content of learning, regular use of cooperative/collaborative learning through small groups, little or no use of lecture, and a largely secondary role for teachers. Palmer (1998) characterizes student-centered teaching as a pedagogy in which

Students and the act of learning are more important than teachers and the act of teaching. The student is regarded as a reservoir of knowledge to be tapped, students are encouraged to teach each other, the standards of accountability emerge from the group itself, and the teacher’s role varies from facilitator to co-learner to necessary evil. (p. 116)

In contrast to a strictly student-centered approach, pastors normally choose the content of their Bible studies, may or may not use collaborative learning groups, find presentations/lectures to be useful, and play a primary role in guiding the class. Likewise, pastors take a very active and primary role in the teaching process, offering a framework

for the study, stimulating conversation, providing contextual information, managing the flow of conversation, keeping the focus throughout the session, summarizing where the class has been and offering concluding points.

Pastors' approach instead has similarity to Palmer's (1998) "subject-centered" pedagogy. Says Palmer,

As the debate swings from the teacher-centered model, with its concern for rigor, to the student-centered model, with its concern for active learning, some of us are torn between the poles. We find insights and excesses in both approaches, and neither seems adequate to the task. The problem, of course, is that we are caught in yet another either-or. Whiplashed, with no way to hold the tension, we fail to find a synthesis that might embrace the best of both. (p. 116)

A solution, says Palmer (1998), lies in turning both students' and teachers' attention to the subject under investigation, to the "great thing" all are gathered to study. "At the center of [the] communal circle, there is always a subject—as contrasted with the object at the top of the objectivist ladder," he says. "This distinction is crucial to knowing, teaching and learning: *a subject is available for relationship; an object is not*" (p. 102).

This relationship begins when we allow the subject to occupy the center of our attention. . . . This contrasts sharply with objectivism, which puts the expert at the center of our attention: in objectivism, the objects of knowing are so far beyond our reach that the expert is the only party with whom we can connect.

When we make the subject the center of our attention, we give it the respect and authority that we normally give only to human beings. . . . We give it ontological significance . . . acknowledging its unique identity and integrity. (p. 103)

Indeed, pastors are teaching in such a way that the Bible is the Subject at the center of their groups' experiences. Through their pedagogical approach, the Bible has an independent voice, and both students and teachers report entering into deep and meaningful relationship with it. Through these studies, both teachers and learners are drawn into and critiqued by the Great Thing that is their primary focus.

Also following Palmer's (1998) approach, pastors are sparing in how much information on the subject they share. Palmer calls on teachers to refrain from flooding students with enormous amounts of content. "When facts about the subject are dumped en masse, students are overwhelmed, and their grasp of the facts is fleeting" (p. 121). Instead, he says, teachers should investigate fewer things in greater depth. This will ultimately yield greater understanding of the subject being studied, he believes.

Every discipline has a gestalt, an internal logic, a patterned way of relating to the things at its core.

Thus every discipline is like a hologram . . . every part of the hologram contains all of the information possessed by the whole. . . . If the film of a rose hologram is cut in half and then illuminated by a laser, each half will still be found to contain the entire image of the rose. If the halves are divided again, each snippet of film will always be found to contain a smaller but intact version of the original image. Take any piece of a hologram and from it you can reconstruct the whole.

William Blake . . . suggests that we can 'see a World in a Grain of Sand.' Every academic discipline has such 'grains of sand' through which its world can be seen. So why do we keep dumping truckloads of sand on our students, blinding them to the whole, instead of lifting up a grain so they can learn to see for themselves? Why do we keep trying to cover the field when we can honor the stuff of the discipline more profoundly by teaching less of it at a deeper level?

Each discipline has an inner logic so profound that every critical piece of it contains the information necessary to reconstruct the whole—if it is illuminated by a laser, a highly organized beam of light. That laser is the act of teaching. Consider the science lab. . . . Alone and together, guided by a teacher, [students] examine this grain of sand, and in the process, they learn the logic of the discipline, its rules of observation and interpretation, as well as some substantive facts. What they discover by examining this microcosm—then another, and another, and another—can eventually translate into literacy in the discipline at large. By diving deep into particularity, these students are developing an understanding of the whole. (Palmer, 1998, pp. 122–123)

Seth's experiences with teaching the Bible express Palmer's (1998) point:

My joke is that whatever book it is, to me it represents another chance to just talk about the Bible. I think that any Bible study, in any book, is an excuse to be able to teach the whole Bible. It really is a unified whole.

