

Constantly Becoming

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Abstract
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Many of us struggle with stories of faith; we question the language, meaning, and our understanding of these stories. This ministry project provided an opportunity for the congregation to enter into conversation together to help draw out both our individual and congregational understanding of being a congregation that defines it's self as "A Progressive, Inclusive, Life Affirming Christian Community of faith within the United Church of Canada.

This project takes place at St. Mark's United Church, an affirming congregation in the East end of Toronto, formerly known as Scarborough. The congregation went through an incredible transition as a group of 50 individuals made their way to St. Mark's after leaving a congregation where the term Progressive meant that major pieces of their worshipping life of faith were being taken away from them.

No formal amalgamation work was undertaken.

This project is designed to have the congregation share in conversation to articulate what the concept of Progressive... Inclusive and Life-affirming means for us as a community of faith to live out our mission, in the context of the following of the subjects:

1. prayer
2. worship
3. sacraments
4. sin, confession and forgiveness
5. Articulating what it means to be progressive, inclusive and life affirming.

Each of these five conversations asked three questions:

1. What is it?
2. What isn't it?
3. Why is the point or value in it? / Why do we do it anyway?

Dedication

The purpose of life
Is not to arrive at the grave
In a well preserved body,
But to skid in sideways,
Screaming, 'What a Ride'!
John Batt

**To the three women I ride with:
It has been,
It is,
It will continue to be,
What fills my heart with song.**

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Preface

Schubert Ogden states ... no religious tradition can long continue as a vital source of faith and life unless it is critically appropriated in each new historical situation. The importance of such tradition always lies in the precious freight of meaning it bears, not in the forms of expression through which that meaning is borne from the past to the present. All such forms are only more or less adequate to the actual occurrence of tradition, and they are to be retained, if at all, only because or insofar as they still make possible the “handing over” which the word “tradition” (traditio) originally signifies. Since whether any given forms of expression continue to serve this purpose is determined by our ever-changing historical situations, the more radical the changes from one situation to another, the more urgent and far-reaching the task of a critical interpretation of the tradition.

(Allen and Williamson, 1991, 72)

I’ve never felt as if I belong in the church, and yet I have lived my entire life in the context of congregational life as a part of the United Church of Canada. I grew up in the church; every breath of my life has been taken within the context of a life of faith, Sunday school, the junior choir, cubs, scouts, youth group and church musicals. I knew in sixth grade that I wanted to be an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. I never considered any other job. At 19, just a week after preaching my first sermon, I left my hometown of Peterborough, Ontario and headed north, off to Laurentian University in Sudbury, four and half hours away from home. Right around the corner from my first apartment was a small United Church. I grew up at Northminster United Church, a “north end” congregation with over 600 families that had one minister, The Rev. Dr. William T. Wells (Bill) for 19 years. This church around the corner would fit, in its entirety, in the General Purpose room of my ‘home church’. The sign outside,

partially blocked by overgrown bushes, said the weekly service was at 10:30am. I got dressed up, shirt and tie and headed over, went in the back door and sat down in the empty sanctuary. I was nervous, but there were people there, off to the side in their church hall and one came out with a surprised look on his face, trying to look caring, commenting that they were glad to see me. I identified myself a new student, living around the corner, and had thought I would come to church. So sad, church was over. Although the sign said service was at 10:30, everyone knew that it was now at 9:00 because they were “borrowing” another minister. This congregation hadn’t bothered to change the sign. I would suggest in fact that they hadn’t even considered that someone might read their sign and even come to church. John Bradford “(1510–1555) an English Reformer and martyr, who served as the prebendary or senior clergy of the Old St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, held in the Tower of London for alleged crimes against Mary Tudor, for his Protestant faith and was burned at the stake on 1 July ([Wiki](#)),” is questionably attributed as the source of my favourite line: “There but **for** the grace of God go I.” But, that line brings with it a bit of a thought that we just follow along with the great plan of God. That doesn’t really work for me, although I love the line, maybe it would be more accurate for me to say, “There but **with** the grace of God go I;” moving an old phrase into a new way of thinking.

Signs change. Inside the church and outside the church signs don’t mean what they used to. This is what brought me into this Doctor of Ministry program at Drew. Somehow my understanding of what church can be and what congregational expectations of what church can be still hasn’t come together. In my years of ministry I

have seen an incredible disconnect. People today see church and equate it with their experiences and stories of what church **was**. The church that **is**, is a much better place.

In this time, during my first year in Sudbury, I became the last Intended Candidate for Ministry in the Bay of Quinte Conference. The National Church launched their new Discernment Process just after my submitted application was received, and I began my formal process towards Ordained Ministry in the United Church of Canada. At Laurentian University, I took several courses with Dr. Brian Aitkin, professor of religious studies and coordinator of the ethics program I had entered as my major for my Bachelor of Arts degree. The University website's definition of the program states that "Ethics Studies introduces students to an examination of morality. It is a branch of Philosophy that seeks to answer the basic question: "What should I do in this situation, all things considered?" The field of ethics is also one of action. It strives to enable people to act fairly and compassionately in all areas of human life."

Brian was a gifted teacher: He was about enabling people to question, to challenge, to push, but not just for the fun of it. He was very demanding in making me articulate a point clearly and concisely. Brian was, as well, a great mentor and life teacher to many. In the spring of 1992 I began my Master of Divinity degree at Queen's University at Kingston to study theology, for what would be three frustrating years leading to ordination. I did two summer internships, one in Sioux Lookout, a remote Northern community in Ontario, with the Rev. Robin Wardlaw, and the other at First United Church in Ottawa a very liberal, urban, diverse and affirming congregation, with the Rev. Sharon Moon. All of this was long before I ever knew that Affirm United

existed. These two congregations were as different as night and day in their outlook. One of the people I knew at Queen's came from Sioux Lookout and knew a lot about the congregation. His comment was that primarily, "they worried about making sure that their building was in good repair." Years before, when talking about holding a soup lunch for people in need in the community, the idea only came to pass when the decision was made that the clients would enter at the kitchen door for the meal, and not 'traipse over the carpet at the front door'. First United, on the other hand was a wonderful engaging community that was open to all in downtown Ottawa. Early one Sunday morning the Chief of Stewards, responsible for finance and property, had a large extension ladder up and was banging the walls to make sure that there were no loose pieces of brick or mortar that might fall down that morning. After removing them, and making sure it was safe, they could be about their ministry. They were a community based church trapped in their decaying historical building, striving to make a real difference for folks in Ottawa. It was after that summer that I regained hope that there might be a place for me in the church.

I met and married my wife Sharon while studying at Queen's. After ordination we set off for settlement to Happy Valley – Goose Bay Labrador! It was established in 1954, with the first clerk of session being Elizabeth Goudie, a remarkable accomplishment for a woman anywhere in the United Church of Canada! People were shaped by their dependence on their neighbours in times of need, their geographic isolation, harsh winters and a local culture of hunting, fishing and living off the land. The Labrador folk had lived through extreme hardship and the "come from away" folks

(CFA's) had given up many familiar luxuries to come to this place. Everyone in this community had a connection to a church whether they attended it or not. They were Anglican, Catholic, Moravian, United, or any of the 19 congregations in that community of 8300 people. "The Goose" was a place for me to learn many things as I started in ministry. I remember crossing the Grand River in a small boat or by skidoo to lead services in Mud Lake, an island community. I remember the hours spent at the hospital being with a family leading prayer when someone had died. Ministers don't get to do that in the city. It was a chance to experience holiness in so many different ways. So many of the families were related throughout the generations, and were connected to indigenous Innu & Inuit people. I had to learn patience; the world went on at a different speed than Labrador did. I learned the small town pace of life. I learned how volunteers built and supported congregations. I learned about what was important to folks, who needed to be 'on board' for any new ideas and that you can't change a tradition until you can understand a tradition and you can't understand a tradition until you have shared in the tradition. That takes time. The congregation had many ordinands over the years and trained them well for service in the wider church.

When it came time to start our family, we wanted to raise our kids in Ontario where there were sidewalks and playgrounds, backyard pools and to be closer to our families. We moved back to Caledon East, Ontario, and Mayfield United Church, a thriving dairy farming community north of Brampton with some of the folks there using cutting edge milking technology and herd management programs. Sharon flew out at the end of June and my dad joined me in Labrador to drive out the trans-Labrador

Highway together. It remains one of my best memories of time spent one on one with my dad. Sarah was born in August of 1998, and my best friend, the Rev. David LeGrand came down from Burk's Falls to do the baptism on a Sunday evening, because the Mayfield church didn't feel like home yet. Karen was born a year and two weeks later in August of 1999, and by then, Mayfield felt like our church and I baptised her. The congregation was a huge extended welcoming and friendly family. The Sunday school was overflowing; there was no room in the pews on a Sunday morning until the kids went downstairs. There would be 26 people in the tiny nursery sharing bottles, sippy cups and fish cookies. It didn't matter what the event for Mayfield was, you could plan on 97 people arriving at your door whether it be for our open house or any other social event in the community. Each year, when the congregation held the hugely successful annual chicken BBQ, the joke was that it was the only "eat in cemetery" to be found. I will never forget the time that the patriarch introduced me to someone at the annual church barbeque just before Karen was born, he told the man "he has been here for a year, had one baby after he arrived and the next one is due in a month. We're not sure if he knows what's causing the problem yet or not". I was so embarrassed, and so cared for, Mayfield was a real gift for Sharon and me as a couple and as a family to us both. Mayfield was about generations. Seven generations later, descendants of the donor of the land for the church still lived on the land next to the church and were still an active part of the congregation. I remember seeing an old family picture on a visit and in it, the six daughters all married men from the communities and those 7 family names are still alive and well in the congregation. That single picture tied most of the congregation

together as a family. These folks wanted to know about the stories of faith, they wanted me to dig into the background and tell them how stories of so long ago still have something to say today. The stories of generations of faith still spoke to them.

After three and a half years there, I got an offer to come to Scarborough and be the Minister of Worship and Administration in a multi-staff team, so with 7 years of marriage and two kids we moved into our 5th address. I served at St. John's in Scarborough for 8.5 years. It was a solid suburban congregation that was filled with very active volunteers that had been white collar professionals, leaders in industry and education. Outreach was very important to the congregation, they were leaders in the Presbytery for support of the National Mission and Service Fund, and would raise \$18,000 in a day for their White Gift Outreach program. It was very much an older congregation, with incredible power dynamics due to some dramatic conflicts over the life of the congregation. In those times of conflict and transitions, a leadership vacuum occurred and individuals moved into significant power roles and controls that had to become shared responsibility again. It was hard work trying to rebuild healthy communication and decision making channels and processes for the congregation, but it was successful. The congregation came to have trust in a minister again, and were willing to try new things, but only through a very slow and intentional process of making decisions. I was, and remain the only called minister that was not asked to leave. In my time there, we brought some pretty dramatic changes to worship, screens in the sanctuary, the pulpit was no longer used, I no longer 'had' to wear my gown every week,

but what was really exciting were the conversations around a new way of thinking theologically.

Four years ago I made the move to St. Mark's where I currently serve. I had been to St. Mark's to worship with my family. I had preached in the congregation at a Presbytery Pulpit Exchange, and had been a friend with the minister there for all of my time in Scarborough, so it was a familiar place that was known to be a leading edge congregation. They had done incredible work with moving forward in their faith and understanding of church. The building burned down in 1979 and in the four years it took to rebuild, they made some dramatic decisions about what they wanted to be. They sold 5 housing lots from the property and that, with the insurance money, allowed them to open the new church in 1983 in a debt free position. They didn't put pews in the sanctuary; they wanted the space to be usable for many purposes. The sanctuary is well suited for worship, packing food hampers, or hosting a yard sale as the need may arise. The congregation wrote cutting edge policy for congregations, a Duty of Care policy, an endowment fund policy, they hosted the first sabbatical for a minister at the Conference and drafted polity that was put to use by the national church. They had an openly gay man in ministry for 23 years. It was a constant process of moving forward in the articulation of their faith. The congregational engagement in reading, study, or discussion became a very freeing exercise as there was much of the traditional language and theology of worship that wasn't resonating, and this made people feel quite hypocritical because they were seriously questioning whether they could participate in a theology they had moved past. The stories from the testaments and other writings that

resonated were the ones where Jesus presents as wholly human - the master teacher, care-giver, self-motivated person that we as humans strive to be. They continually worked, as individuals and as a congregation as a whole to dig a little deeper in terms of their walk towards being progressive, inclusive, and life affirming. They were heavily influenced and excitedly engaged by reading – John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, etc., and the series of workshops the Rev. Alan Hall, the former minister at St. Mark’s had conducted on Faith Formation. This was the congregation I both knew, and thought I was applying to come to serve. But upon my arrival I found that the congregation was very new and different. A few short years earlier, fully half of the congregation had arrived as expatriates from a neighbouring United Church. The work of my D. Min. project, the series of conversations was to become part of our articulating a new way of being in ministry together at St. Mark’s, and what that means to us as a new community.

I was ordained at 24 years of age, and now, at 44 with almost 20 years’ experience, I am still usually the youngest person at the table at almost any level of church meeting I attend. But the ‘not fitting’ is more than just my age, it’s my understanding of God, of creation, and of hope. The United Church of Canada is a uniquely Canadian entity, created in 1925 by an Act of Parliament to unite the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches of Canada, primarily that they could do mission more effectively. I remain entirely grateful to the Congregational Church of Canada (the smallest of the three denominations), that, during the union talks in the 1920’s insisted that we only be in “essential agreement” with the Basis of Union

and its twenty-three articles of faith. It let a kid like me say “yes, I agree with the idea”, but not have to truly ‘subscribe’ to their precepts and archaic language.

The last twenty years has been about me finding my place in the story of our faith and helping others to do so too. I don’t believe in the ancient creedal absolutes of Christianity. I can’t get past the first line of the Apostles Creed that states “I believe in God, and yet I give thanks and believe that I live with a God that walks with and within us with every step and every breath of life. For the congregations that I have served, they too have truly come to hold onto the line that I use every service I lead as my Benediction that “We are Not Alone” and from that point we move forward in faith.

Bill Wells, my minister when I was growing up, my mentor and the one who helped me see myself in this vocation, included in his writing for his D.Min. Thesis from Drew a line that Teilhard de Chardin is reported to have said. Bill was unable to find it again to accurately cite, but I appreciated his adaptation offered in the context of a Pre-Google search World! "Someday, after we have harnessed the sun, the winds and the tides, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time, we will have discovered fire." (Wells 1989, 41) I like his paraphrase better than the original. The world has changed. Language has changed. The Church has changed. Our understanding of God is changed, as has our understanding of prayer. It is my hope that through this work, we will find a new way to use language and understanding to articulate in a new way that we believe, and in doing so, we may ignite a new and vital church that is **Constantly Becoming** something more.

Introduction

Constantly Becoming

Many of us struggle with stories of faith; we question the language, meaning, context and our understanding of those stories. This Doctor of Ministry Project is an opportunity for individuals to enter into conversation to draw out an understanding of faith, as individuals within a congregation that defines it's self as "Progressive, Inclusive and Life Affirming Christian community of faith." As individuals, and as a congregation, we don't have the answers to our faith. We are nearly all equally uncomfortable in articulating creed-like statements about our faith, and yet we feel surrounded by the presence and love of God. Rabbi Louis Jacobs in his book entitled **Jewish Preaching** leaves room both for God's Presence and for doubt. He points out that God is not **before** us or **with** us or **after** us, but that God "**is**". "There are times, at least, when we can appreciate the idea that God is outside the time process altogether, and that God sees, as it were, past, present and future "all at once," as C.S. Lewis once said: "there are no tenses in God." When all has been said, however, we recognize that we are in the presence of a mystery, and this is as it should be." (Jacobs, 2004, 222) In this reading from Jacobs, there is also a great affirmation of our ability to question our faith. "If our faith were perfectly intelligible in all its details it would certainly be false, for it

would then be purely human. The great Hasidic thinker, Hahman of Bratzlav, went so far as to say that unless someone of faith has doubts then whatever they believe in, it is not God. (Jacobs, 2004, 222)

There is an incredible strength in that kind of statement or affirmation in the ministry I serve. In his review of this writing Len Sweet, my academic advisor stated: “The only thing I need more is an initial discussion from your perspective on **the difference between making faith postmodern, vs. incarnating faith in a postmodern culture** I’m less concerned you would come out where I would than that this whole issue is addressed and conceptualized It seems to me that the whole interaction of faith and culture needs some theoretical scaffolding to hang the flow and flux of your dissertation.” (Sweet, October 2014, Personal Correspondence)

It took me the better part of a day to understand what the question was before I could work to articulate an answer. I found a useful piece in helping me to understand Len’s question. It is from The [Following Jesus](#) web site, “a project of the *Mustard Seed School of Theology*, which may be the smallest school of biblical studies and theology in the world”:

In a postmodern world, faith is built on experience more than on doctrine or rational proof; the focus will be on attitudes, behavior and lifestyle. The religious issue for Postmoderns is not about correct beliefs or styles of worship practices—it is about a way of life. In that sense it is a return to the earliest days of the church, to the “followers of the Way.

