

The Church Amidst Changes

Reflecting on Our Church's Social, Economic and Environmental Context



Maritime Conference

The United Church of Canada

Eric Tusz-King
Conference Minister for Outreach, Mission Support and Stewardship
August 2005

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Introduction

In looking at the changes taking place and the choices facing congregations in Maritime Conference, I worked with five pastoral charges in different types of communities to look at how what was happening in the community affected their ministry.

There were two phases to this effort. The first phase was to meet with participants with each of the five pastoral charges. The second phase brought together some representatives from those pastoral charges in a regional forum to meet with Conference staff and others engaged in social ministry and community development both within and outside the church. I reported briefly of **Phase 1 - Congregational Conversations** and **Phase 2 - Regional Forum** to the annual meeting of Maritime Conference in May 2005.

Phase 1

The five pastoral charges were:

- two rural communities, one of which was a stable community and the other with a declining in population,
- two suburban communities, one of which was growing rapidly and another growing slowly, and
- one urban bilingual community.

The five pastoral charges were located in the three different Maritime Provinces.

Each pastoral charge identified 10 to 15 participants of their choice and we met together for two to three hours. We engaged in a process I designed using a resource, *“Restoring Communities to Live In”* which is produced by The United Church of Canada and has been used previously in Maritime Conference.

The conversations started with looking at what participants thought was happening in their communities, and how they felt these challenges affected their congregations’ ministry. This was followed by reviewing Statistic Canada’s demographic information on their community. The process of looking at the their pastoral charge’s ministry in light of their perceived issues and some data on their community provided a rich ground for conversation to discern the ministry God is calling The United Church of Canada to engaged in their community.

The results from each community was summarized and presented to the participants in Phase 2 - the regional forum.

Phase 2

Not all pastoral charges managed to send a representative to the regional forum, but their pastoral charge’s story was shared with the group. Into this mix of local stories I presented regional data also from Statistics Canada. The question that focused this divergent information was, “What is important from the pastoral charge information and the Stats Can information for the Conference to better understand the regional context in which The United Church of Canada carries out ministry?”

My appreciation goes to the participants from the five pastoral charges who welcomed me into their communities and engaged with me in fruitful and frank conversations about their church and community. We have heard from many delegates at the annual meeting that they also appreciated hearing these voices, who reflected many of their own questions, joys and concerns. Thank you also to the participants in the Phase 2 – Regional Forum who gave a day's work to assist the church in this discernment process.

My hope is that these discussions will be helpful to the many people in pastoral charges, presbyteries and conference committees who are engaged in better understanding, discerning and preparing for vibrant ministries in the communities in our Maritime Conference.

What was heard?

What we heard may be new to some and quite familiar to others. Even those who are fairly familiar with some of the topics discussed hopefully will find the overview that is given here and the examination of them for the implications for the church's ministry in the various communities to be both challenging and affirming.

Major changes

Migration

For several years we have known that more people are moving from rural communities to urban communities. The statistics we saw from specific rural communities and regional trends supported the stories of stores, businesses and post offices closing in rural areas and expanding subdivisions and suburbs in just a few cities in the Maritimes.

Not all cities in the Maritimes are growing, but Moncton and Halifax are growing very quickly. Most of the people moving from the rural communities are young adults, often with children, leaving an older population in the rural communities. Some small towns and rural communities are attracting retirement age people, but not in sufficient numbers to make an increase in population.

Overall provincial population figures are declining slightly, while PEI is the only Maritime province that has maintained its population numbers in the last 10 years, particularly in the rural communities.

Immigration

New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec Provincial Governments are actively recruiting larger numbers of immigrants to their provinces. The cities of Moncton, Fredericton and Saint John have a target to attract 6,000 immigrants over five years.

At present there are few support programmes for immigrants outside of the larger cities of the region. Most people will immigrate to one of the cities. The provincial and federal governments are intentionally promoting the urban communities.