Giving Scripture a voice and allowing it to speak is a priority for pastors, including hearing it speak to their own lives and allowing it to claim authority over them.

Participants report that through pastors' Bible studies, they often hear the Bible speaking and "coming alive." Palmer (1998) states that

it is not cheap mysticism to claim that all great things have inner lives that will speak to our own—if we let them. Literary texts are merely the clearest example of such voices, voices that reach us with astonishing clarity across huge gaps of space and time. (p. 110)

This echoes in comments from participants:

Whenever a Bible study can take events that happened thousands of years ago, and you come away with, 'Oh, they're not much different than we are today,' or, 'This chasm of time isn't all that big on another scale of people being human,' or 'We haven't changed. We don't act much different than the experiences they're having, that are being talked about.' (Ken)

Don teaches in a way that we hear the Scripture speaking. It's what the Scripture is saying, not what Don is saying and not what an author of a Bible study book is saying. I've been to other Bible studies where we read a book, where the author quotes a lot of Bible. But it's the author's opinion; it's not the Bible speaking. With Don's Bible studies I am hearing the Bible itself speak. (Grace)

Thus, while pastors did not describe their pedagogy as "subject-centered," their comments and behavior and those of participants point solidly in that direction. The enthusiasm that participants share not only for the Bible study experience, but for *the Bible itself*, speaks volumes about pastors' success in transcending the divide between teacher-centered and student-centered approaches, to create subject-centered Bible study experiences.

### Pastors Share More Than Pedagogical Approach

Besides pedagogical approach, pastors share many other things in common. They share an intense passion for biblical formation, an understanding of pastoral identity, certain personal characteristics and many formative experiences.

### **Intense Passion for Biblical Formation**

Pastors passionately desire biblical formation for themselves and the people they serve, for the purpose of *transformation*. They believe that biblical formation *matters*. They long to participate more fully with their people in “the biblical story,” a metaphor they use for Scripture. Clinton (1991), who studied how Christian leaders develop over a lifetime, has observed such passion for Scripture to be a sign of leadership potential and a prime characteristic of effective Christian leadership. “An appetite to learn the Word of God (shown by a person’s response to the ministry of Bible teachers and self-initiated study projects) is a good indicator of an emerging leader,” he writes (p. 207).

Pastors in the present study have confidence in the overarching coherence and unity of Scripture and view Scripture as the metanarrative that gives life meaning, and by which they seek to live their lives. While spending little time discussing their doctrinal positions on the authority of Scripture, they demonstrate a deep commitment to Scripture’s authority. Surprisingly, neither pastors nor participants mentioned struggling with questions of the role and authority of Scripture. To be clear, no interview questions directly addressed this question. However, two questions might have elicited comments on it. One question gave pastors a chance to speak to challenges they encountered in the Bible study context: “What are the joys and challenges of leading this Bible study?” The other question asked, “How did your seminary education both prepare you and fail to prepare you for this kind of work in a congregation?”

Pastors’ relative silence on the matter of struggling with issues of biblical authority is noteworthy when juxtaposed with the findings of *Engaging Pastors*. That project found that “there is an urgent need and opportunity for pastoral, biblical and teaching authority to be strengthened in the Mennonite church,” and that “teaching

Scriptures is one place where we again encounter issues of pastoral leadership and authority. It is not clear whether churches see teaching as intrinsic to the pastoral vocation” (Boers, 2007, p. 1). It also raised the question, “How do we read the Bible well, and to whom do we look to tell us that we’ve read it well? And who can take the authority and make it so?” (Longenecker, 2010b, p. 108).

This finding has interesting parallels in Borsch’s (1995) concern for “biblical theology” (p. 359). Borsch states that seminaries ought to formulate and articulate a biblical theology that speaks to the questions of the role and authority of Scripture.