([Struckmeyer](#), ¶3)

I agree with the idea of a focus on attitudes, behaviour and lifestyle, but I think that we have a responsibility, if we are going to mimic the earliest followers ‘way’, to continually

work to learn about how they lived out their faith in the context of the stories of scripture. I have heard too many times that people ‘find God’ on the golf course or fishing at the cottage, and that is fine, you can love God while you ignore your faith, but to be Christian, to learn from and follow the example of the life of Jesus, requires the gathering of a community. Jesus wasn’t a lone wolf; he was all about expanding community.

To be blunt, I don’t support Len’s premise of opposing statements. It isn’t **either** “catch up” faith to a modern way of thinking or “living out” faith, incarnating that faith in a postmodern culture, it’s both. We have to work to bring change in our liturgical experience of the theology of God, and we have to stop letting our life of faith be something we do in a specific building on a specific day of the week.

In an interview with Relevant Magazine, Len describes the gospels as oxygen:

So, the most important thing for me is to get oxygen out to these people who are panting, dying for the oxygen. I don't care how you get it to them. I don't care what container you use! We've got a lot of churches fighting over whether or not the oxygen's got to come in an iron lung! That's the mystery for me: Why is the church spending its time fighting over what kind of canisters you put the oxygen in? This is the only breath of life there is!

([Sweet](#): Closet)

Let me offer an example of the struggle about the containers... In the fall of 2014 our Christian Education Team scheduled four Free Family Movie Nights as an outreach event for the local community. We printed up 800 bookmark flyers, 500 for the elementary school next door, a hundred for the food bank, a hundred at a centre for healthy communities and the rest for the retail stores around us and handed out at church. Recent attempts at a similar event, without connecting to the community had

led to events attended by only 10 people from St. Mark's. On the other hand, our first movie night marketed to our community had 80 people gathered in our sanctuary, welcomed, treated to free popcorn to watch **The Lego Movie**, "an ordinary Lego construction worker, thought to be the prophesied 'Special', is recruited to join a quest to stop an evil tyrant from gluing the Lego universe into eternal stasis." ([IMDB](#), The Lego Movie)

"You are special!" "Don't let the world get stuck." "Help the world to live and grow and move." Those are challenging messages for any preacher to offer on a Sunday morning, and we had 80 guests in the sanctuary on a Friday night hear it. The tune to "Everything is Awesome" being sung by the kids on the way out clinched the message. The questions from some of the folks I talked to about our success asked: "Are we charging them?" "How much were the treats"? Nope! No charge. We were too busy bringing air, incarnating faith. The goal is that they come to understand this place of faith as part of their community. Someone commented in a conversation that "many of them wouldn't come to church!" So what? The goal is that they know that this place of faith is part of their neighbourhood. We are bringing oxygen, forget about the container, and make the connection to the breath of life.

Our challenge isn't to describe faith; it is to live it out, to share it with others, to both be changed by it and to bring change. Jesus offered stories of The Way, how to live, not what to think, but how to live it out. It isn't about **bringing** God. It's about **seeing** God where we are. "Postmodernism is not a theory or a creed: it is more like an attitude or a way of looking at things. It didn't drop out of the sky—it showed up at this

juncture in history, in Western Culture, for specific reasons that have to do with the history of the West.” (White, 2006, 11) It is something that became, it didn’t have any defined edges, and it’s coming into being evolved gradually. “Nor is it, as it is sometimes caricatured, an incoherent jumble – it has weaknesses but also strengths as a way of looking at the world. Nor is it incomprehensibly profound, out of reach of the ordinary layperson. It is a view of the world that, like most other views of the world, requires some effort and sympathy to understand.” (White, 2004, 11) “Pre-modern cultures have not been thought of creating a sense of distinct individuality,” ([Wiki-Modern History](#) ¶ Pre-Modern) of the corpus, but postmodern breadth and depth is, more than anything about that sense of distinct individuality. Each person is called to find their true self, to express that self, and at the same time to make room for others to feel safe in their expression as well. Recently, in an article I read in the Toronto Star, Nicole Winfield, the writer of the article, wrote about an event at the Vatican in which Pope Francis had a two week gathering on family life “Showing an unprecedented opening toward gays and divorced people” (Winfield, 2014). In her article she talks about the “Law of Gradualness” what is described as “A theological concept that encourages the faithful to take one step at a time in the search for holiness.” Postmodernism is about “The greatest happiness for the greatest number” (White, 2006, 33) “Pre-moderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead. Postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it. This is the crux of all

postmodern thought.” (White, 2006, 41) Moderns believe there is a “The Answer”.

Postmoderns want to know what your “The Question” is.

There is a cost to this way in the world though: John Shelby Spong, in speaking about how people experience the “law of gradualness” is a very real fear that they will lose everything. “The anxiety experienced by many is that when this structure is dismantled, nothing is left. If that is so, then let us be honest and face the fact that Christianity has died and the history of a post-Christian world has begun.” (Spong, 2007, 284) But, “it is no longer to speculate about who or what God is but to act out what God means.” (Spong, 2007, 286)

As part of this D.Min. Program, there is a requirement to have a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) to work with me, “a select group of mostly lay persons associated with the Candidate’s ministry context, who are chosen by the candidate to work with her or him as a team to plan, execute, and evaluate all aspects of the professional project.” (Drew D.Min. Handbook, 33) The group who worked with me was a balance of newer & long-term members, younger and older, male and female that are integral to the life and work of the congregation.

With many great hours spent in thought and conversation we worked to articulate the overall goals of this D.Min. Project in this ministry context:

- To provide an opportunity and a safe place for individuals to share ideas
- To acknowledge that we are not THERE yet, that we are continually becoming
- To provide a learning experience for all participants
- To hear both Individual and communal thoughts
- To provide a safe place to express oneself by acknowledging places of discomfort
- To think in new ways and to discern what that means to us
- To share ideas in open discussion

- To participate as a member of a community
- To engage in lifelong learning
- To identify and strengthen the identity of our church
- To draw out the value and essence of prayer in this context of ministry.

The work of this project has been to draw the congregation into a unified ownership of an understanding of who we are and what we are to be about asking “In what ways are we Progressive?” We met several times to plan and carry out 5 themed conversation evenings and Sunday morning services throughout the spring of 2014

looking at:

1. Prayer,
2. Worship,
3. Sacraments,
4. Sin & Confession
5. What it means to be Progressive, Inclusive & Life Affirming.

At each of these opportunities, we were working through three specific questions:

1. What does it do?
2. What doesn't it do?
3. What is the point or value? / Why do we do it anyway?

This project is important to me because in my coming to this congregation as the minister. I have been pushed in new ways of both thinking and articulating my understanding of faith. This is a congregation that has members with a traditional understanding of faith, and others that simply will not take the status quo way of thinking. They want to think things through; they want to be pushed in their understanding of the stories of our faith and our interpretation of those stories. That is familiar to me. That is something I have continually worked at, but here, the

expectation is that we, as a community of faith will go further. It has always been for me, that the sermon allowed boundaries and understandings to be pushed, and I have had a lot of fun with that challenge, but here, at St. Mark's, that push of a new idea in a sermon is in fact already accepted as normal or correct, and the real challenge comes in how the liturgy emerges out of that new starting position of thinking and understanding. Gretta Vosper, minister, author, atheist, in her book *With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe*, says "If you can't say it in the pulpit, you shouldn't sing it in the pew" (Vosper 2008, 333). Language around prayers, the words we sing, the liturgy at the table or the font has to be what can say with integrity, not simply words out of tradition or habit.

Although not all of the people in the congregation are at that level of understanding in their expectations in worship, there is a strong pull within me to honour that idea and work on bringing transformation to the language and understanding of the weekly liturgy.

One of the most interesting exercises of the project was in and around the transition of language in prayer. I had found an exercise online for building a "you – who – do – to – through" prayer from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship that I really like, but, the language was very traditional and I wanted to adapt the resource. I initially presented it to my Local Advisory Committee as it is laid out below, with it having the "track changes" feature turned on in Microsoft Word which turned on "strikethrough" for deletions and underlined any additions with both changes identified in red ink. (Figure 1)

It looked like this:

The YOU
Is how you choose to address and praise God:
~~Almighty~~ God of hope
Light of the world
Creator of all that is good
El Roi, God who sees
~~Great Healer~~ God who journeys with us

The WHO
Names an attribute or action of God:
Who ~~Parted the Red sea~~ is with us on our journey
You love us despite our weaknesses
Who fills the earth with life
You know us better than we know ourselves
You ~~cast out demons and cured lepers~~ bring the promise of life.

The DO
Offers a petition to who you've just said God is:
We ask to sense your presence in a special way today
Shine your love into our ~~dark empty~~ corners
Show us how to cherish what you ~~r~~ created.
Reveal the opportunities ~~you've planned~~ for us to help
~~Please release~~ Be with our brother ~~from his~~ struggling with addiction.

The TO
Explains why you're asking God for this:
So that this chapel service may touch those who ~~doubt your power~~ gather
We long to live as one and ~~bring~~ your glory family
So that future generations may live in abundance
May our congregation ~~be a~~ blessing to others in new ways
Let his friends see ~~what you can do~~ your love making a difference in his life

Amen

Figure 1 - You Who Do To - Track Changes

But the LAC group didn't like how that looked. To them, it seemed to indicate right and wrong, that it has been "corrected", the LAC request was to find a way to present the same changes as an option, in a non-judgmental way. Someone suggested that a two-column table could show the option of changed language, and yet still left room for individuals to say 'I like the one on the left'. Language about miracles,

darkness, divine plan, intervention, power, expectation or one way actions of God were changed and the reason for the changes discussed, but the prayer was still shown as an option, showing part of our history that wasn't taken away from them. It also showed how it was adapted into more usable language for worship at St. Marks for them to consider, without the traditional idea of a 'red pen' correction. (Figure 2)

The YOU is how you choose to address and praise God:	
Almighty God Light of the world Creator of all that is good El Roi, God who sees Great Healer	God of hope Light of the world Creator of all that is good El Roi, God who sees God who journeys with us
The WHO names an attribute or action of God:	
Who parted the Red Sea You love us despite our weaknesses Who fills the earth with life You know us better than we know ourselves You cast out demons and cured lepers	Who is with us on our journey You love us despite our weaknesses Who fills the earth with life You know us better than we know ourselves Your brings the promise of life
The DO offers a petition to who you've just said God is:	
We ask to sense your presence in a special way today Shine your love into our dark corners Show us how to cherish what you create Reveal the opportunities you've planned for us Please release our brother from his addiction	We ask to sense your presence in a special way today Shine your love into our empty corners Show us how to cherish what your creation Reveal the opportunities for us to help be with our brother struggling with addiction
The TO explains why you're asking God for this:	
So that this chapel service may touch those who doubt your power We long to live as one and bring you glory So that future generations may live in abundance May our congregation bless others in new ways Let his friends see what you can do	So that this chapel service may touch those who gather We long to live as one and be your family So that future generations may live in abundance May our congregation be a blessing to others in new ways Let his friends see your love making a difference in his life
The THROUGH affirms that Jesus is our Way to the Father:	The THROUGH affirms the story of Jesus and the promise of God:
We ask this for Jesus' sake We ask in Jesus' name We pray this through Christ, in the Spirit's power, trusting in your grace. Accept our prayer for the sake of your Son, our Savior Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever	We ask this in the knowledge of your love We ask in the name of the one who came to teach us of you We pray this trusting in your grace. Accept our prayer O God of Love

Figure 2 You Who Do To - 2 Column

What surprised me was not that there was a reaction that I changed the language and the theology of the resource, but that it needed to be articulated in a way that cared for folks at different places. Both the traditional language and the updated version could be compared and appreciated. In the thinking of the LAC, one was not right, making the other wrong; it was simply a way to see something in a new light. This was being inclusive in how we articulated what progressive can mean to a congregation. This layout change showed how carefully the LAC worked so all could participate in healthy conversations as we were all stretched in our thinking.

Raising the level of understanding in the congregation was one of the key elements of this project. The congregation I serve is an unofficial coming together of people from two congregations. West Hill United Church is 3.4 kilometres (2.1 miles) east of us, and it is served by the Rev. Gretta Vosper who, as mentioned above, describes herself as a Minister, Author, Atheist (www.grettavosper.ca). In 2004 that congregation adopted a "Vision Work" statement that offended many in the congregation that felt the direction of ministry and worship of the congregation conflicted with the needs of the people that believed in and worshipped God. The final straw came for many in the West Hill congregation when the decision was made to discontinue Christmas Eve services, and to instead gather for the "Longest Night" on December 21st. It was a time of great upheaval, and by the time the 2009 edition of that same document had come out, many had, like Moses, headed off into the wilderness ending their wanderings at St. Mark's. Half of individuals in our current worshipping congregation have come from exile to community again.

St. Mark's made a concerted effort to welcome folks as they arrived, to provide a place for them to grieve, to be angry or upset, to come and worship without pressure or tension surrounding them. Two distinct congregational groups have come together without any formal, intentional congregational amalgamation.

Engaging conversation between folks of all backgrounds encourages St. Mark's to enter into dialogue about what it means to be a people of faith in this community. It is an opportunity to look at the language of our Mission Statement (from before the influx of new folks) and to move toward shared ownership of the direction it articulates.

St. Mark's is called to be a progressive, inclusive, life-affirming Christian faith community in The United Church of Canada that is committed to engaging faith, scripture and tradition in progressive ways, seeking to be inclusive of all regardless of ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, race or sexual orientation and striving to affirm the inherent blessing of life found in all Creation.

(St. Marks, 2008)

Learning about aspects of the worship service and how it is put together was one of the project goals. As we gathered in the sanctuary each night with the lighting of the Christ candle, we talked about our faith, how we worship, what we believe and how we connect with God helped us to deepen our faith experience. In the midst of connecting with each other and hearing other people and opinions and ideas, we couldn't help but be challenged and even changed in the way we both articulate and live out our faith.

The folks who arrived from West Hill grieved the loss of their church home. They had participated in many years of active involvement in the congregation and journeyed with process until church became unrecognizable. Folks that had too much trouble with

the kinds of transition that were taking place in the congregation were given the option to remove themselves from positions of leadership and encouraged to go elsewhere.

The Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity was formed with Gretta Vosper at the helm in 2005. There is a very blurred distinction between the operating ethos of the organization and the living out of its mandate in the West Hill congregation. The eight points of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity were an aggressive change in direction for what had properly begun as a congregation of the United Church of Canada and has now become, by the text of their 2009 VisionWorks document:

... individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a diversity of viewpoints, we come together in community, holding in common a reverence for life that moves us to pursue justice, seek truth, live fully, care deeply, and make a difference in the world. While united by life-enhancing values, we are enriched and challenged by our differences in perspectives and beliefs.

As we strive to develop meaningful community, we draw from our origins in an historic religious tradition, the knowledge gained about that tradition over time, diverse sources of insight and wisdom, and contemporary ethical and philosophical thought. We distill from these sources the core values we believe are fundamental to right relations with self, others, all life, and the planet. In this progressive work, we attempt to demonstrate openness, intellectual rigour, honesty, courage, creativity, sensitivity, and respect.

