What does a transformative, earth-honouring Christianity look like at ground level and lived out in daily action? Reforms of personal habits—such as recycling, eating locally and shopping responsibly—are important steps. But we’ll need to embody a more vibrant Christian environmental ethic if we are to become the people God years for us to be, and to address the overwhelming ecological crisis facing us today. We’ll need to do something wild and take on the yoke of watershed discipleship.

Watershed discipleship? It’s an intriguing, provocative term that blends two domains rarely joined in our imaginations: one scientific, the other religious. Yet it’s this kind of paradigm—that data-driven and deeply spiritual, both ancient and new—that Jesus followers will need to adopt in the coming decades if we are to play any significant role in our planet’s healing.

What is watershed discipleship? Activist and theologian Ched Myers gives the term two meanings, and I’ve added a third. In a nutshell, watershed discipleship means:

• **Being disciples** during this watershed moment. Interlocking and immediate crises of change, diminishing resources and widening ecological degradation compel us to make environmental justice and sustainability integral to everything we do as disciples of Jesus, asserts Myers.

• **Being disciples** within our watersheds. Myers suggests that followers of Jesus today must be people of specific places, who root their prayers and practices in actual watersheds of care.

• **Being disciples** of our watersheds. It is the “re-placed” identity we as a species must rediscover if we are to unshackle ourselves from the ecocidal, “dis-placed” path of empire. We need to go to school on our surroundings, as the ancients did, and learn core life truths from our own home places. As followers of Jesus, we need to treat our region as rabbi and teacher as well.

God’s gifts of clean water, pure air and good soil are in the balance; our industrial society is damaging them at a horrific pace.

Your way is my way

My friend Stephanie came by yesterday to plug in her electric car. She once lived next door to us and we shared a washing machine, but now that we live 32 kilometers apart we’ve become her way station. She can do errands and bring her kid to gymnastics, and then visit with us and top off her battery in case it’s a bit low for the return trip home.

Out here in our little mountain town, electric cars are still oddities. Convenient charging stations and smooth level roads are rare or nonexistent. But Stephanie’s household and mine are partners striving for a better kind of life together. It’s slow and we stumble, but we help one another on the path. Inspired by the ancient biblical example of Ruth, we’re beginning a journey of watershed living together. It’s a kind of paradigm that blends two domains rarely joined in our imaginations: one scientific, the other religious. Yet it’s this kind of paradigm—that data-driven and deeply spiritual, both ancient and new—that Jesus followers will need to adopt in the coming decades if we are to play any significant role in our planet’s healing.

We’re making a few steps on the path of energy descent and community resilience, and learning to live a bit more within our niche as citizens of our watershed.

Walking the watershed way

We’re not journeying alone, either. Earlier this year, I was licensed by Mennonites in New Mexico and Colorado to be an educator and capacity-builder for watershed discipleship in the way of Jesus. What does that mean? I’m not sure, exactly, but I mean to find out. My first step will be to visit with existing congregations and groups in the larger region to find out what they are already doing and highlight some of their place-based practices they might want to share with others.

Next, I want to encourage the communities in our Mountain States region to enter into a 10-year exploration with us, an invitation to life-change that we’re calling “Walk the Watershed Way.” How can we each—in our own context—free ourselves from harmful lifeways and transition into a better future together by altering habits, innovating systems and living lighter on the earth?

We’re living into this question in 2015 by initiating a decade-long period of shared exploration, initiating and observing significant change in our own lives and communities. Each year, participating communities will craft an annual reflection and then share it with other communities, describing the best practices, struggles, questions and surprises that emerged during the year. Peer communities will help develop measurable next steps and guiding questions, and together we’ll head into the next cycle.

Why did we choose 10 years? Three reasons:

• It’s a timeframe that encourages continued attention and accountability. Our earth is going to undergo significant change in the next 10 years.

• It gives a sense of practical urgency. It makes us plan, prioritize and prepare without feeling defeated. The kind of structural changes we need to make—in areas such as food sourcing, housing, energy, transport, community economies—are not going to happen overnight, or even in a year.