The Bible provides the stories that have always given identity to the Christian community. . . . These stories and related materials are the base data and primary theological core of Christian community. In the same way that not knowing the stories of a family means that one is not a full member of the family, so not knowing these stories undercuts full membership in the community of Christians. It is the one ‘language’ shared by Christians of different races, cultures, and economic backgrounds. (p. 360)

A biblical theology, says Borsch (1995), will help students integrate the scholarly study of Scripture with the use and study of the Bible in contemporary life. This integration will serve a crucial role for graduates who become congregational leaders, he says. While the present study did not directly ask pastors and participants about struggles with notions of biblical authority, the findings point in the direction of a robust biblical theology among pastors.

The fact that neither pastors nor participants mentioned struggling with questions of biblical authority raises several questions: (a) Did they simply forget to mention their struggles in this area? (b) Are participants unique among the general Mennonite population and therefore not facing these struggles? (c) Is it the case that pastors’ biblical theology is indeed robust enough to allay participants’ concerns? and (d) What is the

relationship between pastors' demonstration of the "functional" authority of Scripture (Schertz, 2013) and Borsch's (1995) call for the articulation of a biblical theology?

### **Understanding of Pastoral Identity**

Pastors share an understanding of pastoral identity that includes teaching as vital. All pastors reported feeling called to make Bible teaching part of their ministry. All pastors stated that they *love* teaching the Bible. They find it thrilling and deeply satisfying to see people in their studies learning and growing.

Pastors understand the purpose of their congregational Bible teaching as nurturing spiritual formation in congregants and extending God's mission in the world. Bible teaching is not primarily for the sake of passing along information, but for transforming lives and communities. Pastors believe that people are hungry for Scripture study. Several find that as congregants find meaningful spiritual challenge and growth opportunities through their Bible studies, others from outside the church are drawn in and enter into the process of spiritual formation, as well.

Pastors teach Bible regularly even as they carry out complex pastoral assignments, including regular preaching, pastoral caregiving, and administration. Their roles represent a range of pastoral assignments. They serve in full-time and half-time roles; they are lead pastors, church planters, solo pastors and associate pastors. They serve congregations as small as 30 and as large as 300. All make teaching a regular part of their ministry.

A few pastors shared their wish that the wider church and seminary would take a more active role in supporting pastors' call to teach the Bible. A recent conversation with



a seminary student in my own context reveals that this concern persists (Rose, personal communication, November 22, 2013).

### **Personal Characteristics**

Pastors share several personal characteristics in common, including eagerness to learn, emotional and social intelligence, rejection of ideology, and adaptability. These personal characteristics are a key part of their teaching success, allowing participants to learn from and trust them and to find joy in the Bible study experience.

Like the leaders in Clinton's (1991) study, pastors have a strong drive to learn. "Effective leaders, at all levels of leadership, maintain a learning posture throughout life," Clinton writes (p. 180). In contrast, he states, "leaders who plateau early reveal a common pattern. They learn new skills until they can operate comfortably with them, but then they fail to seek new skills deliberately and habitually. They coast on prior experience" (p. 89). Indeed, pastors in the present study are lifelong learners. They have scholarly inclinations, which are evident in their biblical expertise, fearlessness with "tough" texts and critical thinking. They are drawn to questions, using questions heavily in teaching and regularly inviting participants to share their questions. They seek knowledge from a wide range of sources, including scholarly books, novels, blogs, museums, movies, continuing education programs, travel, ecumenical dialogue, congregants, other pastors, personal experience and more.

Pastors integrate their strong intellectual interests with strong emotional intelligence. Goleman (1995) draws on neuroscience and psychology to show that emotional intelligence is a "master aptitude" that determines how successfully or unsuccessfully a person will use all other aptitudes, including raw intellect. Through

several studies he demonstrates the remarkable capacity of emotional intelligence to enable people “to be content and effective in their lives, mastering the habits of mind that foster their own productivity” (p. 36). High emotional intelligence, says Goleman, puts people “at an advantage in any domain of life, whether romance and intimate relationships or picking up the unspoken rules that govern success in organizational politics” (Goleman, 1995, p. 36).