(VisionWorks, ¶12)

The Leadership Team at West Hill made a firm commitment to become progressive in accepting this document, containing no “God language”, even though The Centre for Progressive Christianity in the United States still used language about God. Many felt the congregation was being dragged along as it was stripped of familiar pieces of faith and worship. They lost language of God, they lost their hymns, the idea that prayer mattered, and they felt powerless.

At St. Mark's, it was a very different process. Folks here were finding a voice in new expressions of language in worship. They were moving towards something that was more comfortable, more open. The changing language of God in hymns and prayers opened up their understanding of their faith that was articulated in an all-encompassing way. There was room for all. Some in the LAC described a difference in process with one being a Coup d'état (military historian Edward Luttwak states that "[a] coup consists of the infiltration of a small, but critical, segment of the state apparatus, which is then used to displace the government from its control of the remainder." ([Wiki](#))) compared to an engaging personal and corporate growth process. It was the difference between a package deal and an individual process. One comment made was "in an absolute – progression ceases."

The topics for this project were to allow conversation about what they miss, what they enjoy, how they see their faith being lived out and what is important to them in the worshipping community they call home at St. Mark's. The intent wasn't to box in, but to open up the conversation that multiple points of view could both be articulated and heard. There are not two sides in the faith of the congregation, but instead, a hundred people trying to find their way in faith together.

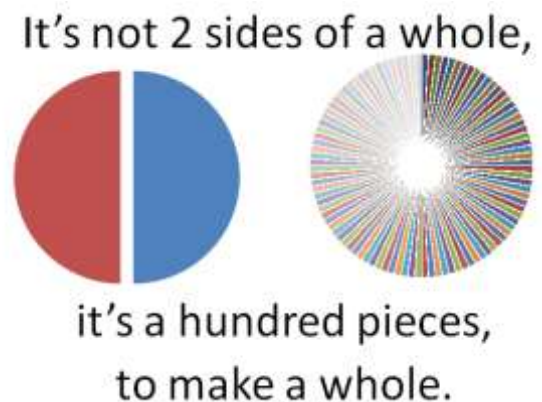


Figure3 It's not 2 sides of a whole.

In my reading about John 14 (in God's house are many rooms) I found a sermon called "A Chosen Race?" by Erskine White. He complained about the comments from the group of ministers that he had been at a bible study with: "I was angry because, in my opinion, each of their three objections suffers the same basic error which is so prevalent in the church today - it is the error of excessive humanism or human self-centeredness, the error of spiritual egoism, if you will. **"It is the error of allowing our own experiences and our experiences with other people to circumscribe our faith and define our understanding of God."** (White, 1990)

It shocked me. How can you not read scripture in light of our own experiences and our experiences with other people to circumscribe – to "draw a line around; encircle: to enclose within bounds; to mark off; define; delimit" (<http://dictionary.reference.com>) our faith and define our understanding of God? Gone are the days of the absolutes of faith, accept the dogma, sign on the dotted line to be a member, and you are in. Faith is about our experiences, about the way we engage ourselves, about the way we experience the holy with each other, in our community, and the community outside. It's about how we speak of our relationship with God and with each other that allows us to make connections. The purpose of this project was to help us define our understanding of God based on our combined experiences of faith.

Each congregation I have served has had one hymn that articulates who they are as congregation. It is beloved, familiar, and sung far too often in many cases. St. Mark's has two, both of which come from *More Voices*, our 2007 Supplement to *Voices United* the 1996 *Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada*. Strangely enough,

they are both from The Common Cup Company, a musical group featuring Gordon Light
(an Anglican Priest and later Bishop) & Ian Macdonald (a United Church Minister)

Draw the Circle Wide	My Love Colours Outside the Lines
<p>Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still. Let this be our song, no one stands alone, Standing side by side, draw the circle wide.</p> <p>God the still point of the circle, 'round whom all creation turns; nothing lost, but held forever, in God's gracious arms.</p> <p>Chorus</p> <p>Let our hearts touch far horizons, so encompass great and small; let our loving know no borders, faithful to God's call.</p> <p>Chorus</p> <p>Let the dreams we dream be larger, than we've ever dreamed before; let the dream of Christ be in us, open every door.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Draw the Circle Wide MV 145 Words: Gordon Light, 1994 Words copyright © 1994 Common Cup Company, www.commoncup.com.</p>	<p>My love colours outside the lines, exploring paths that few could ever find; and takes me into places where I've never been before, and opens doors to worlds outside the lines.</p> <p>My Lord colours outside the lines, turns wounds to blessings, water into wine; and takes me into places where I've never been before and opens doors to worlds outside the lines.</p> <p>We'll never walk on water if we're not prepared to drown, body and soul need a soaking from time to time. And we'll never move the gravestones if we're not prepared to die, and realize there are worlds outside the lines.</p> <p>My soul longs to colour outside the lines, tear back the curtains, sun, come in and shine; I want to walk beyond the boundaries where I've never been before, throw open doors to worlds outside the lines.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">My Love Colours Outside the Lines MV 138 Words: Gordon Light, 1995 Words copyright © 1995 Common Cup Company,</p>

Figure 4 Favourite Hymns

These are hymns of inclusion, that push boundaries of welcome and inclusion. These hymns affirm the beauty of life. These hymns speak of openness; there is still the name of God or a reminder of a Christian story. The lyrics make room for the colours of the rainbow which draw us to the rainbow flag in our sanctuary or the rainbow candle on our communion table. "The rainbow flag, commonly the gay pride flag and sometimes the LGBT pride flag, is a symbol of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) pride and LGBT social movements" (Wiki) The lyrics call us to being bigger

together, not in numbers, but in strength of community. It's not just a praise chorus that may build up some energy or life in the sanctuary, but doesn't offer much nourishment to the mind. Like the story of Peter, the lyrics call to us, and challenge us to get out of the boat. Come with me. Take a step! We hold on to the phrase from our Mission Statement that "we are called to be a Christian community of faith.

In my reading for this project, I found some interesting work by Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher. "Voicu Mihnea Simandan, a Bangkok-based ... school teacher, freelance journalist, short story writer, and novelist" in an article entitled **Julia**

Kristeva's Concepts of Intertextuality states:

Kristeva implies, ideas are not presented as finished, consumable products, but are presented in such a way as to encourage readers themselves to step into the production of meaning. It is, therefore, to this tradition that this new semiotics of productivity will most directly address itself.

(Simandan, 2010, ¶15)

Kristeva talks about the interdependent way texts stand in relation to one another to form meaning, that text is always in the state of production and has no clear stable meaning, but Simandan takes it further. In a brilliant post she visually shows how the words change and relate to each other. In a first reading, the image makes no sense if you read in the traditional left to right across all the lines, but, if you read each coloured section through completely before continuing on it makes sense. The visual learner in me loves what it says, but even more, how it is said!

Intertextuality / Semianalysis

modern semiotics argued for the Kristeva's post-modern semianalytic views objectivity of language, stating that state that text is always in the state of myths, oral cultures traditions, production has no clear, stable meaning literary texts, or any cultural text 😊 intertextuality is the can be scientifically analyzed.. Interdependent way texts stand Kristeva's concept of in relation to one another to intertextuality has been criticized form meaning for obscuring the allusion as a "ideas are presented in such a way to literary technique 😞 encourage readers to come up with their own originality doesn't exist anymore because interpretation of it's meaning"* all art and literature is compiled from previous works

Figure 5 Intertextuality - Simandan

(Simandan, 2010)

Think for a moment of the "verbatation" of society, how we, with a moment of whimsical flair turn nouns into verbs. Have you ever "popcorned" ideas or "fishbowled" a conversation in the centre of a group? Language and meaning is constantly changing. Sometimes words get in the way. Sometimes what we say means one thing to one person and something altogether different to another.

At St. Mark's people can say 'we do believe.' That is a continual process of individuals and a congregation working intentionally on what it is becoming.

As A.N. Whitehead says in Process and Reality, the "essence" of anything is, in fact, "constituted in its becoming."

Every project has to have a biblical story as part of its foundation. For this project the story that spoke is the Statue to an Unknown God: Acts 17:23-25, 28

For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'...

(NRSV)

This scripture articulates the primary difference in evangelism in the 21st Century. Evangelism has always been the “preaching of the Christian Gospel or the practice of relaying information about a particular set of beliefs to others with the intention of conversion” (Wiki). That is no longer an acceptable model; the process is no longer about “bringing Jesus” or “bringing God” but rather helping people to see the presence of God in the places they live. Somehow we know ‘of God’, but lose that idea. Deepak Chopra offers a comment on the evolution of God in our human understanding:

Nearness to God is a constant, not just in human history but in human nature. If we are connected to our souls, the connection is permanent, even if our attention falters. We think that God changes, because our own perception waxes and wanes. The messages keep coming, though, and God keeps showing different faces. Sometimes the whole notion of the divine gets hidden, when secular forces snatch the steering wheel and attempt to drive alone. But the force of spirituality never fully surrenders. God stands for our need to know ourselves, and as awareness evolves, so does God. This journey never ends.

(Chopra, 59)

We somehow know that God is here, but somehow, at times, we miss out on that relationship. The language that connects us, the phrases of the hymns that connect us are those that speak of inclusion, of welcome, that we are “not alone” The final phrase in the Song of Faith of the United Church of Canada says “Creating and seeking relationship, in awe and trust, we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.” We

often hear it rephrased that God is Holy Mystery who is Wholly Mystery. There is no Catechesis of what God is. There is not one line out of the two hymns provided above that answers the question of what God is, but many lines that answer the question of what God is. The conversation of drawing out what God is to us as a community and as individuals continues.

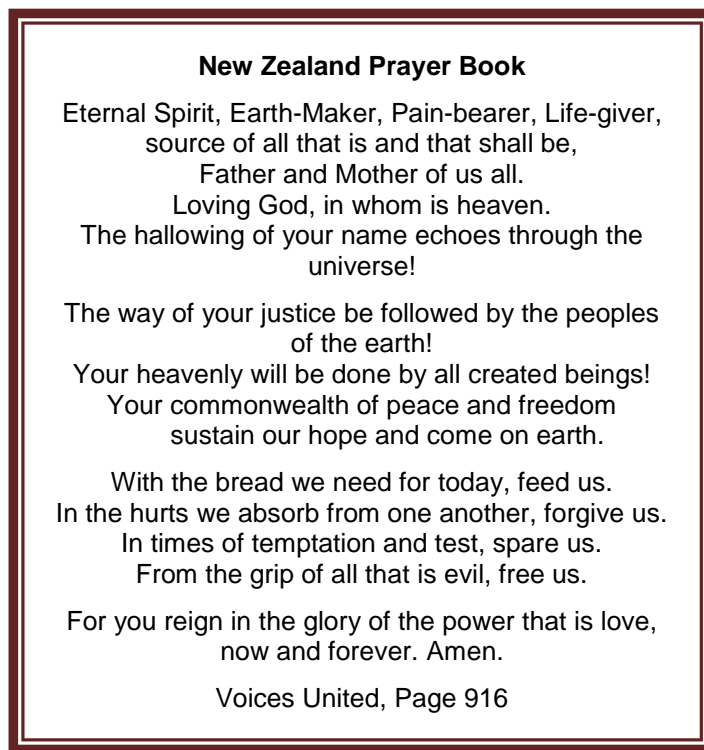
Carol Christ, writer, teacher on feminist religious writing says. **In Her we live, and move, and co-create our being.** (Christ, 2011, 194) I still believe in the power of God to change and challenge us, to draw us into new areas, issues, and opportunities. I think the challenging part of this project will be working with the congregation to articulate what God does, where and when we really experience God's presence, and where we feel God is working with and within us as individuals and as a congregation of faith. This is that act of co-creation with God. This project is to provide a place of conversation to help us all work to better articulate our faith.

Chapter 1

Prayer – It Changes Things

The title of the chapter is the result of all of the conversations shared in and around the topic of prayer. We could all come to agreement with it. Prayer, at the core of it's being, changes things.

We Began the first of our five evening session gathered in a circle in the sanctuary at St. Mark's looking at 12 different versions of the Lord's Prayer gathered



from various sources (orucc.org)

and displayed around the room.

Each participant was given two

stickers to place on any two

versions of the Lord's Prayer

that they liked. As people

made their way around the

room, they made notes of

phrases they liked from the

various versions. The

Figure 6 New Zealand Prayer

overwhelming favourite was the version taken from the New Zealand Prayer Book (Figure 6 New Zealand Prayer). People like the diversity of the images provided, that it was not exclusive. One participant articulated that it is both “familiar and unfamiliar enough to hear it as we

know what it is, but don’t know it enough to go by rote.” There was interesting conversation about the need for an adaptation of the Lord’s Prayer that is not exclusive, but that it still needs to be respectful of the original prayer that it is representing. The group spoke of how the transition finds its way into a new mindset of understanding.

The most interesting part of the conversation was about the version entitled “the

A Blogger’s Lord’s Prayer

Our Father who lives above and beyond the dimension of the internet,
 Give us this day a life worth blogging,
 The access to words and images that express our journey with passion and integrity,
 And a secure connection to publish your daily mercies.
 Your Kingdom come into new spaces today,
 As we make known your mysteries,
 Posting by posting, Blog by blog.
 Give this day, the same ability to those less privileged,
 Whose lives speak louder than ours,
 Whose sacrifice is greater,
 Whose stories will last longer.
 Forgive us our sins,
 For blog-rolling strangers and pretending they are friends,
 For counting unique visitors but not noticing unique people,
 For delighting in the thousands of hits but ignoring the ONE who returns,
 For luring viewers but sending them away empty handed,
 For updating daily but repenting weekly.
 As we forgive those who trespass on our sites to appropriate our thoughts without reference,
 Our images without approval,
 Our ideas without linking back to us.
 Lead us not into the temptation to sell out our congregation,
 To see people as links and not as lives,
 To make our blogs look better than our actual story.
 But deliver us from the evil of pimping ourselves instead of pointing to you,
 From turning our guests into consumers of someone else’s products,
 From infatuation over the toys of technology, from idolatry over technology
 From fame before our time has come.
 For Yours is the power to guide the destinies behind the web logs,
 To bring hurting people into the sanctuaries of our sites,
 To give us the stickiness to follow you,
 no matter who is watching or reading.
 Yours is the glory that makes people second look our sites and our lives,
 Yours is the heavy ambience, for ever and ever, Amen

[Andrew Jones](#)

Figure7 Blogger's Prayer

Blogger’s Prayer” (Figure7 Blogger's Prayer). It, more than anything else, spoke of the difference of language and understanding of the generational demographics of any congregation today. It was identified as being ‘too cute’, and ‘irreverent’ while the other angle was that it spoke of ‘new language’ and ‘varied relationships’ calling us to still find ways to speak of God’s “daily mercies” and challenging us when we fail to see the “unique people” we engage with electronically.

In this “blogger” version, the call is not to prayer or worship, but to reflect on how we engage through technology or social media with people and the world. Although the consensus was that this was not ‘suitable’ to be considered a version of the Lord’s Prayer, it was a great example of how different generations speak, engage, and experience the world differently.

Side 1:	Side 2:
Our Father	Our Mother
Who art in heaven	Who are in all the earth
Thy kingdom come	May your wisdom come
Hallowed be they name	Holy is your truth
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven	Your circle be one uniting heaven and earth
Give us this day our daily bread	Give us today a nurturing spirit
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us	Heal through us as we ourselves are healed
Lead us not into temptation But deliver us from evil	Lead us into Fullness of life And liberate all that is good
For thine is the Kingdom,	For the Wisdom, the power and the glory Presence and the Goodness are Yours
All: Now and forever Amen.	

Dominican Sisters

Figure 8 Alternating Sides Prayer

The second highest rated prayer (Figure 8 Alternating Sides Prayer) was one that had the traditional Lord’s Prayer spoken antiphonally with a newer version. I am certain that some would suggest the traditional side is their preferred side, and others would suggest the updated version is better. As we grow into a better understanding of the use of language in prayer and worship we risk living together in that dichotomy – that Division into two usually contradictory parts or opinions. That’s not my understanding of people. That’s not my image or understanding of the balance we work for in the church, my image of God, nor is it my idea of worship.

