

Let Your Light Shine

Matthew 5:13-16

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

November 19, 2023/Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

I'm not sure if you're aware of this or not, but 2023 marks three milestones for Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

- The church is 45 years old this year (So, if we were to think in terms of generations, our church would be a Gen Xer about to hit a mid-life crisis? 😊).
- This church *building* is 25 years old (so, maybe our building is a late-Millennial or an early Gen Zer trying to find themselves!)
- This marks 25 years that the Voluntary Service Unit has been a part of LMC (I'm just going to stop straining the "generations" comparison!).

These three milestones seemed to me (and others) like a good reason to do a bit of poking around in the history of our church.

We discovered that the church history written by Irvin Martens and Ernie Sawatsky covered the first 25 years. But a few things have happened since 2003! So, we decided that it might be time to update our church's history document.

Over the last few months, with the help of this original church history, and H  l  ne combing through council documents and providing a helpful list of highlights, through informal conversations, and through sifting through my own memory, I've adapted and rewritten a LMC church history.

It's about seven pages long. It doesn't cover everything. In fact, I'm quite certain that some of you will feel that I've left important things! But it's an attempt to capture a sense of who we have been and who we are over the course of the last forty-five years.

So, as I was thinking about what to do for my sermon this week, and given all this history on my brain, I thought, "I wonder if other people might be interested in hearing this history? I wonder how many of us know the history?"

We are the stories we tell about ourselves. This is true of us as individuals and as communities.

And it's good to tell the story from time to time.

So, this morning, I'm going to tell a condensed version of our church's story. I won't even come close to telling the whole story in this short amount of time, so those of you who have been here since the beginning will almost *certainly* feel that I'm leaving important things out!

(I may even get a few things wrong! Feel free to let me know).

But I hope it will be interesting. Maybe even inspiring. I'll close by making a few connections with this morning's well-known words from Matthew 5, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

This church began with a question that was asked in the year of my birth and in the town I grew up in. It was 1975, and the Coaldale Mennonite Church's Missions Committee recommended that a survey be conducted asking the question, "Should we plant a church in Lethbridge?"

The first answer was "no," but by 1976 attitudes had begun to change. Steps were taken, committees were appointed, and gradually, a new worshipping community began to take shape. This church formally came into being on February 26, 1978.

In the first few years, the little community bounced around a few temporary homes until a building was purchased downtown on 11th St South (just south of St. Augustine's. The building still serves as a church — a little LDS church worships there today).

Those early years were characterized by joys and challenges. There were growing pains that had to be navigated, including some tension around the first pastor. But the young church continued to grow in love and understanding.

In 1980, Ernie Sawatsky was hired as pastor. The next decade or so would be characterized by increasing stability, energy, and spiritual growth. LMC reached both outward and inward, with efforts made in youth ministry, families, peace activism, ministering to those with disabilities of various kinds, and engaging with other churches in the creation of a Soup Kitchen to feed the hungry.

This also marked the time period that the church joined what was then called the General Conference of Mennonites.

Ernie tried to resign as pastor in 1989, but as I understand it, the church wouldn't let him. Or something like that 😊. Ernie served an additional three years, resigning in 1992.

From 1993-98, Fred Unruh served as pastor (hi Fred!). Two highlights of Fred's tenure were the move to a new building and the start of the Voluntary Service Unit.

The downtown building was starting to feel too small, and there was a desire for more space. So, after a whole bunch of prayer and planning and considering numerous sites, Fairview was chosen for a new church building.

The project began with a sod turning ceremony April 13, 1997, and this church building was finished the next year. It was dedicated on January 18, 1998.

As if that wasn't enough for one year, 1998 was the year the VS unit started. This has become an important part of our church's life together and service in our community. I did a count this week, and if my math is right (a big if!), we've had close to one hundred young adults come and go from our church over the last twenty-five years! Many of these young people maintain a connection to our church, and even come visit occasionally (and some of us go visit them!).

For some, 1997-98 marked the time that LMC "came of age." Pastor Fred summed it up like this in a report (I believe for an AGM): "We have moved from dependency on our Coaldale parents for values and structures, and we have chosen our own. Rewriting the constitution, engaging in a major self-evaluation, purchasing, and building our own home could be signs of coming-of-age. We've grown up. We appreciate our parents, but we are making our own decisions."

With this, Pastor Fred decided to retire in 1998. For the next twelve years or so, Ruth Preston Schilk served as pastor, and brought to her ministry a gentle and compassionate style of leadership.

These years brought the church's first refugee sponsorship project (an Albanian family from Kosovo in 1999) as well as increased conference engagement (e.g., hosting Mennonite Church Canada Assembly with Coaldale Mennonite Church in 2000).

Hosting this event took place in a broader context of some turbulence in the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta. Issues around human sexuality were dividing churches with some (including Coaldale Mennonite) choosing to leave the conference.

After discussion, study, and prayer, LMC chose to stay and live with differences of opinion. This has been our path ever since.

It has not always been an easy path. There was some tension with Coaldale that had to be worked through. It has not always been easy to negotiate different opinions together internally. But we have tried to hold unity in Christ as a higher ideal than our positions on secondary issues.

In 2004, the peace pole was installed and dedicated outside of our church. This pole proclaims, in multiple languages, one of LMC's core convictions and hopes, which is that the peace of Christ shall indeed prevail upon the earth.

(Just last week I had a fascinating conversation with a man from our community, who attended a Probus meeting on Wednesday and forgot something at the church, about whether peace would or *could* actually ever prevail!)

The church mortgage was paid off in 2005, a mere seven years after the church was completed. This was a time of celebration.