The keystone of emotional intelligence, says Goleman (1995), is self-awareness, which he defines as the ability to “recognize a feeling *as it happens*” (p. 43). This ability, along with the capacity to manage emotions, motivate oneself (delay gratification and stifle impulse), recognize emotions in others (empathy), and handle relationships, forms the basis of emotional intelligence. Pastors perceive their own and others’ emotions, effectively managing their own behavior and building positive relationships with a wide range of people. They attend to non-verbal cues, are self-aware, are authentic in relationships, are open to others and listen well. They are aware of some of the potential emotional and social pitfalls of pastoral ministry and take steps to avoid them.

Pastors’ theological commitments transcend ideological categories. They appreciate aspects of both conservative and liberal views and challenge aspects of both conservative and liberal views. They value having multiple cultural and religious perspectives on Scripture. They readily adapt to the settings in which they work and to the people they serve. They are patient, flexible, pragmatic and imaginative.

### **Formative Experiences**

Along with sharing common personal characteristics, pastors share many formative experiences in common. They had family members who engaged Scripture,

close relationships with churches that emphasized Scripture study, and many opportunities to teach Bible as young adults. They experienced major shifts in theology as young adults. Their seminary education was important and formative for them. They had mentors who loved the Bible who were present at key points along the way.

As we have seen, even as pastors do not share a common teaching technique, they do share a common pedagogy, and they share much more than a common pedagogy. They share a passion for biblical formation, a sense of pastoral identity, certain personal characteristics, and many formative experiences.

### Grounded Theory

Drawing from pastors' common experiences, perspectives, and behaviors, I have developed a grounded theory that describes how seminary-educated pastors are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. Through the collection and analysis of data, I identified categories, patterns, and themes and have developed a "story line" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initial interviews led to emerging theories which were tested and re-conceptualized in relationship to further interviews. Constant, ongoing comparisons among the data led to adaptations and refinement of those emerging theories. This recursive process led ultimately to the following grounded theory:

### Creating Communities of Engagement Around the Bible: A Grounded Theory

#### **Introduction**

Even in the face of widespread misuse and disuse of Scripture, there are seminary-educated pastors who are successfully leading ordinary readers to informed,

enthusiastic engagement with the Bible. Defying trends toward misinterpretation and disengagement, these pastors are bridging the gap between their seminary education and people in the pew.

### **Proposed Theory**

How are pastors accomplishing this? I propose that pastors are succeeding at leading ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible, not by using specific teaching techniques, but rather by manifesting their own intense passion for the Bible—passion that emerges from certain kinds of formative experiences. This passion expresses itself in a conviction that pastoral identity includes Bible teaching and in a learner-oriented pedagogical approach. Pastors’ personal characteristics, passion for the Bible, formative experiences, understanding of pastoral identity, and pedagogical approach empower them to successfully create communities of engagement around the Bible.

### **Why?**

Pastors who have confidence in the Bible’s overarching coherence as the “Big Story” of God’s work in the world and live their lives in light of its claims—pastors who find the meaning of their own lives bound up with the biblical story—have an intense desire to see others drawn into it. They believe that biblical formation *matters*. Out of this conviction, they view teaching the Bible not as a distraction from, but as *central to* the work of pastoral ministry, including being engaged in mission and pastoral caregiving. They therefore make offering Bible studies a priority even while carrying out many other pastoral tasks.

Pastors who believe in the importance of biblical formation have a learner-oriented pedagogical approach. Distinct from specific teaching techniques, this approach focuses on how much participants are *learning* rather than how much information is being *taught*. Pastors whose goal is biblical formation help participants *discover* biblical texts, *interact* with others about texts, *comprehend* what they are hearing and reading, and *integrate* what they are learning into their lives and worldview.

Pastors' capacity to inspire participant learning is substantially enhanced when certain personal characteristics are present. Eagerness to learn propels them to access scholarly tools and prepares them to share valuable and much-appreciated information with participants. Emotional and social intelligence enables them to build trust, to read non-verbal and verbal feedback from participants, and to continually adjust their teaching to maximize learning. Rejection of ideology further deepens trust with diverse participants, as pastors openly appreciate aspects of both conservative and liberal theological views and challenge aspects of both conservative and liberal theological views. Finally, pastors' patience, flexibility, pragmatism and imagination help them to keep the goal of biblical formation at the center of their efforts.