I see this version of the prayer as one that came to me as the balanced pair, Day and night; Romeo and Juliet; winter and summer; Yin and Yang. When we make room for both sides, we make room for the whole. When we see both sides, we see the whole. When we experience both sides, we experience the whole. It’s not either/or, it’s both/and.

Again, I think it was meeting that ‘comfort zone’ where it is familiar enough, but that we truly have to engage our mind to hear and see something familiar in a new way, a new perspective that causes us to think beyond our rote understanding of what the prayer is about.

After our time of conversation on the versions of the

"Mercedes Benz" By Janice Joplin

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
 My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
 Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
 So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV?
 Dialing for Dollars is trying to find me.
 I wait for delivery each day until three,
 So oh Lord, won't you buy me a color TV?

Oh Lord, don't you buy me a night on the town?
 I'm counting on you, Lord, please don't let me down.
 Prove that you love me and buy the next round,
 Oh Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?

That's it!

Figure 9 Mercedes Benz Lyrics

Lord’s Prayer, we moved to our gathering circle in the sanctuary. As the focus of the evening was on prayer, we watched a YouTube video of Janice Joplin singing her classic tune “[Mercedes Benz](#)” (Figure 9 Mercedes Benz Lyrics) on the very traditional understanding of prayer. It was a lighthearted way to hear an understanding of prayer that we are simply no longer prepared to embrace. And yet, it stirred up some comments about where we have come from in our life and understanding of prayer.

As we gathered into the circle we began to take some time thinking about our experiences of prayer. As we had a diversity of individuals in the room, we wanted to provide some time for the introverts to be able to exercise their inner conversations about prayer. We handed out sheets for a “Prayer Suitcase”

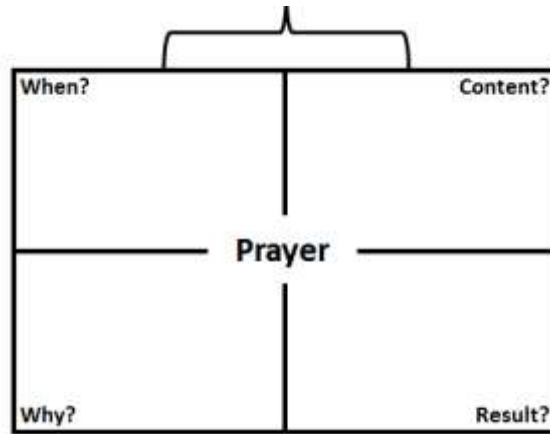


Figure10 Prayer Suitcase

(Figure10 Prayer Suitcase) exercise. The suitcase is designed to hold things that you take with you in life, things that you carry, that you have been through, and that are part of who you are as a person of faith. We asked folks to take some time to reflect on something significant in their life. What have you prayed for? What results have you received?

The engagement with the exercise was both varied and dramatic. Rather than asking people to share in the group what they had noted on their prayer suitcase cards, we asked people to attach the cards to their shoulder and to mill around the room in the group with enough time provided for people to read the notes of each participant. No one had to speak of their prayer experience and yet we all shared each other's experience of the exercise. It was a rewarding and intimate exercise allowing introverts and extroverts to participate equally not able to speak only to make a connection with their eyes, or a touch on the shoulder. We drew that exercise to a close listening to [Be Still](#) by The Fray (Figure 11 Be Still).

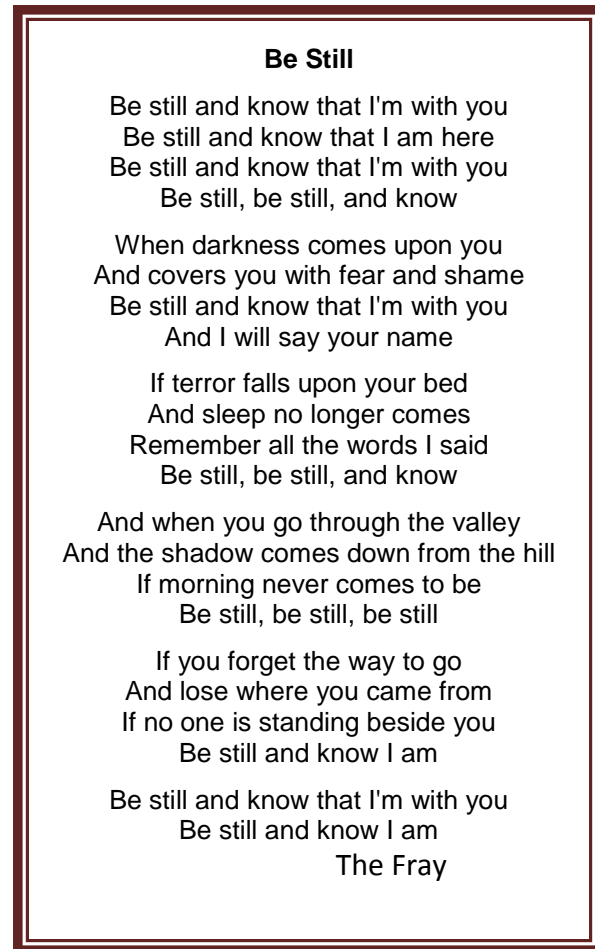


Figure 11 Be Still

As we talked about Intercessory Prayer – the act of interceding or offering

Mark 2 - The Voice

¹⁻² Some days later when Jesus came back to Capernaum, people heard that Jesus was back in town and many gathered at the house where He was staying. Soon the crowd overflowed from the house into the streets *and still more people pressed forward* to hear Jesus teaching the message of *God's kingdom*. ³ Four men tried to bring a crippled friend to Him; ⁴ but since the crowd prevented their carrying him close enough to get Jesus' attention, they climbed up onto the roof, opened a hole in it, and lowered the paralyzed man on his mat down to Jesus.

Figure 12 Mark 2

petitionary prayer to God on behalf of others, we heard the parable from Mark 2 – the man lowered through roof for healing (Figure 12 Mark 2). It is a story about friends doing something constructive in a time of need. They brought a paraplegic to Jesus. When they weren't able to get in close because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic

on his stretcher. Impressed by **their bold belief**, Jesus said to the paraplegic, "Son, I forgive your sins." What was Jesus impressed by? - Their Belief. How did he recognize it? – By their action. The word for this is "**Praxeology**" it "is the study of human actions and conduct. Jesus invited the world to judge his followers by their praxis, their actual practice in life of his commands and example." (Sweet, 2000, 116) Leonard Sweet, is "an American theologian, semiotician, church historian, pastor, and author" (Wiki), in his book *Soul Salsa*, quotes the Rev. Dr. Chris Levan saying the beatitudes "...are riddled with "performative language." Jesus used the Greek word *makarios*, which we translate as "blessed." But a "blessed" life, in Jesus' sense of the word, means a life of service dedicated to extending God's promises and protection to those who need them the most. To be faithful to God means being faithful to those at the bottom of the social scale. To be "blessed" by God means one is a blessing to those least blessed. Levan Says

“The Beatitudes, then, are not “a throwaway list of bedtime benedictions,” Levan insists, “but the marching orders for a new world.” (Sweet, 2000, 116)

These marching orders are for engagement. No longer are we to sit back and write a cheque hoping thing will

change, but we are called to a new level of engagement. “The four friends had carried (airē) the person who was paralyzed to Jesus. Restored to health, he is now commanded by Jesus to carry (imperative) his own bed. "At the word of Jesus," writes Borg, "the passive victim has become an active participant in life." (Charles, 2008) Prayer becomes the work of our hands.

What does it mean: “active participant in life?” In contrast to the calling of the disciples in Chapter 1, in this story the healed man is told not to follow Jesus, but to "go to his home.” If he was a paralytic he lived his life in exclusion. His paralysis would make him unclean, outside of the bounds of the community, outside of the bounds of the temple, but in this story, he is called to be back in relationship – to go home. The idea is of going back to somewhere you belong, restored in body, in spirit, in relationship. Yet language of prayer is not always easy, finding the right words, finding familiar words, finding challenging words, finding any words at all sometimes can be a challenge. Nevertheless prayer can restore us, return us, and connect us?

More than anything the consensus of the group was that prayer draws us to a different kind of engagement with God, each other, ourselves. Not

I am increasingly convinced that we will fully grasp the meaning of peacemaking only when we recognize not only that prayer is a form of resistance, but also that resistance is a form of prayer.
Henri Nouwen

To clasp our hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorders of the world.

Karl Barth

necessarily a physical task or action, nor specifically a spiritual or relational action, but somehow, through our time taken in prayer we are changed and those around us are changed and we are different because of it. Not just the carrying of the individual to Jesus, but the understanding that our doing something will make a difference in this person's life. Marjorie Suchocki, a leader in Process Theology says that "Prayer changes the way the world is, and therefore changes what it can be". (Suchocki, 1996, 31) But often we don't see the value in, or take the time to pray. We brush it off as not having value. If we say that God doesn't cause cancer or that God doesn't cure cancer or that God doesn't punish us when we do something wrong, or that we cannot simply ask for a miracle fix and expect it to happen, it becomes easier for us not to pray, and yet, with Suchocki's premise, we are still called to prayer.

Prayer is, surprisingly enough, finding its way back into organizations that work to serve and help people. Not in the context of 'being religious', but in the context of connecting to something bigger that calls us to use the resources of our hands and our lives to make a difference. People's actions in the organization, not their connection to a religious community is a kind of spirituality that Gretta Vosper of West Hill United Church would articulate as their identity as followers of the way".

"In the early days following the death of Jesus, communities were forming that were choosing to live differently from the societies around them. They shared what they had. They went into areas of disease, at great risk, and worked with the dying. They went against family wishes in order to live up to the ideas of love that they knew. They became known as Christians for how they lived. And that's how we want to be known as Christians – not for what we believe, but for how we live."

(West Hill, 2009, Believe)

And although the image of a people at prayer is likely the last way that most people would describe the community at West Hill, they make a valid and biblical point about levels of engagement and why they do the things they do.

The diminution of prayer by many social activists has served to undermine its very purpose. Realizing that many of their fellow Christians are not with them, some have become discouraged. Others have burned out in their zealotry, and some of these have left the work altogether, giving in to what Thomas Merton termed “organized despair.” Others have plodded on, fortified by Native American traditions or Eastern or Catholic monastic practices.

These days there is a growing awareness among progressive religious leaders of the need for activists to receive the inner nourishment, vision, and inner strength that come with a deepened prayer life. For the last twenty years, Rabbi Michael Lerner has been organizing political activists into “spiritual progressive” communities around universal spiritual principles and practices that embody love and compassion for all, including the activists themselves. Walter Wink has been arguing persuasively that combining prayer and social action is not just a theological necessity, dictated by the need to integrate all of life around the reality of the living God. It is a matter of sheer survival. The evils we confront are so massive, so inhuman, so impervious to appeals and dead to compassion, that those who struggle against them face the real possibility of being overcome by them.

(McAfee, 2008, 34)

Everyone in the group process articulated the same thought and feeling that although it was difficult to articulate both how they were changed and continue to be changed, they still give value to the process of praying. They felt that somehow, even with all of the tools of logic, something still happens through prayer. There is transformation.

Carol Christ in her writing entitled “She who Changes” talks about how everything in the world is in process – change most definitely is – prayer changes us:

“For process philosophy, the whole universe is alive and changing, continually co-creating new possibilities of life. Every living individual is born, grows, and then dies. The world is a web of changing individuals interacting with, affecting, and changing each other. The

body is the locus of changing life. Not to be embodied, not to change, is not to be alive. Change occurs from moment to moment in our daily lives as we are acted upon and act, exercising creative freedom... For process philosophy, change, freedom or creativity, and embodiment are interconnected. Everything in the world is in process. Change most definitely is.”

(Christ 2003, 45)

Everything in the world is in process – change most definitely is – therefore, I would submit, prayer changes us.

The Phantom of the Opera has within its collection of hits a piece called “Love Changes Everything” (Figure 13 Love Changes Everything). It is a love song, a duet between Raoul and Christine, about young love. The song is honest in the way it articulates how the two characters are changed, how they experience the world differently because of this new relationship. Does that mean that “days are longer?” No. Does it mean that “a night can seem like a lifetime”? Yes. They are changed.

We regularly use a singing bowl in our service of worship. Whether we strike it with the mallet for a chime or run the mallet around the edge of the bowl giving

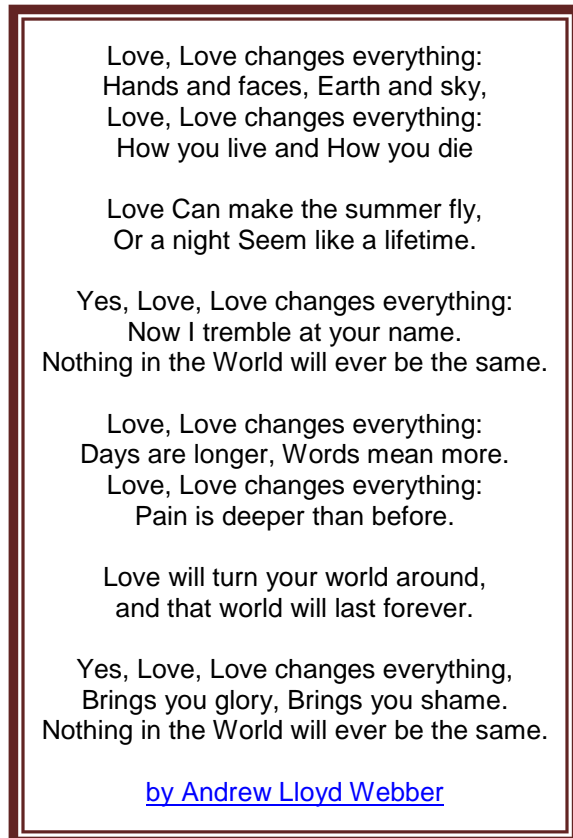


Figure 13 Love Changes Everything

us a continuous voice, it becomes for us a time of stillness, to centre us as a congregation and community of faith. The sound comes out of the bowl as our thoughts and moments of holiness come out of us in our time of worship. Maybe that is what prayer is; something that draws out of us a song, a melody, a resonance that changes us as individuals and as a community. Are we changed by the sound of the bowl? No. Are we changed by the sound of the bowl? Yes.

Prayer is a transformational process that changes us. It is that stillness of breath or thought or care that we are not willing to let go of the word prayer. It's not reflection. It's not meditation. It's not about asking and expecting something. It builds family, it builds community, it draws us together into something united, and it builds care and concern for something beyond us. It is about spending time. It is about holding someone or something up to God and knowing that somehow, in some way, through prayer, we are all changed. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!



Figure 14 Prayer Billboard - Moase

Chapter 2

Worship – It Connects Us

Sunday is the last day of my work week, which begins on Monday morning. I go through the whole week thinking and reflecting and building the service of worship which comes to a conclusion about noon on Sunday. I'm strategic about it though; I build my week with the plan that Sunday is the first day of the week for the congregation. For me, Sunday worship is that time in the locker room with the coach, if you will, it offers some thoughts, some plans, some ideas and a 'send out' to play "the game" well. But planning worship is so much more than being a coach; I would suggest the idea of being a general manager of the team as a better fit. That job has a wider responsibility, there are many pieces involved in planning the yearly ebb and flow of worship. People in the pews may not realize where I have made intentional decisions.

Worship is being close to God and close to each other.
Participant

This second project evening on the topic of worship was intended to teach the gathered group about what makes good worship.

Worship is hearing something different in a familiar story.
Participant

I've lead worship for 19 years now, and have always worked with an idea of an energy flow to the service of worship, come in with some energy, bring that energy down into an experience of learning, of stillness, of holiness, if you will, then

bring the congregation back up with some energy to draw the service to a close and begin a new week.



Figure 15 Worship Energy

Linnea Good, self-described in her website bio as a 'Musical Animator' is described as being

"contemporary musical voice of the emerging church in Canada" (Linneagood.com). In her repertoire of workshop experiences she offers globally, she leads one session entitled "Let the Music Lead" which was attended by Claire Woodbury and Joyce Madden at Epiphany Explorations, an annual event held by First Metropolitan United

Is it worship when we serve
at Out Of The Cold?
Participant

Church, Victoria, BC. I learned about that session, under the title of "Beyond the Hymn Sandwich" in their notes from the day found online on their

www.congrgationallife.com website. In this workshop material I found a kindred spirit in thinking about the worship experience.