Pastor Ruth moved on in 2010, and after a brief period with a transitional interim pastor, I showed up on the scene in 2011. 😊

What's happened over the last twelve years? Well, a little youth band called CCQ (Comments, Concerns, Questions) started, and that has morphed and grown and paved the way toward having more contemporary expressions of worship music in our church.

There was the Syrian refugee project of 2015-17 that was a big part of our church's story. Our church catalyzed a group of sponsors from churches to university groups to people from the hospital, from people of deep religious faith to no religious faith, and all together we brought nearly forty Syrians to Lethbridge.

There was all kinds of publicity and media attention. I'm not sure how many of you remember this or not, but we even had a reporter from CNN in Atlanta come up and do a feature story on the project (the article is still online, the video, sadly, is not).

Our building has grown and evolved. We've added an office upstairs, an expansion of our church foyer and adding a multipurpose room and a ramp for accessibility.

Seven years ago, we started an annual Faith Questions sermon series which tries to recognize that the church needs to be a place where we can explore our faith and the context in which it is negotiated with honesty and curiosity.

And of course, there was the pandemic of 2020-2022 where we were all forced to learn how to love our neighbours, be a community from a distance, and, again, to try to prioritize unity while living with differences of opinion.

In 1978, a church was born. Forty-five years later, Lethbridge Mennonite Church remains a community seeking to be agents of healing, hope, and peace, to one another, to our city, and to our world.

The world looks different in 2023 than it did in 1978. We often hear that we live in post-Christian times with declining church numbers, and our church is not immune from some of the trends we see all around us.

God alone knows what the next season of our church's life will look like. But we are convinced that whatever the future holds, God can be trusted, and God will guide and direct our paths.

Right after the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, Jesus uses three metaphors to describe what his followers are to be and to do in the world.

The first is salt.

In the ancient world, salt's primary purpose was to serve as a preservative. In a world without refrigeration, where food would go bad much more quickly and was less readily available, salt allow food to be stored longer and to hold off fungus and bacteria from destroying a family or village's precious and often precarious food supply.

If we draw the analogy, Jesus seems to be saying that his followers are to play this same preservative role. In some mysterious way, we keep the world from "spoiling," or "going bad."

In our time, salt is used for seasoning. And I think this metaphor also works because we are also meant to be a source of flavour and goodness in the world. We are meant to make things “taste better.”

Second, Jesus uses the metaphor of light. We all know what light is and what it is for. We need light to make our way in dark places.

The church is to be this light for a world that so often finds itself in the dark.

Without light, the darkness can seem overwhelming and fearful. When the light comes, confidence, faith, and hope are restored.

As followers of Christ, we are to be this light—for the sake of a world so easily drawn to the darkness.

The final metaphor Jesus uses is that of a city on a hill. Again, this is a fairly obvious image. Just as cities on hills are visible to all, so the church is to be a visible sign of God’s mercy, forgiveness, and truth to the world.

We are sent into the world as a city on a hill — but a totally unique kind of city. *This* city will not be made from stone and brick, it will not be defended by the weapons of war, and it is not built for the glory of human rulers who come and go and are forgotten.

It will, rather, be made from hearts and minds and hands and feet committed to participating in and pointing the way toward Christ and his kingdom.

it is to be a city built for the glory of the God of peace who makes all things new, the God who climbed another hill, with a cross on his back and the weight of the world on his shoulders and laid down his life for his enemies.

Three metaphors. Salt. Light. A city on a hill.

This week, I received a fundraising letter from an organization called “Safe Families Canada, Lethbridge” — it’s an organization that tries to provide a network of support to families in crisis while they get back on their feet.

(Naomi attended a breakfast event with them a while back and came away very impressed with the work they do.)

At any rate, their letter said this:

It has come to our attention that Lethbridge Mennonite Church holds a steadfast commitment to serving the community and has consistently made a positive impact through its various outreach efforts. We are genuinely grateful for your dedication to embodying the principles of Christ's compassion and grace to those who need it most.

It has come to our attention! Wow, so formal!

Now, it would not be difficult to interpret this letter cynically. Maybe it's just the same thing they cut and paste and put in every letter they sent to every church they reach out to. Maybe they're just using flattery to try to get us to add them as a line in our budget.

But the older I get, the more I think that cynicism is too easy. It's also boring and not at all hopeful.

And so instead of interpreting the letter cynically, I thought about those words in light of the history I've shared (and the history I haven't shared, the history that is held in our collective memory).

I thought about Matthew 5. I thought about Jesus' three metaphors.

And I thought, "Look at us, adding flavour, preserving goodness, shedding light. A little city on a hill."

Not a perfect one, of course. As you've heard, there have been some bumps and bruises along the way, and we will always be seeking to live more faithfully into Jesus' call on our lives.

But we have tried to let our light shine. And we must continue to do so.

Yesterday, before the MCA event here at our church, I had lunch with Tim Wiebe-Neufeld, our conference minister. We were talking about the state of the church, and the challenges and opportunities of our cultural moment.

He asked me what I thought the church should be leaning into in the next years.

I don't remember exactly how I said it, but I said something to the effect of, "We need to let our light shine.'

The church in the West, maybe particularly in more "progressive" circles, has spent good chunks of the last few decades sort of apologizing for ourselves, whether it's because of the church's sins with respect to our indigenous neighbours, or the climate, or abuse scandals, or the various ways in which we've not been good news to this or that identity group.

This is appropriate, I said. The church must always honestly name and confess our sins.

But we can't stay in guilt. We must also speak of the hope that we offer to a hurting and broken and sinful world.

We must confidently and joyfully and unambiguously say that the church offers good news.

The church of Jesus Christ has changed the world. It *has been* good news for the world. *Our* little church has been good news for our community for the last forty-five years. We must not be afraid to say this out loud.

May God help us to let our light shine.

Amen.