How is it that some pastors are so deeply, viscerally, and whole-heartedly connected to the Bible? Where does such passion come from? Childhood family members, churches and mentors are key players in drawing pastors into a great love of the Bible. As pastors grow up with key influencers who are deeply engaged with Scripture, they develop a profound respect and reverence for Scripture that stays with them throughout their lives, even as their theology may shift dramatically. As they enter adulthood and their childhood understandings of faith are challenged, opportunities to

teach the Bible, seminary education, and mentors are crucially important and intensely formative. These experiences provide significant times of rapid growth and support pastors' transition into becoming passionate Bible educators.

## **Conclusion**

Forming pastors who successfully lead ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible, then, is the responsibility of many parts of the “ecology of ministry.” As pastors are being formed as children, are growing into young adults, are being equipped for ministry, are called to particular ministry assignments, and are carrying out their ministries in various congregations and communities, all parts of “the system” have major roles to play in lighting the fire of passion for Scripture. Indeed, if we want to address the tendencies toward misinterpretation and disengagement of Scripture facing North American Mennonite churches, all parts of the system will do well to ask, “What nurtures our passion for the Bible?” and, “How do we create a love for Scripture among those we serve?” Those who already love Scripture are well poised to raise these questions in any part of the system. As pastors in this study have illustrated, it will be through those who are passionate about Scripture that the church as a whole will learn to know and love it.

### **Alternative Representation of Grounded Theory**

An alternative representation of the theory appears in Figure 1. In it, the Biblical Story is a River, perhaps a mighty River, which flows continuously. The River takes up the central space of the paper and of pastors' lives. It has always been flowing (from the left edge) and will continue on into eternity (off the right edge).