What Linnea advocates is an energy flow in worship that emulates what she knows works well in musical concerts (Figure 15 Worship Energy). As we come into worship there is usually a sense of excitement and anticipation. We greet one another and feel connected to the community. Linnea suggests music is a good way to sustain this energy. Worship needs to start and end on a high, but the substance of effective worship is to make a connection and have an experience of the holy.

(Woodbury & Madden)

This description of worship energy provided by Linnea is contrary to what must have been her spoken description at the workshop of three other not quite so successful, but sometimes,

Worship is awareness that
we are not alone.
Participant

unfortunately too familiar styles of worship. The three types of worship she speaks against are Compartmentalized Worship, High Hype Worship, and Palliative Worship. These are relatively easy to understand descriptions, but the images posted (Figure 16) on the notes page for Claire & Joyce made what Linnea was saying that much more clearly. Sometimes a picture (or 3) is worth a thousand words.

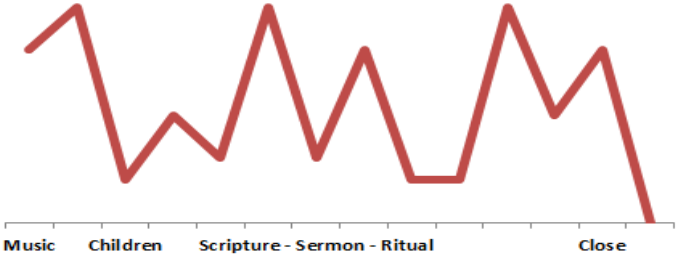
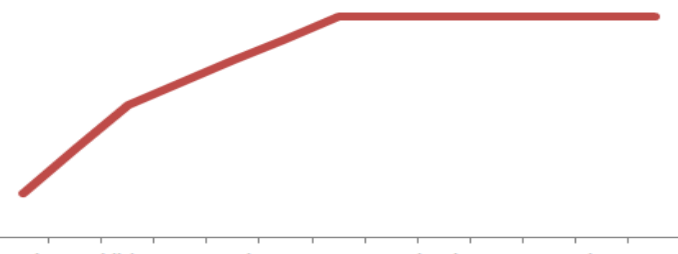
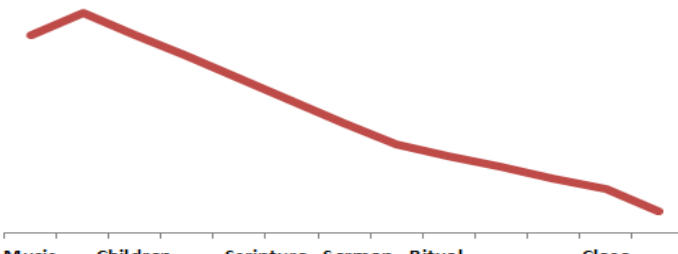
<p style="text-align: center;">Compartmentalized Worship</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Music Children Scripture - Sermon - Ritual Close</p>	<p>Too much of main-line worship is Compartmentalized. It moves from one unconnected phase to another taking the participant on an emotional roller coaster ride. It is more commonly known as the "hymn-sandwich."</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">High-Hype Worship</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Music Children Scripture - Sermon - Ritual Close</p>	<p>High-hype worship has an emotional tone that goes up and then flattens out because the leadership can't get the hype any higher.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Palliative Worship</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Music Children Scripture - Sermon - Ritual Close</p>	<p>The most deadly of all church experiences is Palliative worship where the energy level does nothing but drop.</p> <p>www.congregationlife.com</p>

Figure 16 Types of Worship

As we talked about the flow of worship I spoke of the traditional pieces of worship. We gather, we listen, we respond and we go out and how the energy of those different pieces can affect us, and how we experience movement through the service.

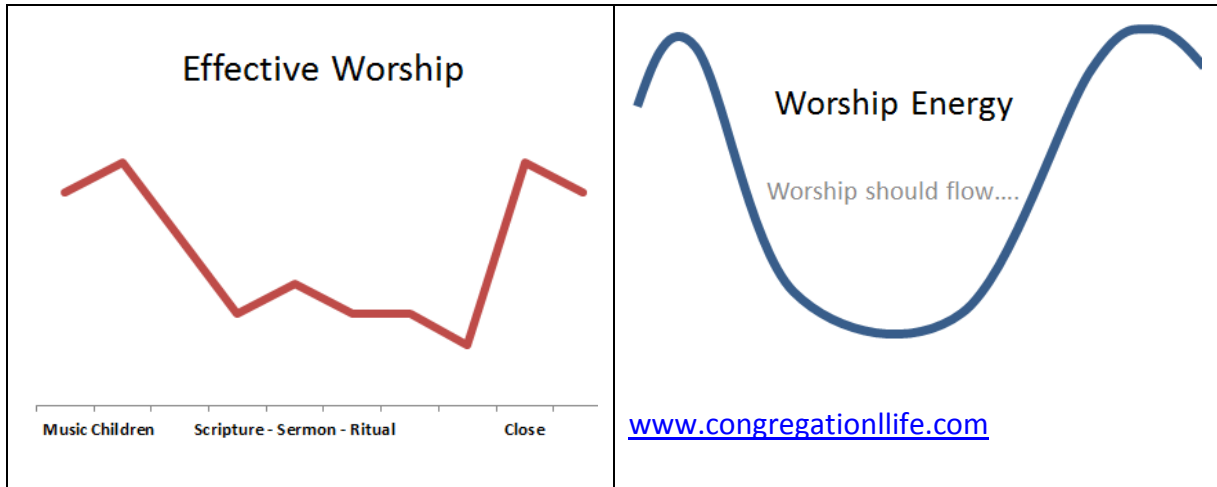


Figure 17 Effective Worship

Good offers some general guidelines (Figure 17):

The Time of Gathering is a High/External Energy time when trust is built and the tone is set. The music is grand or upbeat and is either very easy to pick up or is already known to the group. The momentum is up; instructions kept to bare bones with no portions drastically slowing or changing the emotional tone (dipping the energy flow). It is also a time when music can be taught or things explained but should be done briefly.

The Deep/Internal Energy Portion of worship is the place where the worshiper's receptivity and vulnerability are highest. This might begin with the reading of scripture, with gentle not -wordy prayer or with the "message". Here, music and word intertwine with few explanations and the movement from scripture to sermon to prayer is natural.

The Closing of the Service needs to be done in such a way as to not leave the worshiper vulnerable as before. The tone becomes gradually one of inviting the individual back into the corporate body, with increasing momentum into bigger -energy closing music. It is important that people feel able to leave the warmth of the worship space and be prepared to move into the world to be Christ's body elsewhere.

What you, as the Music and Word Liturgists, are then looking for is a flow from External to Internal to External again with no huge “jags” or peaks in the service - shape. Small dips and rises in the shape are really effective (in fact MORE effective than the straight movement shown in the graph) but care needs to be taken to keep them small.

(Good)

In the general text from the workshop notes of Woodbury & Madden, they speak of an experience of the holy, of making a connection, what Bruce Reed calls Extra-Dependence on God in the Grubb Theory of Oscillation:

In the 1970s Bruce Reed developed a theory known as the Grubb Theory of Oscillation. (Figure 18) His most readable explanation was published by the Alban Institute. According to this theory, human beings have needs both for work and for rest, for productivity and for nurture, and that we humans need to oscillate between the two. Bruce Reed's finding was that the deeper you oscillate into a state of extra-dependence (dependent on that which is outside yourself), the more energized you are for the remainder of your intra-dependent life - where you have to make the decisions about what you do, what you wear, what you say, and who you relate to. Worship and meditation are two places where we can go most deeply into a state of extra-dependence, dependence on God - because God is the one who is ultimately dependable. Good worship can release the energy that makes life truly worth living.

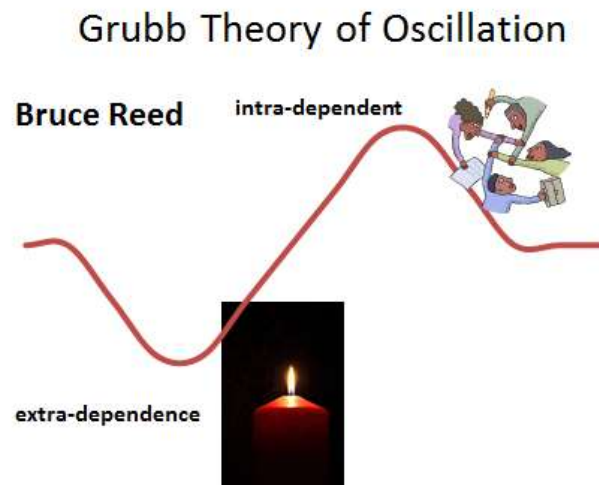


Figure 18 Grubb Theory of Oscillation

(Woodbury, Madden)

This is the kind of worship experience that Good challenges us to get better at. Worship that flows, that connects us with the holy and with each other and sends us out “prepared to move into the world to be Christ’s body elsewhere.” (Good).

During conversation that evening one of the participants commented that “when we come down into the extra-dependence – down into the trough of the wave, into that stillness in the service; it is at that lower energy point, where the presence of God (identified by the red line) seems to be at its highest, at the crest of the wave.”(Figure 19 Presence of God)

The nodes, where the two lines connect, begin and end that period of oscillation into extra-dependence.

For me, this movement is facilitated in a service of worship with music which can be a powerful tool and teaching and learning experience when we come to understand that the music can change the energy level of the service. I once pulled a

trick on the congregation at St. John’s trying singing familiar lyrics to the ‘wrong’ tune. I asked them to sing with me the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (VU 664) the words are from 1855 with the tune “Friendship” from 1868. It is a lovely, but outdated, old hymn. Unbeknownst to the congregation I had arranged with the organist and the choir that they would play and sing the hymn to the alternate tune suggested in the hymn book of “Blaenwern” (1905) which is traditionally used for the Hymn “God is Here As We Your People, Meet to Offer Praise and Prayer” (VU 389). It was a horrible experience in congregational singing, and yet, it made exactly the point that I was trying to make through the music. The full set of pipes up front and the 18 voices of the choir fed through the sound system, and the minster

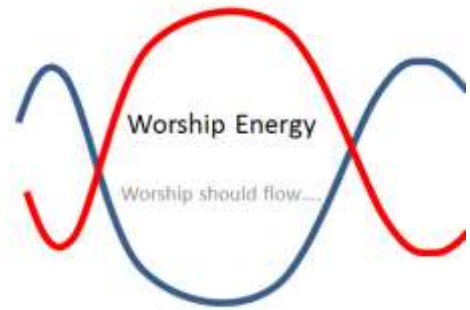


Figure 19 Presence of God

Worship is when you are ready to open yourself to let “whatever is going to come in”, to come in.
 Participant

singing with great gusto, versus a congregation that knew how the hymn was to be sung. They wouldn't hear the organ, or the choir, and stubbornly sang the hymn their usual way. When I stopped them and we talked about what had happened, it was powerful, how we go the way we always go, how we sometimes don't hear things that are new or different, how unfair it is for the preacher to throw new things at them, but then, when we came through the conversation, we tried the old hymn in the new way together, they graciously did that for me, and when we talked about it after singing the verses, one of the folks said, "I've sung that song my whole life, and I've never heard the words like that before." We didn't change the words, we changed the tune, and, they heard it differently.

Another piece of our evening session's work was looking at how the music changes the feel of the experience, and how we can change that worship experience through music by changing the tune to a piece. We looked at the hymn "Crashing Waters at Creation" (VU 449) a 1987 hymn written by Sylvia Dunstan a United Church of Canada Minister, musician and writer who died in 1993 contributing a record 13 hymns in *Voices United*, as an example. When you look at the bottom corner of a hymn book page, there is credit information, who wrote the words and music, when it was written, who holds the copyright, who edited it, all of that copyright information that you have to be very careful with. On the other side of the page, in the opposite corner is the title of the tune that you are singing (Crashing Waters) and the Meter of the hymn (8787). Theoretically, you can switch any tune with the same meter; the only mathematical concern is where the words start in the bar of music. Wikipedia says "A

hymn meter or metre indicates the number of syllables for the lines in each stanza of a hymn. This provides a means of marrying the hymn's text with an appropriate hymn tune for singing.”

Worship is feeling like a part of something larger than myself that can make a difference.
Participant

We started out this section of the evening singing the first verse of “Crashing Waters at Creation (Figure 20 Crashing Waters). It is one of those hymns that can be used in any part of the service depending on which tune you put with it. It’s a great hymn if you ever have to meet with a potential new church musician to hear how they can make the same piece feel differently by how they play it.


 <p><i>CRASHING WATERS</i> 8 7 8 7 Alt. Tune Stuttgart</p>	<p>VU 449 – Crashing Waters at Creation</p> <p>Crashing waters at creation, ordered by the Spirit's breath, first to witness day's beginning from the brightness of night's death.</p> <p>Crashing Waters William Cross 1992 8787 Alt Tune Stuttgart</p>
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Figure 20 Crashing Waters

We sang the same verse with five different tunes (Figure 21 Tune Variations) that had been recorded at the piano by the director of music.

Click the YouTube Link to hear the tune variations – Hymn text in the description of the video		
Actual Tune	http://youtu.be/vherizdByh0	449 Crashing Waters William Cross 1992 8787 Alt Tune Stuttgart
Opening or Closing Hymn Options	http://youtu.be/PKz945VQ7-g	540 Stuttgart (suggested alt.) Grant us God the Grace of Living Come Thou Long Expected Jesus Henry Gauntlet, 1861
	http://youtu.be/ImMTizwbpF0	333 Hyfrydol Love Divine Prichard, 1831
Prayerful	http://youtu.be/p0K3Ax2SKXY	374 Beech Spring Come and Find the Quiet Centre Benjamin White, 1844
WRONG!!!	http://youtu.be/iKtZsa4F5Pk	710 Hanson Place Shall We Gather at the River Lowry, 1864

Figure 21 Tune Variations

This is, for me, a favourite hymn. I love how the various tune options allow for the hymn to be heard differently, to be sung differently. With the more formal tunes, we can stand in confidence and sing with conviction; with the prayerful approach of Beach Spring we can sing the hymn as we sit in stillness moving us into a moment of holiness.

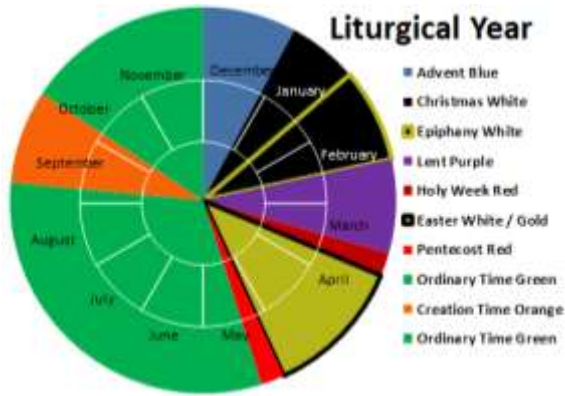


Figure 22 Liturgical Year

As we moved out of the flow of worship, we moved into much bigger picture of the flow of the church year looking at the liturgical seasons as well as the liturgical colours that go with each season. Although there are many images of the liturgical year and its colours, I created

this one to include the new “season of creation” as part of the liturgical year with the colour orange (Figure 22 Liturgical Year). There is a flow to a service of worship, there is a flow to the seasons of the church, and there is a flow to the liturgical year that allows for the movement of the spirit to find its way to speak to and through us in our worship.

The liturgical colours (Figure 23 Liturgical Colours) help us to notice the change of the season in the church, whether it is the first glimpse of the anticipatory Advent ‘blues’ or the sullen black drape on the cross at Good Friday, the colours move us in and through the seasons.