• 2025 marks the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism. Five centuries ago, a little bit after Martin Luther tackled his protests on the doors of the Catholic Church, the forefathers of the Mennonites and Amish broke the law and scandalized Catholicism by baptizing one another and forgiving one another’s sins, without needing professional priests to do it for them. Five hundred years after these transformative actions, it seems fitting to have a reckoning, and ask: As followers of Jesus, what are we doing today that is transformative and earth-honouring?
Choosing your own path
Where will this exploration of the Watershed Way lead our faith commu-
nities over the next decade? I’m guessing that no two communities will follow
the same path. For groups located in dense urban areas, walking the Watershed Way
may turn both prophetic and political, such as what is happening in Detroit,
where some faith communities are resisting powerful interests that willingly
accept unpaid water bills by corporations but turn off the taps of the poor. Others
might enter into a historic moment in which they have a covenant like Stephanie and I are
doing here in Taos, and see how we can adapt to what is available in our area.
I am a Mennonite, an environmentalist, and an apologetic follower of Jesus.
But where I live in northern New Mexico, the Watershed Way is practised more
deply by other traditions. I’ll be joining an ancient river, not creating something
new. Over the next decade, I’ll be learning
from my indigenous neighbours at Taos Pueblo about how they have
been able to walk the Watershed Way in this bioregion for thousands of years; I’ll be learning from traditional Hispanic farm-
ners and ranchers about how they have
been practising the Watershed Way here
these past five centuries. I’m guessing that
where you live you have mentors and
counterparts, too.
Watershed living is my path of earth-
honouring, Jesus-following discipleship.
For me, as a “half-done” Christian, it is
not an intellectual exercise; it is experi-
ential and transformational, a learning-
by-doing that results in liberated lifeways and systemic change.
Is this path familiar to you? That’s for you to
decide. God’s gifts of clean water, pure
and good soil are in the balance; our
industrial society is damaging them at a
horrific pace. How can we half-done
Christians change our ways and be-
come the people God yearns for us to be?
Whatever path you choose in these transition
times, I believe that it must be both personal and political, social and spiritual, individual and communal.
What will it be for you, in your place,
in your situation? Perhaps you’ll encour-
age your church to “go green” with solar
panels and encourage your electric company
to provide cleaner energy. Perhaps you’ll
harvest roof rainwater and advocate
for clean water laws. Maybe you’ll get a
few folks to commit to a bicycle-based lifestyle and fight against fracking. Or
maybe you’ll grow more of your own food
and support local food hubs connecting
producers to consumers, and help low-
income people get healthy, fresh food.
Maybe you’ll travel into the woods for
weeks at a time, and discover you need a
lot less from industrial society than you
thought.
We’re heading into transition times, my friends, an unknown wilderness for which there are no maps, only sketches. God’s
income people get healthy, fresh food.
Maybe you’ll travel into the woods for
weeks at a time, and discover you need a
lot less from industrial society than you
thought.
We’re heading into transition times, my friends, an unknown wilderness for which there are no maps, only sketches. God’s
income people get healthy, fresh food.
Maybe you’ll travel into the woods for
weeks at a time, and discover you need a
lot less from industrial society than you
thought.
We’re heading into transition times, my friends, an unknown wilderness for which there are no maps, only sketches. God’s
income people get healthy, fresh food.

How can we each—in our own context—free
ourselves from harmful lifeways and transition
into a better future together by altering habits,
innovating systems and living lighter on the earth?

