

## Grain of Wheat Servant Leader Report September 2017

### Retreat Reflections

What does it mean to be ‘the church’? Our annual Servant Leader Retreat took place in mid-August at the beautiful Light of the Prairies Retreat Center. It was a time to become quiet and hear the voice of God, leading, guiding, nudging and pulling us onto the road selected for Grain of Wheat Church – Community. It was a time of reflection as we walked the labyrinth, sat by the pond, and watched the bees and the muskrat being who God made them to be. It was a time to reflect on who we are as leaders, who we want to be as leaders, where is GOWC-C today and asking the question: are we following the road God is revealing to us?

Each person within Grain of Wheat Church-Community is a member of a sacred partnership, one that requires ongoing commitment to God and to one another. It is a sacred partnership that sees us gather to be fed, to be supported and cared for so that we can go out and be salt, light and a blessing to those we serve and work with on a daily basis. It is a commitment to growth, to mutual support and accountability that is renewed daily, weekly, monthly at the communion table where we meet our God. Lloyd reminds us that in the early Christian church ‘Membership meant you were part of an alternate community where you experienced unconditional love and help in time of need, whether material, spiritual, or psychological.’ Is GOWC-C that alternate community? In the coming weeks, we will be sharing the draft of a new membership model for us all to explore. We will be asking people to consider the following questions:

- 1) Does this membership model make sense within the context of God's movement among us in the past?
- 2) Does this model of membership create room for God to lead us in our spiritual journeys - individually and communally?
- 3) Do you personally feel energy for this membership model - are there particular points that you like or dislike?



While this is not the beginning of the church year, September is the new beginning of many church programs. Plans are underway to restart Children’s Worship, Seed Groups, The Gathering, Common

Meals, and the list goes on. We are hoping to provide opportunities for the community to increase its experiences of individual and communal prayer these year; two main ideas are organizing a monthly prayer gathering and increasing the participation in, and use of, the GOW pray chain. We are also hoping to introduce some short-term opportunities to build new connections within the community. One idea is to pair households for a meal together around a specific topic of conversation. The idea of spring camping is also being explored. More information will be available as we develop our dreams into reality.

A leadership retreat creates space to focus time & energy to the everyday tasks of keeping GOWC-C functioning well. Questions we ask ourselves and spend time thinking about include: do we have the right mix of available energy and time for the required tasks, what is required (of the leadership team and of each other) to feed the GOWC-C well, what would people like to see the SLT spend time doing? What can we, as leaders, do to create energy, desire, commitment within the community to be Christ to those we meet in the everyday lives we all live?

We deeply value your insights and opinions and would love to get together and hear what you're thinking.



## **A Review of Experimentation**

## **Adventurous**

**A continuation of the membership discussion started in 2015**

“You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking.” Henri J.M. Nouwen

### **Goals were:**

- finding practical ways of living out the 13 commitments.
- try to simplify church obligations to create space and time for people to live out their faith in their daily lives.
- experientially seeing what happened when participation requirements were removed

### **Proposed Practical Actions:**

## **Completed:**

- Sharing and Learning meetings did not occur the first Wednesday of each month
- A new gathering occurred on the first Wednesday of each month (i.e. *The Gathering*)
- Hiatus on the Ways to Belong Membership Structure. Experimental membership structure that removed all participation requirements was used for 2016-2017.
- Moving the GOWC-C commitment ceremony to the Sunday morning worship service.
- Having parts of the 13 commitments displayed at every worship service (partially)
- Re-emergence of the Teaching Team with a focus on new ways of teaching, learning and walking with one another.
- Time for seed groups to reflect on membership; invitation also extended to those members not in seed groups
- Encouraging the emergence of teaching times, prayer times and other types of gatherings that respond to internal movings or the needs expressed by others.

## **Reflections on experimental membership structure from Seed Groups/Other conversations**

- Throughout the seed group discussions many people indicated that they value a membership structure that respects what people feel they have to offer and that encourages people to feel like they belong.
- Multiple groups reflected strong support for the 13 commitments as the basis for membership.
- Multiple groups reflected that they valued the invitation to participate but did not want a structure that “required” particular ways of participating. There was a strong thread that many people did not want a structure that created feelings of guilt.
- There are community members who mourn the loss of the era when frequent, intense participation was the norm. Many of these same people also recognize that this is no longer current practise.
- Multiple groups spoke of a desire for some level of accountability but no definition of what that would look like was offered.