The Colour’s Meaning

- **WHITE** - light, innocence, purity, joy, triumph,
- **RED** - the Passion, blood, fire, God’s love
- **BLUE** - water, the beginning of a new creation
- **VIOLET** - penance, humility, melancholy
- **ORANGE** – endurance, strength, fire and flame
- **GREEN** - the Holy Spirit, life eternal, hope
- **BLACK** - mourning, sorrow (optional usage)
- **GOLD** - joy (optional usage)

Figure 23 Liturgical Colours

Sunday Lectionary	
Year 2013-2014 2016-2017	A
Year 2014-2015 2017-2018	B
Year 2015-2016 2018-2019	C

Figure 24 Sunday Lectionary

The last piece we talked about was around the lectionary as the three year cycle of readings (Figure 24) and how we use those readings to guide the service and sermon. Wikipedia articulates that “Within Christianity, the use of pre-assigned, scheduled readings from the scriptures can be traced back to the early church, and seems to have been inherited from Judaism. Not all of the Christian Church used the same lectionary, and throughout history, many varying lectionaries have been used in different parts of the Christian world.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectionary>

Each service of the year is assigned four readings (Figure 25 Weekly Readings) one from what was once called the “Old Testament” which we now call the “Hebrew Scriptures”, one from what

Weekly Readings	
Old Testament A Hebrew Scripture	New Testament A Christian Scripture
Biblical Hymn Psalm	The Letters An Epistle

Figure 25 Weekly Readings

was once called the “New Testament” which we now call the Christian Scripture, one from the Letters, commonly called an Epistle, and a biblical hymn of the church from the Psalter or book of Psalms. There is a wide variation on what congregations use for scripture. When I was growing up, the lectionary was really just coming into use. Through my career, most ministers I know have used the lectionary to work through

the major themes of the bible in the three year cycle. It helps keep ministers off the same theme over and over when the text guides or pushes us in a new direction.



There is also a diversity of opinion on how many readings are to be used each week. I normally just use one reading and work hard to push some real depth into the teaching and learning about the piece of scripture. (Figure 26 Sermon Depth in Teaching) Here is my logic:

- If you have a 20 minute space for a conversation with the text and engage with four texts, you have less than four minutes per text, with 4 minutes for an introduction and conclusion.
- If you have that same 20 minute conversation with only two texts, you can have eight minutes per text with the same four minutes to introduce and conclude your conversation.
- If you have the same conversation with one text, you can have 16 minutes with one story of our faith.

That is why I only use one reading per Sunday. It makes sense to me, but it also means that I rarely get a turn to read the scripture in worship.

From there, we went into a conversation of one of the very traditional ways of putting a sermon together, introducing the Wesleyan

Quadrilateral. Wikipedia describes the quadrilateral (Figure 27 Wesleyan Quadrilateral) as "...a methodology for theological reflection that is credited to John Wesley, leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th Century. The term itself was coined by 20th

Sermon Depth of Teaching



Figure 26 Sermon Depth in Teaching

century American Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler which makes it in fact, a post-Wesley-Construct. This method based its teaching on four sources as the basis of theological and doctrinal development, scripture, tradition, experience and reason.”

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral as understood by contemporary Wesleyan theologians.



Figure 27 Wesleyan Quadrilateral

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_Quadrilateral

Elder brother John Wesley gave us resources for teaching and preaching the scriptures while his younger brother Charles Wesley gave us many hymns still in use today.

The challenge of the spoken word is to help people engage with the story of faith, so words, ideas and images from thousands of years ago can still speak to us today. This is where the premise for this project began. Often, when we hear a story of divine intervention in scripture, we raise an eyebrow and think “really?” And yet, these are the stories of our tradition, they have value, so we don’t ‘write them off’; instead we dig into them further. Reason seems to be the first way to process scripture. Let’s think it through. What do we know about the content of the story? What do we know of the context of the story? We bring in our traditional understanding of the story, but then hold them up to the experiences of a people that are living today. We explain them, dissect and analyze the prescribed excerpts of text as if under a microscope delving as deeply as we can, but then back up a bit for a bigger view. We take the story apart, we

explain it out, and then ask ourselves, why bother? What in this story still has value? How, through the reading and reflecting on this story can we come to a further understanding of our life of faith in relationship with God? Although Wesley weighted Scripture with the greatest value of the four, today reason seems to win out as we deconstruct the story.

I am a very visual learner and needed to find an image of this quadrilateral. In my searching through Google I found an image of this that spoke to me more than the traditional understanding of the Quadrilateral found in Figure 27 Wesleyan Quadrilateral with “How we know God” in the centre

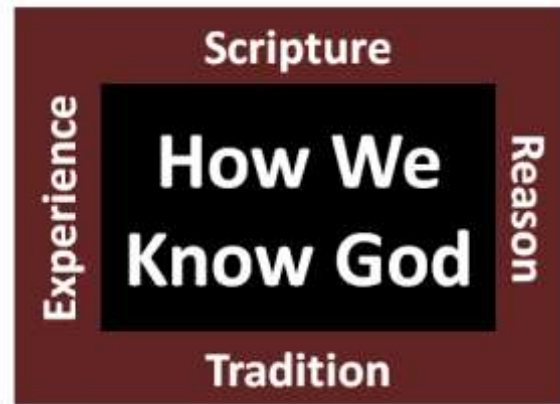


Figure 28 How We Know God

(Figure 28 How We Know God). The original version starts with scripture and how we see the story of our faith through experience, reason and tradition. Epworth United Methodist Church in Norfolk Virginia articulated in their Theological Stance section of their “About Us” page that “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral speaks to a Wesleyan understanding of how we encounter God through Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience.” The lens has shifted from looking to scripture through experience, reason and tradition, to looking to God through scripture, reason, experience and tradition. From my reading of their website (<http://epworthva.org>), it seems that they have no clue that in this image they have removed the primacy of scripture, so important to Wesley, and in doing so have made room for me to see a place made for me in this

traditional methodological approach. To me, all four sides are equally powerful lenses to look through in helping us articulate how we know God.

Kathryn Moase, one of the women in my Local Advisory Committee commented in one of our planning sessions that she had been at a lunch with a group of women that had a

conversation about the quadrilateral, and one member of the group spoke that the work can't be done in isolation with another naming a Pentalateral shape I tried to create. (Figure 29). I was privy to the email exchange:



Figure 29 Pentalateral Shape

Rev Susan Howard: The Wesleyan quadrilateral is just a way of explaining how we understand theological stuff like God, Spirit, Christ, ourselves etc., through the lenses of scripture, tradition, experience and reason (rationality/reasoning).

I always have such trouble with that construct, since it is so formulaic and not how many people (particularly women in community together!) actually think things through. So where does 'community' fit in to the picture?? (Figure 30 Quadrilateral in Community)



Figure 30 Quadrilateral in Community

Kathryn Moase: I'm a very analytical thinker, so I appreciate the structure of the Wesley quadrilateral. It actually pushes me to consider more than one point of view and allows me to move outside of my comfort zone, which can be very narrow at times.

However, I am grateful to you, Susan, for reminding me of the valuable lessons that we learn from being in community together. I'll consciously add that to my list of

lenses. Is Quintilateral a word? If we worked at it, I suspect that we could identify many more lenses, and those extra layers of complexity would add greatly to our understandings.

The Wesleyan quadrilateral, a construct established long after Wesley lived – is a primary teaching tool for preachers.

But, Epworth UMC pushed it beyond a preaching

directive to a way the congregation can learn about and build their faith. The creation of the Concentric circles of community around the image with a feminist perspective added makes the idea, and the tool, that much more useful. (Figure 31 Concentric Circles) Both the community we serve, and the wider community affect how we know God, how we see God, how we experience God as people on a journey of faith. Maybe there should be another empty ring that leaves room for other ideas.

Wesley was willing to push beyond the rules and regulations of the “norm” for that experience of understanding his place in a life of faith, and perhaps the church needs to move back to that Methodist understanding of what it means to be a member in a church. In the tradition of the United Church of Canada, we lift up the Presbyterian Historical Record as how we articulate the membership requirements in a congregation. In that tradition you would become a member of a congregation on a specific day at a specific occasion. If you were moving, you would take with you a certificate of membership and present it to the congregation closest to your new home and your



Figure 31 Concentric Circles

membership would be transferred. There wouldn't be a day that you were not a member of a congregation. If there ever was a hymn to articulate this theology of membership it is the not very well known tune from 1975 by Jerry Goff (Figure 32) that a former minister in a congregation I served loved to sing that became a 'holy experience' with the individual

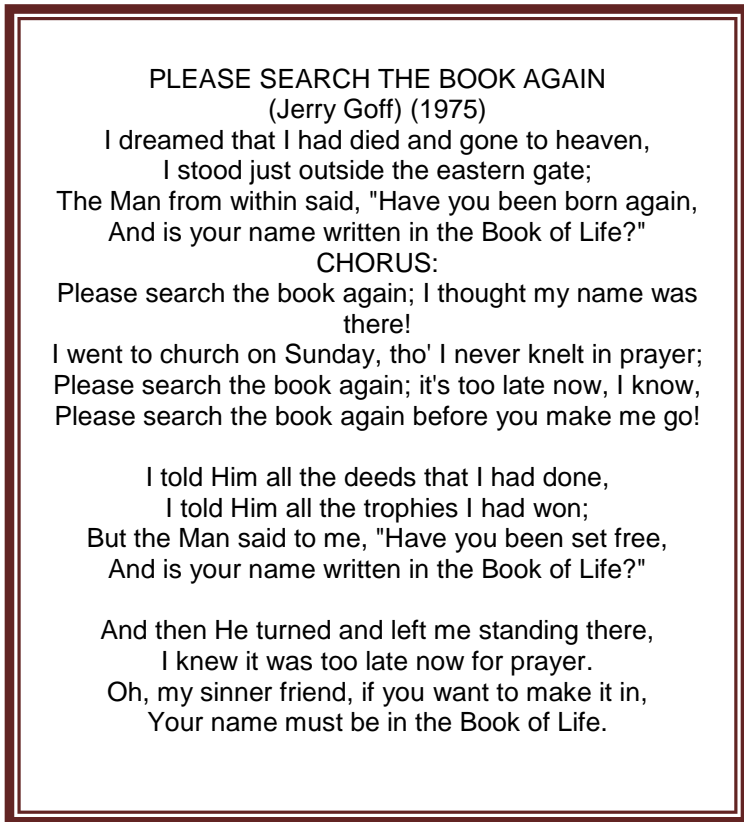


Figure 32 Please Search the Book Again

rather than with God. "Please search the book again, I thought my name was there." The Methodist tradition was more that you became a member of the congregation when you had testified of your relationship with God through the living Christ, the congregation would say "Amen" and that was that. There was not much effort on the record keeping. It wasn't about being "in the book", it was about being "in the relationship". There is a story from John Wesley's journals that speaks to this: "One day in his travels Wesley came to the city of Salisbury. There he found a little nine-year old girl Elizabeth Bushell, who wanted to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper along with the other Methodists at the local (Anglican) parish church but was refused because

of her age. Wesley took Elizabeth on his knee, talked with her about the meaning of the Lord's supper, and "then and there administered to her the sacrament of Holy Communion. Elizabeth Bushell grew up to serve the Lord all her days." (Cited in Curnock, ed., *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 5:291) (Snyder, 2011, 37) She was ready to experience God – and she did. I want to see the world, and see people, the way John Wesley did – through the lens of God's love. Wesley was about connections about worship that draws us to God and to each other. Modernism added reason to the idea of only looking at scripture through experience and tradition, and postmodernism said that reason wasn't enough. This is a quest for new knowledge, about a new relationship and how we have come to know God.

Chapter 3

Sacraments – It's Not Magic

I remember one exciting conversation about being able to do sacraments. It was one of those profound chats at theological school, why do you want to be a minister? I remember answering “to be with people at those holy moments in life, celebrating a new beginning of life, sharing at the table”. It was something I was excited about. Getting into ministry though was different. There are a lot of struggles with sacraments. People in the congregation were fiercely for or fiercely against the different ways of serving communion. Do they come to the front to the rail, or do they stay in the pews with the trays? Does the minister serve one side or the other or both? The only unanimity it seemed was to speak against people dunking their fingers in the chalice and the crumbs left behind in the juice. The only positive statement about this method of taking communion, contrary to the unified voice of distain about the ‘germs’ though was much simpler, less dishes which meant people could get home from the late Christmas Eve service earlier. Those have never been very spiritual or holy conversations, but they were easy compared to the baptism service deliberations. When would the services be scheduled? How many babies at a service? Who can be baptised?

It is important to have a ceremony or ritual of welcome into community. Rituals are important in our lives.

Participant

Who would be allowed to stand up front with the parents? There are some of the easier logistical questions, but more challenging than that, who are

Baptism is expanding family, entrusting the child's spiritual growth to a community.
Participant

these people? Although the "elders" knew who they were, I had never seen them before, but they were there, bringing their children to be baptized.

I remember a fateful morning in Labrador. We had just done a baptism service for 6 babies. It was to be a service of great hopefulness with six families, six babies and to top it off properly, it was, I believe, even on Mother's day to make it that much more special. It was awful! Dunk, dunk, dunk, dunk, dunk, and dunk. There were too many, and they were strangers. As the presider at the service of worship, I asked the parents to stand at the front of the church, to face the congregation and to lie to them. "Will you do this? Will you do that? Do you promise to raise your child in a Christian home" and they all said "yes". I can't help but wonder if they had their fingers crossed behind their backs as they stood there in that line across the chancel stretching across the entire front of the church? Then, I asked the congregation to stand up and lie back to them. "Will you help raise these children in the Christian faith? Will you? Will you?" And they all said "yes", except one woman at the back. The congregation knew that these babies wouldn't ever darken the door again of the church, but they stood up and made their promises, all but the one in the back row. She wouldn't stand up and lie, she

Baptism is a proclamation of commitment.
Participant

wasn't willing to say yes to things she wouldn't possibly be able to honour. She was the same woman that wouldn't take communion either, she said she wasn't

good enough, but at my last communion service at “the Goose”, she came forward. I’ll never forget her. I went home from that six baby baptismal service, called the chair of the Worship Committee and let her know that there would be no more baptisms until we changed the language of the service to something that we could all say with integrity, with conviction.

Baptism is sharing a milestone in their life
Participant

That phone call led to a four month conversation in the congregation about what Baptism meant to us as a community of faith. We looked at our understanding of membership in the congregation, and came to the consensus that parental membership or even active participation wasn’t a requirement of baptism. We talked of Original Sin and our understanding of what Baptism meant and came to the consensus that baptism wasn’t a hell prevention booster shot. We talked about the way Jesus hung out with the folks that weren’t part of the community and welcomed them and loved them and we

Baptism doesn’t provide a guarantee.
Participant

resonated strongly with that idea. We didn’t want to set up barriers for anyone wanting to either be baptized, or have their child

baptised, and when we had shared in all these conversations, it helped us to articulate what our Congregational Response to the baptism liturgy would be. I have used this response at every congregation I have served since.

Congregational Response

We stand with you offering our support and to share in the celebration of the life we have received from God.

We stand to make our commitment to provide this community of caring Christians for you.

We commit ourselves to make sure this church is here for you and your child, and there will be a Nursery and a Christian Education program to help teach you and your child stories of the faith.

We welcome you today and hope that you will come to be a part of this family of God as you grow in faith.

(Happy Valley – Goose Bay United Church)
(Mayfield United Church)
(St. John's United Church)
(St. Mark's United Church)

And, a song rose in my heart as the woman in the back row stood for the Congregational Response the first time we used this new language at the Baptismal Service. Nothing had changed; there was no added stipulation of becoming part of the congregation. That expectation wasn't there. The change was simply in how we

articulated not so much what baptism would be for us, but what our role in the living out of that commitment would be. Instead of a commitment for the congregation to do something for or with the child, it

Baptism is a public
commitment of the family
with the congregation as
witness
Participant

was a commitment to make sure that this place would be here for the child and the family. Our commitment was, if you come, we will be ready, and we hope that both the parents and the children will come. It was no longer language of how we will be with and interact with these babies.

In the working through the process with the congregation, we also changed the language around the questions asked of the parents presenting the child for Baptism.

Questions of the Parents

You have brought your children to this community of faith to be baptised.

Do you believe in God, source of love? **I DO**

Do you believe God has been made known in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived, died and lives again? **I DO**

Do you believe that God's spirit is active in the world to direct and strengthen you in all that you do? **I DO**

(Happy Valley – Goose Bay United Church)
(Mayfield United Church)
(St. John's United Church)
(St. Mark's United Church)

Instead of asking questions around expected belief or actions, we offered three statements of the ability of God, through the language of the trinity, to be with the family in their journey of life.