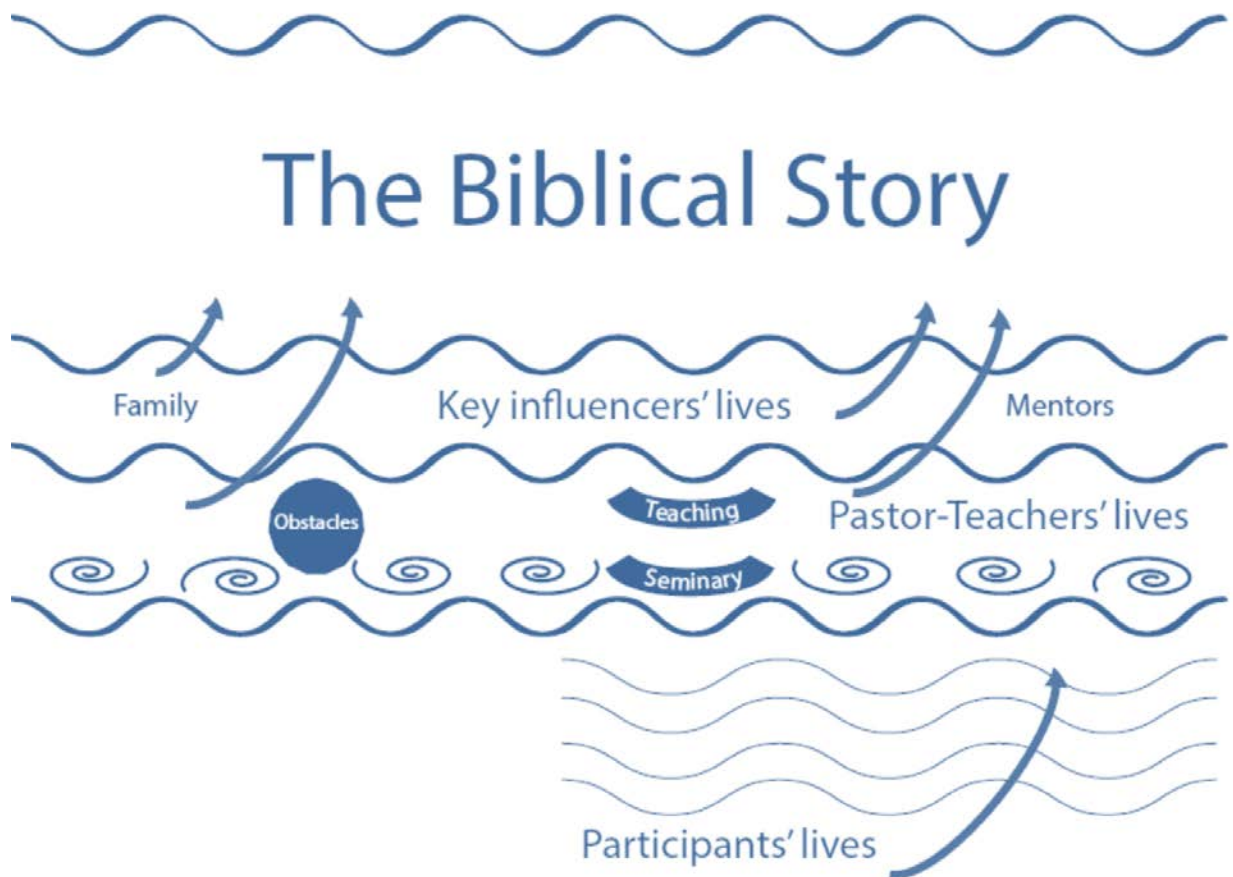


Figure 1: Alternative representation of grounded theory.

The key influencers are people (family and mentors) who entered the River ahead of the pastors, people who have participated in the Biblical Story, in the metanarrative that God's Story offers. Currents flowing from and through these key influencers have pulled the pastors toward the River. The pastors' lives, like those of the influencers, take on the shape of the River and become part of the River. They are part of the Biblical Story; this is the stream/worldview/metanarrative within which they have placed their lives.

Pastors' lives face obstacles early in the River. These are swirling places where life is upset; new thinking, discernment and navigation are required. These may be difficult theological realities, faith crises, or even conversions. These are the young adult experiences I call "shifts in theology."

Pastors' lives/streams deepen and widen through various experiences on the River. For example, teaching opportunities in young adulthood and seminary studies are shown as rapids through which the pastor passes, representing a time of rapid growth or intense immersion in the biblical Story.

In the pastors' lives, many small currents are visible in the form of whirlpools. These are the currents that have been forming in them all along their journey. They are eagerness to learn, emotional and social intelligence, rejection of ideology, and adaptability. Further along the River, these currents are also their pedagogical approach, representing willingness to lay groundwork, use learner-oriented techniques, and guide the studies. All these small currents together begin to be strong enough to help draw participants' lives toward the biblical story/River. Thus the lives of participants are now, too, being pulled into the River, just as the pastors were pulled into the River by key influencers, who were pulled into the River before them.

For the River is the purpose, goal and climax of the work and lives of these pastors. The River is what they're all about; being immersed in it and getting their people to enter it with them.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

While Mennonite pastors are uniquely poised to address the problem of misuse and disuse of the Bible, other parts of the "ecology of ministry" or overall "system" of



Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada must also play a role in the transformation that is needed. Particularly because the findings suggest that pastors' common success does not lie in following specific teaching techniques but in a combination of factors, these other "parts"—seminaries, congregations, conference leaders, camps, colleges, denominational publishers and denominational leaders— must consider their roles in growing more pastors who will teach the Bible using the tools of biblical scholarship in congregations.

As a starting place I offer several recommendations below. "The system" refers to the whole ecology of ministry. Following each recommendation I specify which parts of the system could make a significant contribution.