Rural communities will have difficulty recruiting or keeping immigrants because there are few support programmes in these communities. However, one of the frustrations for rural communities is that skilled professionals such as doctors who are recruited from other countries

will be attracted to the urban areas. Aggravating people in the rural communities even more is that some immigrants who are qualified professionals in their own country cannot get certified to practice in Canada and are left to drive taxis, work in construction or retail services in the cities.

Young Adults

There was also a common agreement from people in the local communities and regional forum that there are a lot of disillusioned young adults as a result of the economic strain they are feeling. For young adults who have gone into some trades they find it difficult to get full-time employment. For young adults who have gone to university they too find it difficult to find full-time employment. 10% do not find full-time employment within two years of graduating.

The other reality of is that 50% of community college graduates owe an average of \$19,200 and the average university graduate with a bachelor degree was in debt to the tune of \$32,200.

The impact on the young adults is a very different set of expectations than what their parents had a generation before. They looked forward to few full-time jobs and probably working two or three part-time jobs. Overall the real wages would be lower than their parents generation. Along with high debt for most community college and university graduates they often returned to live again in their parents' home.

This does not necessarily mean that these young adults do not have a partner and children, for now it is quite common for young adults to be living in their parents' homes with children of their own.

Two Income Families

One of the changes taking place in our economy, particularly with regard to employment, is that there is a growing number of two income families. One aspect that was discussed widely was that many are working away from the community in which they reside. This is as true for rural as it is for urban residents.

Discussions led to look at some of the reasons why we have an increasing number of two income families. Some reasons noted were:

- Wage levels are not keeping up with inflation in some trades and professions.
- For unionized workers this is happening when contracts are won by non-unionized businesses.
- In rural communities the number of jobs, the wages and family income from the resource based industries such as fishing, lumbering, fish plants, mills are all declining

Religion

Most people in the church are not surprised to know that their congregation's membership has declined significantly in the last 2 decades. However, participants were astonished and a little relieved when they learned that they were not alone in this change, and this is a general phenomenon affecting most mainline churches in North America.

Participants also found it difficult to guess how many people classified themselves as "no religious affiliation" on the 2001 Census and discussed that these numbers do not include those

who say they are United Church on the Census, but never cross the threshold, except for the weddings and funerals of family and friends. The rate of increase in the “no religion” category since 1991 rose by 48% in New Brunswick, 56% in Nova Scotia, and 81% in Prince Edward Island.

It has been pointed out for several years that when we look at the difference between those who indicate they are United Church on the Census and those who are actually participating in a local congregation, there are lots of people in our communities could be open to a conversation about United Church ministries. Add to that the number of people who express “no religion” and there are very many people in most communities with whom United Churches could talk about participating in their congregation without violating their sensitivities of being a member of another faith community.

Education

Not all was gloomy in the trends we examined, for the average educational levels for Maritime people are increasing, particularly in rural communities. Functional literacy levels are increasing particularly for middle age adults and young adults as people go back to take upgrading, stay in school longer, and seek post-secondary education. However, there still is a concern for older populations, and those in the last decade of employment before retirement. Most provinces have invested heavily in literacy education and it is starting to have a positive impact.

This is a short summary of “what” we heard. We asked both in the local conversations and the regional forum, “so what” are some of the implications of what we heard.

What was missing?

The participants in Phase 1 had plenty to chew on with the topics they noted above. Along with that input the participants in Phase 2 - Regional Forum realized that the picture was still not complete and identified other areas and questions that they felt needed further research and discussion. Some of the topics and questions noted were:

- Youth (13 to 18 years of age):
 - What are their aspirations and desires?
 - Where they are?
 - What would unblock them in what we do now, e.g., rock music? outdoor experiences?
- Young adult (18-35):
 - We need to be conscious of the differences within this group, e.g., young families, single adults and couples.
 - What is going on in their lives? What is meaningful to them?
- Buildings:
 - How we can make our buildings more welcoming to various age and economic levels?
 - What ways are there for having income generating uses of our buildings?
- Worship:
 - How can we have worships services that appeal to various ages and economic levels?