The United Church of Canada, in its newest resource with worship guidance is the August 2013 *Sacraments Elders* resource. The Baptismal Liturgy is built heavily on the resources found in "*Celebrate God's Presence*, the fourth major collection of prayers and services designated for use in The United Church of Canada." (<http://www.united-church.ca/sales/ucph/celebrate>) The language of the promises and the response follow:

Profession of Faith and Promises

Do you believe in God, who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh to reconcile and make new, and who works in us and others by the Spirit? **I do, by the grace of God.**

(CGP, 332, based on A New Creed)

Will you follow the way of Jesus Christ? **I will, God being my helper.**

(CGP, 334)

Will you join as part of this community of faith to celebrate God's presence, live with respect in creation, and love and serve others? **I will, God being my helper.**

(CGP, page 334, based on A New Creed, alt.)

(Sacraments Elders, 18)

Congregational Commitment

We have heard the will of *this/these* person(s).

We receive *N.* [and *N.*] in Christ's name, as we ourselves have been received.

We all belong to the one household of faith in Jesus Christ.

Will you support these *N.*, [and *N.*]
with constant love, wholesome example,
Christian teaching and faithful prayer?
We will, God being our helper.

(*CGP*, 340, Betty Lynn Schwab)

(Sacraments Elders, 2013, 19)

The neat thing for me has been that although it took us months of work, I simply showed up at the next churches with my liturgy and they used it without a thought or a word, but, interestingly enough, over the years, many have commented about how much they appreciate the language provided for the congregation to use.

That silent voice in the back pew was right. If we couldn't stand up with integrity to make our response then the act itself wasn't being valued, if we couldn't honestly feel like we were a part of the celebration of new life as a real part of the process, it wasn't right. It took us four months to come up with a new baptism service set of questions and the response, but when we first used the new words, the congregation felt engaged and a part of the morning's celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism. This was a new expression for the congregation of something old; it connected us to each other and to something beyond. Alfred Whitehead, father of Process theology is spoken of in an article entitled "What Is Process Theology?" by Robert B. Mellert.

Sacraments are ways of getting in touch with the Jesus-event. They recall concretely and symbolically the faith Jesus inspired in his followers, and they become themselves occasions of gathering the faithful for new, creative expressions of their belief. One might say that they serve to mediate the past to the present.

Sacraments can be described in Whiteheadian language as positive prehensions of the Jesus-event. Prehensions, as we have seen, are concrete "feelings" or "experiencings" of the past. Via prehensions the past contributes itself positively to the present and is immanently incorporated in what the present is becoming. As prehensions, then, sacraments not only remember Jesus and the faith of his followers. They also represent them concretely to the present.

(Mellert)

This action in worship with the family that came for baptism did just that, it was an expression we were now more comfortable to be a part of. It ceased to be an obligation and again, became for us a sacrament.

The term "sacrament" describes worship moments in which we draw closer to God through specific words and actions. When we are genuinely open to them, sacraments enable us to experience our faith more deeply, especially spiritually and emotionally. Classically defined by the great theologians of the ages, a sacrament is an "outward sign of inward grace." It is a visible symbol of something we believe in and hold to be an inner truth and, more than that, an inner spiritual reality.

Baptism is an experience
of reinforcing my place in
the church.
Participant

(Sacraments Elder, 8)

One of the participants in the evening session on Sacraments commented "It is important to have a ceremony or ritual of welcome into community. Rituals are important in our lives." And I really appreciated that comment. It is important for people to make a connection to a community to celebrate the milestones in life and the birth of a child is dramatic change. Interestingly enough, it is one of those moments that cause a family to feel a need to connect with a congregation. Certainly for many

folks in Labrador, the old understanding was that the baby didn't leave the house until it had been baptized. Putting up blocks to that attempted connection has always felt very harsh for me as a minister. At St. Mark's though, they are not willing to provide what I would call 'open baptism'. On this subject their mandate of inclusion enforces and expectation of participation. Their expectation remains that to come for baptism that family will be a regular part of the worshipping community of faith. That expectation is articulated in their public baptism policy:

We are baptized into the community of God rather than a specific congregation, but we make our profession of faith with a community gathered to worship. The congregation makes a commitment to continue to be there for you and your family. Baptism isn't to be taken lightly. It is a sacrament and has a level of commitment by the family and a congregation. It is both our assumption and expectation that through this act, you are taking an intentional step into this community of faith. By coming to St. Mark's for baptism, it names this congregation of faith as your church home; we will work to keep in contact with you so that you may know what is happening here and be a part...

What is a reasonable level of commitment to a congregation? That is up to you decide, but we would assume families with small children would be able to join with us in worship at least every six weeks. That commitment allows us both to honour our covenant of baptism. Will anyone be here to take attendance? No. But... you need to know that we feel church is important. Being here for worship gives you a chance to become familiar with our congregation and gives us a chance to be part of your life and the life of your child.

(St. Mark's Baptism Policy, 2010)

Rather than articulating an expectation in the language of the Baptism Policy and 'hope for the best', the expectation of being part of the community of faith is tested before a Baptism date would ever be set. This has meant that many grandchildren of the congregation have not been baptised.

For me, what is really challenging in this is that a congregation that speaks inclusion in almost every paragraph about the church has, what I would describe as, an open table for communion, but a closed font for Baptism. There is a dramatic separation between the living-out of the two sacraments.

We worked to articulate in a new way our understanding of what Baptism meant by changing the language we used. Although, in Labrador, we looked past the United Church regulation that a parent be a member before baptism, we didn't move away from the language of baptism "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," although I do not use that genre of language in worship, I still use that language for the act of Baptism itself.

In 1975, the members of PLURA (Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches) signed an ecumenical agreement acknowledging the historic and common value of the "matter of baptism" (water) and its "form" (the traditional Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and granting mutual recognition for baptism performed under these signs in each denomination. In keeping with this ecumenical agreement, and the instruction of the 30th General Council (1984) and a ruling in 2000 by General Council, this traditional naming of the Trinity must be used at the actual moment of baptism.

In our denomination, this agreement and ruling led to much discussion about the words spoken by the presider at the moment of baptism. The alternative expressions of the Trinitarian formula, such as "in the name of God Creator, Christ, and Spirit," may be added as a blessing following the use of the historic formula. Celebrate God's Presence provides a variety of inclusive blessings that may be used faithfully.

Baptisms that do not follow the ecumenical agreement and our denomination's ruling are not valid. They are a breach of trust between those seeking baptism and the presider, between the presider and the congregation, and between our denomination and our partners in the agreement who believe and recognize our baptisms as one of theirs.

(Sacraments Elders, 14)

Although I do not agree with this, I still honour it. Sometimes being part of something bigger draws us into uncomfortable places at times, but even then, the opportunity to talk about the ‘something bigger’ makes the value of the language of baptism mean that much more.

In the United Church, there are only two sacraments. Our Basis of Union, the formal language at the creation of the United Church in 1925 articulated:

2.16 Article XVI. Of the Sacraments. We acknowledge two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which were instituted by Christ, to be of perpetual obligation as signs and seals of the covenant ratified in His precious blood, as a means of grace, by which, working in us, He doth not only quicken but also strengthen and comfort our faith in Him, and as ordinances through the observance of which His Church is to confess her Lord and be visibly distinguished from the rest of the world.

(United Church Basis of Union)

This definition has us being “visibly distinguished” that others would see us and know that we live our life differently as followers of the way. In our Song of Faith, our 2006 statement of faith, it speaks instead of the challenge of us seeing the sacred.

In company with the churches of the Reformed and Methodist traditions, we celebrate two sacraments as gifts of Christ: baptism and Holy Communion. In these sacraments the ordinary things of life — water, bread, wine— point beyond themselves to God and God’s love, teaching us to be alert to the sacred in the midst of life.

(United Church Song of Faith)

That is such a different goal and understanding, that we look for the holy in our everyday experience and living vs. the requirement to bring the ‘right thing’.

As people of faith, we often struggle with what things mean in the church, both to the community as a whole and to the individuals participating. There was a story in the conversation on the Sacraments

The word companion is derived from the Latin cum (with) and panis (bread). A companion shares the same table with you, breaks bread with you
Allen & Williamson, 1991, 30

session for this project about that concern. When one of the participants first joined the church, her son was very young. When he came upstairs for communion for the first time for him to participate, she was uncomfortable that she didn't know how he would respond, how he would behave, what it would mean for him. The communion went fine and in a mother's moment of curiosity going beyond the moment of trepidation, she entered into a conversation with her son in the car, on the drive home. The question was asked, what is communion about? His response: "that God loves us and wants to share bread to remind us." Truly, they both learned something new and were changed by that experience of communion.

The Christian tradition has woven a tapestry of stories around the sacrament of Baptism. An Anglican friend of mine once served in a congregation in Newfoundland that had a cemetery with a cliff edge that faced the ocean. As nature took its course over time, the cliff eroded. The congregation went through an incredible process with the province to exhume bodies that were too close to the edge and to re-inter the remains elsewhere in the cemetery. Although it was a lot of paperwork, that wasn't the hard part of the task. The real challenge came in exhuming the bodies that were buried outside of the cemetery fence and not recorded in the parish register

Communion is not a confession, not a gathering it's not a magic act. It's serious.
Participant

because they were not baptized and therefore unable to be buried in consecrated ground. I always wondered if they re-interred those remains outside of the cemetery again or if they finally made a place for them. After a quick phone call, I learned that the non-baptised remains were reinterred in the bounds of the consecrated graveyard.

Baptism means different thing to different folks, and I doubt there could ever be a consensus again on a single definition of what the word means. It means different things to different people.

Baptism has five core meanings:

- forgiveness of sin (dying to our old life)
- second birth (rising to new life)
- a unique coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of the baptized
- union with Christ
- incorporation into the church

In the Basis of Union, the founders of our denomination summed up our beliefs about baptism as follows:

2.16.1 Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the sacrament by which are signified and sealed our union to Christ and participation in the blessings of the new covenant. The proper subjects of baptism are believers and infants presented by their parents or guardians in the Christian faith.

In the latter case the parents or guardians should train up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and should expect that their children will, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, receive the benefits which the sacrament is designed and fitted to convey. The Church is under the most solemn obligation to provide for their Christian instruction.

(Sacramental Elders, 12)

Visually, when the text from the basis of union is turned into a Wordle, (Figure 33 Wordle – Basis of Union) it looks like this. Which words stand out for you?



www.wordle.net

Wordle is a toy for generating “word clouds” from text that you provide.

Figure 33 Wordle – Basis of Union

The Song of Faith document speaks in a very different tone of the same subject:

Before conscious thought or action on our part,
we are born into the brokenness of this world.

Before conscious thought or action on our part,
we are surrounded by God’s redeeming love.

Baptism by water in the name of the Holy Trinity
is the means by which we are received, at any age,
into the covenanted community of the church.
It is the ritual that signifies our rebirth in faith
and cleansing by the power of God.

Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining,
and transforming power of God’s love
and our grateful response to that grace.

(Sacramental Elders, 12)

It just doesn't work that way. Our community is exactly where we are at every moment during the day; exactly whom life places in front of us at any time. That idiot, that lecher, that bully, that con, that cop, that bureaucrat who drives us up the wall – everyone we see, hear, or meet must be respected as a brother or sister on the path, even if they have no idea there is such a thing as a path.

(Lozoff, 1995)

To me, that building of community is a sacrament; it is a way of being in relationship the way we were taught through the life and stories of Jesus. He hung out where most people thought he didn't belong. He spent time with the people that society ruled as inappropriate or unclean and his presence changed those individuals as well as the community around them. Jesus was calling folks "to a communion, a union with him and with others." This is about two specific tasks, two specific relationships: being connected to God is listed first; we are called to be a part of something bigger than ourselves in the sacraments.

Communion is personal, but it is shared in community. It makes each of us a part of the larger community.
Participant

[Alfred North] Whitehead came up with a new metaphor for God, that of God as "the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands." God as companion or friend is our second major metaphor for God. Although it has not been typical of Christians to speak of God as "companion," neither has it been entirely foreign to our tradition. Many free-church Protestants grew up singing the hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus," in which Jesus, clearly standing as the theologoumenon for God, bears all our sins and grief's. **The word companion is derived from the Latin cum (with) and panis (bread). A companion shares the same table with you, breaks bread with you, and befriends you.** When Christians celebrate "the breaking of bread," they are responding to God's invitation to be friends of God, of each other, of the world, of the Friend of the world.

(Allen and Williamson, 1991, 30)

Some of the churches I have been a part of, either in my growing up, my training for ministry, or for the congregations I have served, are what I would

Communion is a connection to Jesus.
He is with us.
Participant

describe as 'heady' congregations. They like to think, they expect the sermons to be thoughtful and well backed up, but that isn't all, there has to be much more to the service.

While Proclamation of the Word of God is an indispensable means of grace, it does not exhaust the many different ways in which the extravagant love of God is communicated to us. In addition to proclamation, there are sacraments. Sacraments are "visible words" (Robert W. Jenson) embodiments of Grace, enacted testimonies to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

(Migliore, 279)

That grace of God, those visible words of God were heard or seen or found in the other pieces of the service.

The Reformation churches reduced the number of sacraments to two or three, with baptism and the Lord's Supper always recognized as the most important. It was argued that sacraments were to be limited to those practices clearly instituted by Christ and the apostles. Even more important than the Reformers' reduction in the number of sacraments, however was their insistence on two basic points: first, the inseparability of Word and sacrament; and second, the importance in both Word and sacrament of the working of the Spirit and the response of faith. These emphases countered every quasi-magical view of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments. As Martin Luther put it, "It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water. For without the Word of God the water is merely water and no Baptism" (The Small Catechism, 4.10)

(Migliore, 280)

The sacrament of communion is our second sacrament. In the context of the United Church there is little variety to it. Some churches do still do communion

quarterly, others monthly. I remember the first time I served communion in my current church, the ewer, a great tall pottery vessel didn't get filled, and as I spoke the words

and tipped it up and tipped it up and tipped it

In general, clergy are more likely to want to increase frequency [of sharing in communion] than are their congregations. As one said, "For me, it's the other side of the coin in worship. We've lost the rhythm of the word proclaimed and the sacrament enacted, and we're just now reclaiming it."
DesCamp, 2013

up nothing came out. I have sat through long

communions that were that dry and

represented well by the empty jug. I have

served communion in silence, with the choir

singing, with a soloist, in a line, in a circle, just

about any variation you might think of, even with people actually moving together

coming up the centre isle while listening to *Stand by Me* from Playing for Change. One

would think that there isn't very much variation to communion, but I have served

communion many different ways, and the only constant I have found in the variety of

ways that I arranged to have it served is that everyone has one way of it being served

that they didn't like. At my previous congregation I rotated through serving communion

three ways. Traditional: Silver trays of bread cubes and tiny cups

of juice served by the elders; Kids Serve: Silver trays of juice

It's solemn.
Participant

served by the elders and baskets of bread served by the children and Intinction, where

folks come up the centre isle break off a piece of bread, go to the next station, dip it in

the chalice and return to their seats via the side isle. What is interesting is how each has

been received. One person in her 80's complained that the children just are not

"distinguished" enough, that they "don't take it seriously enough," another woman in

her 80's, at the same service sits with a tear in her eye as a child connects with her to

Communion is a moment. Quiet. Holy.
Participant

give her the piece of bread. When my two children were very young, the younger, much more aggressively extroverted of the two preferred communion served to

her in the silver trays that drew her into a time of stillness; the older, the quieter of the two preferred when she got to serve the bread to be out and about with the group serving the folks in the pews. This was the exact opposite of what I would have ever guessed as each of their favourite way to share in communion. The coming forward for

communion though, when you face each member of the congregation, and say “food for the journey,” then call them by name as you offer them the cup and look

Communion is a ritual, process, familiarity, a common experience of it.
Participant

into their eyes and say “The cup of new life, food for the journey, no matter where it takes us, we are not alone,” and then, some of them reply back Thanks be to God! “And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one body” (VU 467).