## **Leadership Reflections on the year**

- Overall participation in Grain of Wheat life has stayed the same or increased slightly
- Participation in AGM was higher than previous years
- We are curious about How does the broader community understand our structures and their purposes?
- Wide degree of reflection was given to what it meant to become a member for 2016/17: some people gave a lot of thought to whether they could commit to living into and helping others live into the thirteen commitments, others gave very little thought to the requirements of the particular structure as they saw themselves as “members” of GOW and the history of their relationship with GoW shaped their definition of membership

### **Leadership Reflections on our structures**

- While we value invitational participation our structures are designed for high levels of participation. Because we do not have a board or a conference, we need people who feel called and empowered to take on leadership roles (outside of paid leadership) and who clearly understand their designated roles.
- Recent experience has shown that our current structures may not be not created for a more diffuse form of membership where many people’s participation is fluid and dependant on their monthly circumstances.
- Regardless of what decisions we make about membership, we need greater clarity on the requirements of roles within our various decision-making and support structures. How do Personnel, Advisory, and DMC relate to each other? Which group is responsible for specific tasks and processes?
- What are essential pieces in continuing our current structures? What types and level of participation do we need in things like: -leadership evaluations, AGM, Other structures?

### **Questions for reflection and continued exploration:**

- If everyone in Grain of Wheat participated to the degree that you participate, what would our community look like? How would the community be different?
- “If we are an intentional community what do we want to be intentional about?”

### **Membership in History**

During the summer, Lloyd has taken some time to reflect on church membership; what it means and how it has changed through the centuries. Thank you, Lloyd, for the following article!

*Question 1: What has the church historically understood to be the purposes/goals of membership including participation requirements?*

The early Christians created an alternative community (church) within the Roman Empire. Only after a person was baptized were they allowed to participate in communion and considered a full member of the local church. Membership clearly identified you as a Christian and as a part of an alternative community where you experienced unconditional love and help in time of need whether material, spiritual or psychological. Members were expected to participate in all aspects of the church community's life in accordance with their calling and gifts.



Over the past 2000 years of church history many changes have occurred in terms of membership requirements and participation expectations. After Christianity eventually became the state religion of the empire in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. the state insisted on religious conformity and membership in the church (including baptism) became compulsory. Things got worse as the Middle Ages (500-1500 C.E.) progressed when rulers often used force to convert people in Europe to Christianity. Women and men who were troubled by these developments and wanted to live a separated life wholly devoted to God created monasteries. Also during the Middle Ages the gap between the clergy and laity grew. The clergy and monks and nuns became religious “professionals” who did almost all of the “church work” and the laity were basically only required to attend mass regularly, contribute financially, confess their sins and receive the sacraments.

The Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century created many new churches with both similarities and differences regarding membership and participation expectations. All reformers supported the basic concept of “the priesthood of all believers” This meant that all Christians should have the same status in the church and all were called to exercise their gifts and calling. Lutherans established state churches in which membership in the church became associated with loyalty to the state. Calvinists emphasized that Christians had an obligation to reform every aspect of society

in accordance with Christian principles. For Anabaptists, since only adults could make a conscious decision to follow Christ, only adults could be baptized and join the church. Because Christians must separate themselves from the world, membership requirements were very strict. For example, only baptized Christians who were not being disciplined could receive communion. Leaders (only men) were chosen from within the congregation by other male members. However, all members were expected to exercise their gifts in other aspects of church life.

Today most churches have some basic criteria for membership as well as informal expectations for participation. The main ones include: a) commitment to fundamental Christian beliefs and practices b) attendance at worship services c) giving financially d) and some willingness to serve the church according to their abilities.

*Question 2: How has GOW historically understood the purpose/goals of membership? What have been the implicit or explicit participation requirements?*

In its early years, membership in Grain of Wheat meant a commitment to build an alternative church community. Church was community and community was church; they were virtually synonymous. The expectation was that we would share all aspects of our lives as much as possible: financial, social, spiritual, parenting and also live within a few blocks of each other. This we believed was the best way to live in accordance with Jesus' teachings and the pattern established by the early church. Membership was to be for life unless God called the person elsewhere as discerned by the church community. It was expected that everybody would participate in and exercise leadership in all aspects of community life in accordance with their abilities and gifts. Every member attended the twice monthly community meeting which consisted of sharing, learning and decision making. All major decisions were made by consensus during which we "went around the circle" and heard from everyone even if it was only to give their verbal assent to a proposal. This model did not always work satisfactorily but it remained our basic model for about the first 25 years of our existence.

Our membership criteria have been modified several times. In the late 1980s and early 1990s membership was divided into three categories a) novice member b) member c) core group

membership. Only the latter group participated in decision making and were expected to make a life long commitment to Grain of Wheat. Then in the past ten years as members' expectations of Grain of Wheat Church Community have changed considerably so have our understandings of membership and participation requirements changed. No longer is Grain of Wheat seen as the center of every aspect of our lives. Some of the key changes have been: a) potential members no longer have to become novice members in order to be eligible for full membership b) membership is not a prerequisite for involvement in small (share) groups, c) attendance at members meetings is no longer required, and d) a small group of members (DMC) makes most church decisions based on proposals presented by the Servant Leaders with input from Advisory Council (major decisions are made via meetings open to the entire community). In the past year we have experimented with the idea that if a person agrees with the 13 Commitments they qualify as a member of Grain of Wheat if they so choose.

