

## **SESSION 3: LAUGHING WITH ABRAHAM AND SARAH**

### **1. AIMS**

- 1.1 To see the importance of spiritual renewal for all congregations.
- 1.2 To discover that forming a New Faith Community can bring renewal to existing congregations.
- 1.3 To identify some of the difficulties associated with New Faith Communities.

### **2. INTRODUCTION**

The Mennonite Church in the United States of America was deeply concerned that some of their well and often long established congregations had grown comfortable in their faith, respectable in society and unenthusiastic about their mission opportunities. So they developed an approach to bring new life into old congregations. Remembering the birth of Isaac when Abraham and Sarah were very old they called their approach 'Laughing with Abraham and Sarah'.

### **3. LEARNING FROM CARAPOOK**

*Allow a few minutes for the people who have not read the Carapook Story (Reading 1 at the end of this session) to do so. Those who did read it can look through it again.*

*Ask the whole group to consider this question: What excited you about the Carapook Story? Ask for some responses in the whole group.*

### **4. LEARNING FROM ABRAHAM AND SARAH**

As explained earlier the Mennonite Church in the USA have called their church renewal approach, 'Laughing with Abraham and Sarah'.

*Ask the people to form themselves into groups of four and give them the following tasks:*

- *Study Genesis 17: 15 - 21 and 21: 1 - 7 and discuss, Why did Sarah and Abraham laugh?*
- *What messages do these passages provide for today's Church?*

*Ask the groups to share their thoughts with the whole group when those tasks are completed.*

### **5. SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT CHURCH RENEWAL**

*Give each group of four one of the following readings found at the end of this Session.*

*Reading 2: "The Place of the Congregation and Contemporary American Religious Configuration"*

*Reading 3: "Those who join the Church"*

*Reading 4: "Forming a New Faith Community"*

*More than one group may be dealing with some readings.*

*Ask the groups to:*

*Identify any significant messages for your congregation that come from the reading you have studied.*

*Ask the groups to come back together and share their discoveries with the whole group. List significant points.*

In addition to the points given by the groups, teach the following seven points. Some of these may have been identified in the readings. If so, highlight those as you work through the seven points.

1. Every congregation needs renewing by the Holy Spirit.
2. Renewal of an existing congregation is good but it is not an adequate alternative to forming New Faith Communities.
3. Giving birth to a New Faith Community can bring new life into an existing congregation.
4. If an existing congregation forms a New Faith Community it is important that the congregation lets the New Faith Community grow in its own place and in its own way. If the congregation tries to dominate or control the New Faith Community the health and growth of both will be limited.
5. Not all New Faith Communities become congregations. Some stay as Faith Communities. Others grow and become congregations.
6. It is important to ask the question about ecumenical relationships. Brian Hathaway, Facilitator for 'VISION, New Zealand' wrote in an article on 'Church Planting in New Zealand':  
*“There has also been justifiable criticism of some of the methods of the Church planters in this country. Unfortunately in all too many cases a denomination has decided to church plant into a local area without any consideration of pre-existing groups.”*
7. We need to be aware of new groups of people or groups which our congregation may not be reaching.

When you have finished teaching the seven points, provide an opportunity for questions and discussion.

## **6. SOME STEPS TOWARDS THE FUTURE**

Ask the people to form two groups - those who would like to discuss renewal of your existing congregation and those who would like to consider a New Faith community. Further division on the two groups which have been established is suggested.

Ask the two major groups to discuss one of the following questions. Further work will be done on these questions in the next session. In this session it is necessary only to get the discussion started

What are some steps we could take to assist renewal to take place in our congregation? What steps could we take in working towards the establishment of a New Faith Community? Ask the groups to share some of their insights in the whole group.

## **7. FOR NEXT TIME**

Ask the people to read the article "Opening the Floodgates", Reading One in Session 4.

## **8. CONCLUDING WORSHIP**

The person designated leads worship, praying for the renewal of the local congregation and for guidance for those considering a New Faith Community.