1. The system ought to teach, encourage, and support biblically formative practices among families, both by empowering adult family members to read and study the Bible and by empowering adult family members to nurture children and youth in ways that make the Bible available and accessible to them in their homes. [Pastors, congregations, seminaries, conferences, denominational publishers]

2. The system ought to regularly teach, encourage and support biblically formative practices for children and youth in the context of the congregation. [Congregations, denominational publishers, pastors, seminaries, conferences]

3. The system ought to consider where and how young adults are being taught, encouraged and supported in engaging the Bible, and to strengthen and cultivate such settings. [Denominational leaders, colleges, camps, congregations, seminaries]

4. The system ought to recognize the degree to which young adulthood is a time of consequential choices and shifts in theology, and to provide young adults direction and

guidance toward Bible study and teaching. [Colleges, camps, seminaries, denominational leaders, congregations]

5. The system ought to notice that a seminary education provides skills of exegesis and exposition that are not available to pastors and other leaders who do not pursue seminary studies. These skills are necessary for leading Bible studies that make use of interpretive tools in a way that participants find deeply satisfying, nurturing and engaging. The system therefore ought to encourage prospective pastors to pursue seminary education. Where seminary education is not an option, the system should insist that pastors-in-formerion enroll in biblical studies courses at the appropriate academic level, choosing courses that both utilize biblical scholarship and acquaint and equip pastors with basic interpretive tools. [Congregations, conference leaders, colleges, camps, denominational leaders, seminaries]

6. The system ought to notice the important role played by mentors who engage the Bible and connect adults who are engaging the Scripture with young adults who have interest in Scripture study. [Pastors, conference leaders, colleges, seminaries, camps]

7. The system ought to support the cultivation of habits of mind that undergird effective Bible teaching: eagerness to learn, scholarliness, interest in questions, willingness to seek knowledge from a range of sources, emotional and social intelligence and adaptability. [Seminaries, pastors, congregations, conference leaders, colleges, camps]

8. The system should notice that Bible teaching is not a distraction from but *central to* other aspects of the pastor's role, including being engaged in mission and pastoral caregiving. The system should call and support pastors to regularly teach the

Bible using tools of biblical scholarship in Bible study settings in congregations.

[Congregations, conference leaders, denominational leaders, seminaries]

9. Seminary-educated pastors who care deeply about biblical formation and feel called to teach the Bible should regularly offer Bible studies in the congregation utilizing tools of biblical scholarship. To do this effectively they should lay the groundwork by preparing, expecting participants to prepare, and using marketing sensibilities to inspire participation. They should use learner-oriented techniques in their teaching, in which participants discover, speak, comprehend and integrate. They should be selective in sharing information and communicate using a variety of means. They should provide needed guidance for sessions by offering a framework, stimulating conversation, guiding participants to contextual information and offering summary remarks that draw meaning from the conversation. [Pastors]

10. The system should support pastors' pedagogical efforts by: (a) continuing to teach students to exegete and exposit the text; (b) guiding students in how to offer learner-oriented Bible studies based on discovery, interaction, comprehension and integration; (c) guiding students in learning how to communicate effectively, sharing information selectively and using a variety of means. [Seminaries]

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study raises several questions for further research:

1. What is the significance, if any, of the fact that five of the six pastors in this study were raised outside the Mennonite church?
2. What are the experiences, perspectives and behaviors of other Mennonite pastors who are successfully engendering engagement with Scripture among ordinary

readers in Bible study settings, utilizing scholarly tools? How different are they from those of the pastors in this study? Do contextual factors considerably change the outcome? For example, what might a study focused on Canadian Mennonite pastors reveal?

3. Why didn't the issue of struggling with questions of biblical authority surface in interviews with pastors?

### **Epilogue**

This study of the experiences of six Mennonite pastors and seven participants in their Bible studies has given rise to a grounded theory that seeks to answer the question, "How are pastors establishing communities of engagement around the Bible?" The theory proposes that pastors' passion for the Bible, understanding of pastoral identity, personal characteristics, pedagogical approach, and formative experiences combine to empower pastors to successfully create communities of engagement around the Bible. It further claims that forming pastors who successfully lead ordinary readers to informed, enthusiastic engagement with the Bible is the responsibility of many parts of the "ecology of ministry." As pastors are being formed as children, growing into young adults, being equipped for ministry, being called to particular ministry assignments, and carrying out their ministries in various congregations and communities, all parts of "the system" have major roles to play in lighting the fire of passion for Scripture and in nurturing habits of mind and heart that support the development of effective pastor-teachers. Those who already love Scripture are well poised to raise these questions in any part of the system. As pastors in this study have illustrated, it will be through those who are passionate about Scripture that the church as a whole will learn to know and love it.

