

CHANGE: A Theological Reflection

Reality

“The story of Jesus both is and continues in the story of the church. Empowered by the Spirit of God, nurtured through history and tradition, looking to the future while living fully in the present, the church is called to embody Jesus’ life for a changing world: to love as Jesus loved, to live as Jesus taught, and to be faithful to God in our context of time and place.” *[adapted, A Draft Statement of Faith, UCC, January 2005]*

In 2005, the context of time and place for the ministries of The United Church of Canada within the bounds of Maritime Conference speaks of struggle, tiredness, risk, uncertainty, and frustration. At the same time, our context speaks to us of opportunity, challenge, growth, optimism, and vigor. These descriptors speak to the reality of the communities in which congregations are located as well as the reality of the ministry exercised by those congregations.

Rural Maritime Canada continues to experience marked depopulation. Many of the rural communities in which UCC congregations are located are literally disappearing. At the same time, some urban centers are experiencing significant growth. We have both congregations faced with the reality of closure and congregations struggling to find room and resources to meet the growing demands of ministry. In both cases, the ministry cannot go forward as it always has in the past. That is the reality!

Another aspect of the reality is the emotional roller coaster on which many congregants find themselves. Desiring to honour both the history of ministry and the factuality of change that is occurring in the immediate moment, many church members and ministry professionals are desperate for wisdom from God’s Spirit as to how to proceed. They also need significant pastoral care to address loss, grief, change, and challenge.

Change

A statement attributed to theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, “The community of Christ can only really be formed when some of its hopes and dreams have been shattered.” That shattering is taking place all around our congregations; the villages, towns, and cities in which they are located do not resemble, even in a small fashion, the communities in which those ministries began nor the communities in which many of those ministries were vibrant but a short fifteen or twenty years ago. The communities have changed; some have even taken care in managing the change. In the same period of time, we confess that the church has often stood outside the change and offered itself as a place of unchanging refuge. Too late, possibly, we have learned that not talking about or participating in the change processes does not keep the change from happening...even within the church!

In the midst of this change, the church has struggled to understand and appreciate that ‘church is more than a building’ and ‘church is more than congregation.’ Increasingly, congregations are involved in the work of spiritual discernment in an effort to identify who they are now (identity), how they express the changing awareness of themselves in a changing world (vision), and how they do ministry in the real context in which they find themselves (mission). This work of discernment and resulting change is not happening without pain, dissension, conflict and grief in many situations. In other

locations, the cost of significant change is being matched by a rekindling of joy in ministry and new optimism about the congregation's future. As church closures and amalgamations take place, as ministries experience redevelopment or revitalization, the church is taking on a new, often unexpected face.

Life

Church revitalization or redevelopment speaks of intentionality in choosing life for the faith community. It has been and is the experience of the people of God that such life does not reside in maintaining the status quo. This is the biblical record of the Judeo-Christian experience of faith community! Congregations located in growing suburbs must learn this just as congregations situated in shrinking rural towns, villages, and crossroads. In its new creed, the United Church of Canada declares

*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... [emphases added]*

This declaration speaks of action, vitality, doing the gospel. Even in times of upheaval and significant change, being the Church, it appears, has little, perhaps nothing, to do with a building or a structure. It has much to do with the fashioning and living of peoples' lives. At the same time, however, we are, as the church called to journey with people in the midst of the feelings that are closely related to our living and to seek to helpfully and healthfully acknowledge and respond to those feelings.

Death

In the church's current hymnology, we boldly proclaim our confidence in life after death. "In our death is our beginning...in our life eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory..." ("*In the Bulb there Is a Flower*", Voices United, #703, UCPH, 1996) This confidence is buoyed by the age-old trust that God knows – "unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." This confidence is also grounded in words of comfort offered from every pulpit over the many generations of the Christian Church – "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die..." (*Ecclesiastes 3:1-2*) Ending comes to every human life. Just as assuredly, ending comes to organizations and institutions. End comes to ministry.

In all cases, death does not come without pain, loss, emptiness, anger, sorrow. We remember that the call to the people of Israel to fashion their new lives included a journey through the wilderness and a dying to what was past. Indeed, those who began the journey were not among those who eventually entered the Promised Land. We also recall that Israel's experience of exile was preceded by the promise of a return. However, those who eventually returned did so only after saying goodbye to a previous generation who had died and thus were not part of going home and starting anew.

Much of the change in the world about us speaks of endings and death. Our small, rural communities have witnessed the loss of community institutions – schools, banks, post offices – and now, the church. In two or three generations, major community institutions have all disappeared...as the community itself, in many instances, has just as surely vanished. Can these dried up bones live again? Dare we believe in resurrection and new life for the church as we do for our sisters and brothers in the faith?

Grief

At times, the sense of loss the congregations and pastoral charges are dealing with seems overwhelming. The grief approaches that which is numbing and we do not know where to turn or what to do next. Energy wanes; our will is diminished. At this point we do well to begin nurturing a sense of shared dissatisfaction – we do not have to nor want to tolerate an ongoing loss, more endings, continuing death. However, we do need to take time to complete our grief work and gradually come to terms with new realities.

In the midst of our grief, if not before, we may be finally able to comprehend the truth that not talking about dying does not prevent dying; it only keeps us from living. As that reality dawns, our grief may be multiplied. What have we missed? How have we failed? Can we begin again?

For most of us in the church, we find ourselves in a place we have never been before – a place we have never prayerfully nor carefully contemplated ever being. Like the psalmist, we may cry, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (*Psalm 137:4*) To raise this question, however, may be a first sign of hope and renewal.

Newness

*Lead me into the promised land.
I am sick unto death of bondage,
burdened by doubt and debt
and all those things
by which we are bound.
Give me a taste of milk and honey
in a cup that is running over.
It is time to replace the salted tears
that season my daily bread.
Lift up Your hand, O Mover of Mountains.
You can divide the waters
to let a whole new generation
pass over...*

[from M.T. Winter, *Woman Wisdom*, 1991, permission to use requested]

The disciples had said goodbye to their Rabbi/Friend. He was gone! Everything had changed; nothing would ever be the same. Peter decided to go back to fishing. Others joined him. Remember?

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

[John 21:3b-6]

Jesus invited the disciples to try something different, something new. Can the church hear and heed such an invitation today?

The newness for the Church of which many speak today is mostly unknown. The newness is grounded in and founded upon a willingness to discern the leading of God's Spirit. With the disciples on the road to Emmaus, having told our story – and God invites that sharing, the tears, the joys, the uncertainty, we are invited to wait upon Jesus' explanation of what it all means and where God's Spirit is leading. The newness invites us to think outside the box – figuratively and literally.

There will not be one 'newness' for all congregations and pastoral charges. In various places in a variety of ways and at various times, the congregations and pastoral charges across Maritime Conference will experience closures and amalgamations, a great array of modes of redevelopment and revitalization. Our ministry will not be judged on the basis of closure, amalgamation, redevelopment, or revitalization. As it has always been, our ministry will be judged on the basis of our faithfulness – our faithfulness in responding to God's call to move forward into "the new thing" that God is creating.

We are not alone, we live in God's world...

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. [emphases added]

Prepared for Maritime Conference Church Revitalization Committee
by Rev. Bob Johnson, St. Andrews, NB