- Finances:
 - Can we take away the financial responsibilities from the pastoral charges, e.g., pay centrally from Conference or General Council?
 - How can we get away from frequent fundraising?

What are the implications?

These changes in population, economy, religion and educational level have implications on both rural and urban churches and the community at large. The church can benefit from talking with other groups in the community and see how they are addressing them. Discovering how other groups in the community face the same issues will not only bring helpful information, but also put the church in conversations with individuals and groups that may be helpful resources. For example, the increasing cost of fuel for automobiles will have profound impact on suburbia. The church has assumed a drive-yourself-to-church membership. How might the church change if the automobile is not the dominant mode of transportation?

Some of these changes are more than trends. For example, the increasing number of two income families, has almost become a norm in rural and urban communities. The implication is that families have little time for their community and church, and sometimes the care of children. Institutionalized child-care programmes for school-aged children is a ministry that may be needed now, but the church may be slow to respond, because the church culture still assumes one parent, usually the mother, is a stay-at-home parent.

What might help?

Although neither Phase 1 nor Phase 2 participants had as their purpose to suggest responses to what we learned about our communities and region, the following are a few ideas they could not help themselves to suggest. I share them assist readers and groups as they start to develop their responses to the changes taking place in their community.

1. We could change some of our operations and management of our churches:
 - a) congregations need 3-5 year strategic plan with a one year business plan
 - b) explore more organizational structures that have more flexibility
 - c) develop ministries and not only committees
 - d) need a communication plan

2. We could improve communication among churches:
 - a) develop more trust among us to enable us to share
 - b) inventory of skills and resources
 - c) inventory of buildings and equipment
 - d) twinning between congregations

3. We could encourage more outreach/Faith in Action ministries in the pastoral charge:
 - a) remember who we are and what we are here for
 - b) be life giving – needs to be about strengthening our faith and expressing--individually and collectively

4. The church might encourage the development of new communities of faith through sponsoring pilot projects in some of the following areas:
 - a) Affordable sustainable housing
 - b) Senior complexes
 - c) Affordable daycare centres

4. We could organize our ministries cooperatively
 - a) models of how this is done
 - b) twinning between congregations

5. We could change the ways we welcome people to our church.
 - a) Are we welcoming only a small group of people?

6. We could promote personal and collective ministries
 - a) ministry of stewardship versus Committee of Stewards

7. We might find new ways of being church. Not adding something else to peoples' calendars.
 - a) Can we be church to them in small groups that already exist? Holy conversations with their everyday lives in their homes and work.

8. We might offer leadership development in a variety of opportunities
 - a) Ministers could be introduced to the community development analysis and skills

What is important?

Although many entered the discussions fearing they would be overwhelmed by some of the concerns, the process instilled hope that were new opportunities for the church's ministry amidst this change. For the participants in Phase 1 they strongly felt that it was critically important for them to be in discussions about what is happening in their community and what the church's ministry is in the community.

One of the perspectives that fostered such hope was to look behind the needs to the resources, assets and possible partners to making the road for change. Participants were heartened to consider dialogues and collaboration with other faith communities and the sense of community that has or could grow between faith groups and other community groups.

It must also be said that although there were trends identified. These trends are not necessarily inevitable social or economic conditions. As is often said about our society, "The only constant is change itself." Creating regular opportunities for the church to reflect on the changing community and region is vital if the church is going to offer leadership for its membership and in the community.

Final remarks

Although the discussion of new ideas and the realization that there were others in Maritime Conference and in other denominations who were wrestling with these difficult issues brought some comfort to the participants, reflecting on these issues in light of their faith was where hope and confidence was most noticeable.

This was symbolically and ritually celebrated at the end of each session ended with a unison reading of a United Church Creed. As a fitting end to this report, I believe it is helpful to remember that it is to God's ministry that we are being called and in all of our discussions we are seeking to hear the voice of God.

A United Church of Canada Creed

*We are not alone,
we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
 the Word made flesh,
 to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
 by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
 our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.*

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.