## APPENDIX A

### POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

## POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Possible interview questions for pastors fell into three categories: Introductory, Transition, and Key.

### **Introductory**

1. I've learned from your conference pastor that you are doing an exemplary job of engaging people from your congregation in Bible study. I'm delighted that we can meet to talk about what you're up to—thanks so much for being willing to meet with me for this conversation. Let me start by asking a bit about your personal experience of the Bible. How did you become interested in studying the Bible?

Probe: What have been some of the Bible studies, classes, or informal study opportunities you've participated in throughout your life? What do you remember about those studies? What aspects were especially noteworthy?

2. When did you become a Bible study leader?

Probe: What are some of the settings where you have led studies? What are some of the passages/topics you've taught in these studies?

### **Transition**

1. Tell me about Bible studies at this church.

Probe: How long have you been leading Bible studies in this congregation? Have others led studies? How did you decide that you wanted to start this particular study?

How did you go about getting it started? What, in your opinion, motivated people to come out for it?

### **Key**

1. Tell me a bit about the Bible study you are currently leading.

Probe: When and where do you meet? Who attends? What is the focus of this Bible study? What is the general flow of your study sessions? How do you get started with each session? Tell me about the various components of a typical class. How do you close the session? How do you prepare for these studies? How would you describe your overall approach to leading this study?

2. What are the joys and challenges of leading this Bible study?

Probe: What have been high points and low points in recent months?

3. What is your philosophy as you approach Bible study? Probe: What, in your opinion, are the behaviors most needed to successfully lead Bible studies in a congregation?

### **Transition**

1. How did your seminary education both prepare you and fail to prepare you for this kind of work in a congregation?

2. As you reflect on your seminary coursework and your current congregational Bible leading, what advice might you have for seminary teachers and administrators?

3. Do you have any other comments you would you like to share?

## **Closing Remarks**

Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me about your experiences with the Bible! It's been truly helpful to hear from you on this topic. Before we wrap this up, I'm wondering if you've thought of the names of a couple of participants you would be willing to recommend for me to talk to. I'm interested in learning through their eyes why this is working so well and why they find these Bible studies engaging. I'm also wondering if we can set up a time for me to visit the Bible study.



## APPENDIX B

### POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

## POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Possible interview questions for participants also fall into three categories:

Introductory, Transition and Key.

### **Introductory**

1. I've learned from your pastor that you are participating in a Bible study (he or she) is leading in your congregation. Thanks so much for being willing to meet with me to talk about the study. Let me start by asking just a bit about you. Tell me a bit about what brought you to \_\_\_\_\_ Church.

Probe: In what ways have you gotten involved with the church?

Probe: Tell me a bit about Bible studies generally at this church. How often do they happen? Who leads them? What has been their focus? What are some of the other studies you have participated in? How did you decide that you wanted to join this particular study? What, in your opinion, motivated other people to attend this study?

### **Transition**

1. Tell me a bit about this Bible study.

Probe: When and where do you meet? Who attends? What is the topical focus?

What is the general flow of the sessions?

2. What stands out to you about the study?

Probe: How would you describe your overall learning? How would you describe the learning of other participants?

**Key**

1. What do you observe about the teaching approach your pastor is using in this study?

Probe: How would you describe it? What seems to work well? What seems to work less well?

2. How would you describe your pastor as a *leader*, both within and beyond the Bible study?

Probe: What behaviors do you observe in your pastor? How are they evident in the Bible study? In other ways?

**Transition**

1. How do these behaviors compare to those of other pastors or Bible teachers you have known? What is similar? What is different?

Probe: What, if any, behaviors seem to you to be most effective in getting congregants involved in Bible study here or elsewhere?

**Closing Remarks**

Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me about your experiences in the Bible study! It's been truly helpful to hear from you on this topic. Before we wrap this up, I'm wondering if there's anything else you might want to tell me about your thoughts about the Bible study.

Probe: If anything else comes to mind that you want to share with me please feel free to give me a call or send me an e-mail. (Give my business card.) It's been great to talk with you. Thanks very much for your time.

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