For discussion
1. What is your closest river? How large is its watershed? How does the river benefit
your community? Is the health of the river important to your community? How does your
municipality work at keeping the water clean and safe?
2. Todd Wynward assumes that there is an “overwhelming ecological crisis facing
us today.” Where do you see that crisis in your community? Who are the people in your
congregation who believe that working at healing the planet is imperative for Jesus’
disciples?
3. How important is it for Christians to work at reducing their consumption of non-
renewable resources? Have we been guilty of regarding creation as a commodity,
rather than as a gift from God? Do you agree with Wynward that we should “make
environmental justice and sustainability integral to everything we do as disciples of
Jesus”?
4. How has your congregation been working at honouring the earth? Have you per-
sonally tried to change your habits to live lighter on the earth? Is “going green” gaining
momentum in your watershed?
—Barb Draper

Canadian Mennonite October 26, 2015

VIEWPOINTS

Do it now or should we keep talking?
Russel Snyder-Penner makes many good points in “It’s time for a vote.” His description of how the
roundtable discussion format has hindered conversa-
tion is very reflective of my experience. In my congre-
gation, having moved to a roundtable format, it has
neutered our conversation, in my view.
I understand the sentiment that it’s time to call for
a vote, but as an avid reader of Canadian Mennonite
I am also puzzled by the suggestion that we as a con-
gregation actually participated in this Being a Faithful
Church process. After 11 years ago our congrega-
tion had a conversation on sexuality, after which I
understood how wide the range of our views actually
is.

(Continued on page 8)

Defining the ‘other’
Willard Metzger

F

early in the Syrian refugee crisis, the
Evangelical Fellowship of Canada
(EFC) asked me to be part of a dele-
gation meeting with Chris Alexander,
minister of immigration. We indicated
that the church was ready to do what it could
to respond to the crisis. But as the crisis
continued to unfold and governments
struggle to know what to do, I pondered further.
By articulating the “other,” we identify the
traits and characteristics of those who do belong
and give them an identity. Left un-
attended and unchallenged, these general
attitudes can grow into specific expres-
sions of racism and bigotry, expressions
inconsistent with Christian values.
Jesus challenged the common defini-
tions of the “other” by regularly welcom-
ing Samaritans. He purposefully elevated
the status of women and children. He
refused the rejection of lepers. To follow
the example of Jesus is to radically erase
the definition of the “other.” Cullens are
recognized as different expressions of the
human experience. Borders are recog-
nized as merely geographic identifiers.
We are a diverse expression of people
under the grace and love of a common
Creator. In this, we are a global family.

So a global refugee crisis like that
facing us now is an opportunity for all
humanity to reflect on our capacity to
welcome one another.
To only open our borders to people
who seem most like us is to deny our
commonality. We are all created in the image of God. We are all filled with the
capacity to love. We all long for safety and
wholeness. We naturally swing open in welcome and
embrace.
By articulating the “other,” we identify
the traits and characteristics of those who do belong
and give them an identity. Left un-
attended and unchallenged, these general
attitudes can grow into specific expres-
sions of racism and bigotry, expressions
inconsistent with Christian values.
Jesus challenged the common defini-
tions of the “other” by regularly welcom-
ing Samaritans. He purposefully elevated
the status of women and children. He
refused the rejection of lepers. To follow
the example of Jesus is to radically erase
the definition of the “other.” Cullens are
recognized as different expressions of the
human experience. Borders are recog-
nized as merely geographic identifiers.
We are a diverse expression of people
under the grace and love of a common
Creator. In this, we are a global family.

So a global refugee crisis like that
facing us now is an opportunity for all
humanity to reflect on our capacity to
welcome one another.
To only open our borders to people
who seem most like us is to deny our
commonality. We are all created in the image of God. We are all filled with the
capacity to love. We all long for safety and
wholeness. We naturally swing open in welcome and
embrace.

But let us not leave responses only to
church organizations. This crisis is also an
opportunity for each of us to help
erase the definition of the “other.” Some
simple suggestions include:
• Inviting someone new to share a meal.
• Trying a different ethnic meal.
• Listening to a movie with subtitles.
• Listening to non-English music.
• Reading books from non-western
authors.
• Accessing study material from
commonword.ca.
• Inviting a Mennonite Church
Canada Witness worker/staffer to share
understandings and insights from their
experiences.

While these steps may appear simplis-
tic, they will help strengthen the capacity
to appreciate differences. This, in turn,
will help broaden an understanding of
God. Then as a part of our human family
requires a safe haven, our doors will
naturally swing open in welcome and
embrace.
Willard Metzger is executive director of
Mennonite Church Canada.