There is a lot of conversation within the context of sacraments of community, how the church is a community, how it is the connection with the people that makes the place what it is, how the feeling of being together is what church is all about. But it simply isn't. It's an inaccurate premise. If the point of church is to be a community, than we can do that just about anywhere. Think of the TV Series Cheers (Figure 35

Communion connects us. We are sharing at the same table
Participant

Cheers) which aired for eleven seasons from 1982 to 1993. I bet that even the mention of the name brings the tune for the theme song to mind: Where Everybody Knows Your Name Lyrics by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo:

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.

Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same

You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

You wanna go where people know; people are all the same,

You wanna go where everybody knows your name.



Figure 35 Cheers Entrance Sign
Cheers™ is a registered trademark of
CBS Studios Inc.

(Portnoy & Angelo, 1982)

That isn't enough though. Church has an element of community, but that isn't what it is to be about. "Bruce Reed's Grubb Theory of Oscillation says that human beings have needs for both work and for rest, for productivity and nurture, and that we humans need to oscillate between the two." (Woodbury & Madsen) I have no problem with that part of the theory, we all are better when we take time off, go for a walk, hike, ride our bike, visit a friend, travel, shop, whatever takes us away from the responsibilities of our life that exhaust us, but that isn't enough. Time away from work or home, time in community is what you get at Cheers, or the Rotary, or your club, but the purpose of the church is not just to be that community, what Len Sweet would call your "Third Place" but rather to be communion as well. "Bruce Reed's finding was that

the deeper you oscillate into a state of extra-dependence (dependent on that which is outside

Communion is a chance to
renew our faith by our actions.
Participant

yourself), the more energized you are for the remainder of your intra-dependent life.”

(Woodbury & Madsen)

Wiki proved my point even further when I read that “Nearly all of *Cheers* took place in the front room of the bar, but the characters often went into the rear pool room or the bar's office. *Cheers* did not show any action outside the bar until the first episode of the second season, which took place in Diane's apartment.”

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheers>) They never went outside of themselves for a full season. Work in the Church calls us; life in the church calls us to life outside of the walls, to come in, to recharge and to go out again.

Our community isn't just the people that surround us with love, it's messy, it's about everyone around us and communion isn't about isolation, it's about getting out there, and being a part of something bigger, but, Lozoff still cautions us: “But remember Communion as well as Community. Trying to dedicate yourself entirely through outward activity will sooner or later chew you up and spit you out if you don't take time for inner silence. It's like trying to breathe out all the time without breathing in. Be sure you breathe in, so that you're helping others from a deeper place. There are countless ways to embark on an inner journey beyond all words, and an outward journey of devoting ourselves to others. But they all lead in those same two directions: Communion and Community.” (Lozoff)

But again, I would argue that community isn't communion. We are called to communion with God and with one another. That is what makes us a church.

My gym has a section for the Gary Robert's High Performance Centre that specializes in working hockey professionals to the best of their ability. The motto or mantra on the wall is Train, Refuel, Recover... Perform. (Figure 36) This phrase works for me in this conversation about communion and community:

WE TRAIN, we pray, we read or study –

WE REFUEL, we oscillate into the holy,

and we connect **with God** –

WE RECOVER; we catch up with friends,

family, and our church community –

WE PERFORM, we go back out there as people of faith to make a difference.

That is what we are missing in so many of our congregations, that being part of church is two different things. We connect with a community and talk about how friendly and welcoming we are, but we need to connect with God and articulate that connection when we talk about our church. It's welcoming, it's friendly, it's progressive, AND it's a place where we can still ourselves and connect with God. But, we refuse to take in a breath of the spirit and add that last phrase.

**Train,
Refuel,
Recover...
Perform.**

Gary Roberts High Performance Training Centre

Figure 36 Train, refuel, recover, perform

One of the lines from our Song of Faith document says “In grateful response to God’s abundant love, we bear in mind our integral connection to the earth and one another. In these sacraments the ordinary things of life – water, bread, and wine- point

- Communion Pieces

 1. The Invitation
 2. The Peace of Christ
 3. The Great Thanksgiving
 4. Call to Give Thanks
(Sursum Corda)
 5. Thanksgiving (Preface)
 6. The Song of Creation
(Sanctus and Benedictus)
 7. Remembering Jesus at Table
(Institution Narrative)
 8. Prayer of Self-Giving
(Anamnesis-Oblation)
 9. Affirmation of Memory & Hope
(Memorial Acclamation)
 10. Prayer for Transformation
(Epiclesis)
 11. Intercessions
(Prayers of the People)
 12. Concluding Praise (Doxology)
 13. Amen
 14. Prayer of Jesus
 15. Fraction and Pouring
 16. Invitation
 17. Distribution
 18. Prayer after Communion

Sacraments Elder, 27

Figure 37 Communion Pieces

beyond themselves to God and God’s love.” That meagre morsel of bread lets us refuel and see beyond ourselves to something so much more.

I once heard a sermon that talked about how the door at the back of the sanctuary should have a sign over it that says “Servant’s Entrance” as we go out into the world to perform, to make a difference.

The Sacrament of Communion properly has 18 different pieces (Figure 37 Communion Pieces). I probably do 4 or 5 pieces at a communion service, I believe that as long as I include the epiclesis, that which my ordination

permits me to do, I am fine, and so is

the communion. “The [epiclesis or] prayer [for transformation] continues by calling (-kalein) the Holy Spirit to come upon (epi-) the congregation and what it is doing, as

upon the bread and the wine. 'Come, Holy Spirit, upon us and what we do here that these your gifts of bread and wine may be for us the body and blood of Christ so that we may bring life, hope, and love to your entire world.' Traditionally (and from a theological or liturgical point of view), without this part of the prayer, communion is an agape (love) feast (an unconsecrated communion), over which anyone may preside." (Sacraments Elder, 30)



Figure 38 Mother's Day 'communion'

Communion happens in strange places in different ways. This year for Mother's Day we didn't have communion. Well, there was no bread, there was no cup, there were some words, a cool YouTube video and we passed around some Teddy Grahams, some cookies, so, yes, we had communion, Honey Maid communion. (Figure 38) The Mother's Day Reflection included a video of the "This is Wholesome" campaign released by Honey Maid. The series of commercials are about abundance, changing families and how Honey Maid turns hate mail into the word love, and then surrounded it with 10 times the amount of fan mail (Figure 39 Honey Maid - Love). People were moved. We shared some Honey Maid Teddy Grahams at the end of the sermon, and although it didn't meet the liturgical requirements of being communion,



Figure 39 Honey Maid - Love

people responded in a communion like way to the sharing of the cookies. It was a sacrament for those that shared in the meal.

Now, Honey Maid, that old-fashioned brand of graham crackers, has launched an ad that shows, in the most radical and moving way of any national campaign so far, how much that has changed. It shows a two-dad family, a rocker family, a single dad, an interracial family, a military family. The two-dad household is featured at some length; you cannot be distracted away from it. Most striking is the tagline of the ad: “No matter how things change, what makes us wholesome never will. Honey Maid. **Everyday wholesome snacks for every wholesome family.** This is wholesome.” The ad is deeply heartwarming—not simply because it shows diversity (which other companies have done) but because it labels these families with the word “wholesome,” which is exactly the kind of word that tends to get claimed by the evangelical right. People have long suggested that the new structures of the American family are “unwholesome” as a way of rationalizing intolerance. The idea of what is “against nature” has been central to messages of prejudice about both interracial relationships and homosexuality.

([Solomon](#), 2014)

The church I serve is an affirming congregation of the United Church of Canada. We take inclusion seriously. These little graham bears were symbolic of the story of the bread of life, and we shared deeply in that meal! Communion happens in unexpected places in unanticipated ways. Inclusion can be serious in the church though. Who is in, who is out, who can receive communion, who can serve communion. In one of the congregations I served I ran confirmation classes for a weekend, it was the ‘full meal

For some, childhood remembrances of Communion were somber or even terrifying, while others were unaware of the sacrament because it was for adults.

(DesCamp, 2013)

deal’ in one complete weekend: Friday night, all day Saturday and Sunday morning Confirmation. As part of Saturday, we made bread from scratch in the kitchen at the church together. As the bread rose, we did a

session, we then went back in and punched it down and shaped it, we made about 8 loaves, and left it to rise again while we did another session, then while it baked we did some supper preparation and when it came out of the oven, we broke it and ate it and put butter on it and watched it melt. We put fresh jams on the bread and devoured a good portion. We saved a couple of loaves to serve with supper and saved the round loaf on which we had etched a cross before baking for communion in the morning. I tried for three months with the Session of the congregation, the board of Elders, for permission to allow the kids, after they had been made full members of the congregation, to serve the bread for communion. Their answer was “absolutely not”. I tried that for three years in a row and eventually gave up. Again they proclaimed “absolutely not”. That is for the Elders to do. What do the rules we articulate about serving say about the idea of inclusion?

Radical Inclusion is a trademark for a progressive church.
Spong

St. Mark’s only does communion by Intinction, gathered together with a single loaf and a few cups to share. I don’t wear a gown to work, I don’t even wear a tie to work, and the congregation isn’t about formality. When I came to St. Mark’s, it was from a congregation that was traditional but we moved miles and miles in our

As one said, “For me, it’s the other side of the coin in worship. We’ve lost the rhythm of the word proclaimed and the sacrament enacted, and we’re just now reclaiming it.”
(DesCamp, 2013)

understanding of church in the eight and half years we were in ministry together. I wore liturgical garments; I wore a stole and gowned all the time, then, most of the time, then, sometimes. We did communion different ways, I preached from the

floor, we had screens for projecting images, videos and words and incorporated technology into our services. We used the silver communion set in different ways; they were very open to new possibilities. When I was looking around at St. Mark's just after I started, the silver communion set was on a shelf in the basement, uncovered, coated with what seemed to be decade's worth of dust. It was filthy, I was mortified. I knew that the congregation only did communion by Intinction so didn't need the little cups and the trays, but these were not properly put away. I took initiative, I washed the trays and cleaned them up and put them away properly. Why? Because I think sacraments are important, and that includes the hardware. We did one communion service last year with the silver trays. I wanted to be able to say that communion comes to us where we are, as we are, without condition and we had people serve the trays to the folks where they sat, but they didn't know what to do, neither the servers nor the receivers. I was embarrassed for putting them in that position. Less than half of the people had ever used trays for communion, and although my message was heard, by the logistical disaster of the process, it was lost.

Logistics are important to sacraments, how people move, how the flow happens

matters. In the article **Sacrament or Vestige**, Therese Des Camp speaks of some of the research she did with fellow clergy about communion out in British Columbia. The article has a lot of comments from the different folks that participated in the survey:

When we use the traditional language of body and blood, when we consciously recall the transcendent Mystery at the table, we invoke something that the intellect cannot fathom. The heart alone knows what the rational mind cannot grasp.

DesCamp

"One minister said, "It's probably the only time I can look out and know that most of the people

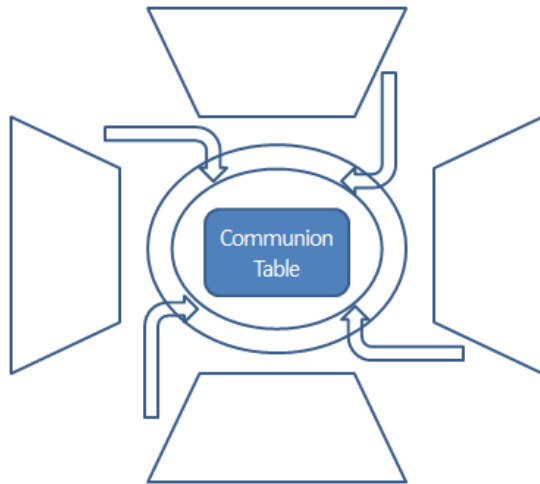


Figure 40 One Communion Circle

are feeling the same thing – that they’re part of something holy.”

(Des Champ)

Not me, I never get that.

Communion feels like recess at elementary school, everybody in a hustle and bustle of communion. It’s not easy to get people to move easily

into that centre space to be served. Everybody talks too much, we have tried music in the background, singing, solo pieces, anthems, it doesn’t matter, communion is chat time, but in this process of thinking and talking with my Local Advisory Committee for the program, we talked about this and came up with another idea. Instead of moving all the folks into a group to be served with a lot of people going a lot of directions at the same time (Figure 40 One Communion Circle) we thought we might have found a solution, another idea. We thought we would try to have each grouping of chairs form

its own circle and serve each other (Figure 41 Four Communion Circles). It was a bit awkward, first time through and all, but, it was quiet, everyone was engaged and we shared in the meal together, four baskets, four cups and the meal was shared. It was communion. Charlotte Caron’s *Eager for*

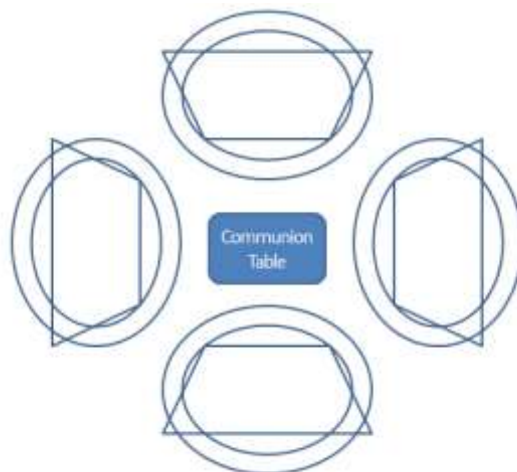


Figure 41 Four Communion Circles

Worship is intended as a beginning introduction to worship;
 Caron introduces as United Church theology the understanding

To remember the story
 and remember our history
 Participant

that “communion occurs in the transformation of the people through sharing bread and wine in the name and presence of Christ.” She goes on to quote Harold Fey, who says Christ is not **in** the elements but **standing beside** the believer (Caron, 2000, 54). In that moment in that place, God was with us.

The task at the end of the working session on the Sacraments evening was to break into three groups and write three pieces of a communion liturgy that we would bring together back in the sanctuary and I would use the words as the liturgy for the evening. I had a piece for the great thanksgiving (we just didn’t have enough folks that evening to break into four groups for the task) and an epiclesis ready. We gathered the pieces, began the liturgy and shared in the meal.

It was interesting at the end how one of the participants commented how “the words became more than words” when they were spoken as the communion. They chose words that were meaningful to them, and as they worked together on the language in their small groups, the words, phrases and images resonated with them. This activity created more. It was not an afterthought. People engaged in the discussions about being progressive and had an opportunity to articulate what that would mean for them in the liturgy. They thought about the words, and it wasn’t a risk, but an opportunity.

This is what they created: (Figure 42 Communion Liturgy)


Communion Liturgy pieces written by the evening session group.		
<p>Communion welcome</p> <p>This evening we gather here as a community of faith.</p> <p>To welcome everyone and invite you to share a quiet moment as we join one another in the act of Communion.</p> <p>The sacrament of Communion proclaims and celebrates the gift of God's love.</p> <p>God calls us to be inclusive, to be welcoming and as Jesus did before us, we want to draw the circle wider.</p> <p>We feed our souls tonight as we eat this bread and drink this wine to remember the story and remember our history. Fill us with peace.</p>	<p>Story of the Last Supper</p> <p>At the last supper Jesus was surrounded by his disciples and at the end of the meal took a loaf of bread, blessed it, broke it and shared it with his friends saying this is the bread of life</p> <p>He then took the wine, blessed it and said this is the cup of life and shared it.</p> <p>Played during the serving:</p> <p>Hymn to Freedom by Oscar Peterson</p> <p>www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHv1tcv_DoM</p> 	<p>Prayer after Communion</p> <p>Thank you for allowing us to partake in the communion symbols.</p> <p>Thank you for reminding us of your relationship in us and our relationship in You.</p> <p>Allowing us to become closer to you at this time.</p> <p>As we leave this house of God, let us continue to spread the good news.</p> <p>May you see the face of God in others as they see the face of God in you.</p>

Figure 42 Communion Liturgy

Churches are meant to be open. Sacraments, in the United Church are meant to be open, but there is still a great difference between the table and the font. Anyone can come to communion. We had the debate about children participating fully in Communion over 40 years ago, but still; St. Marks will not open the font to all. There is an ingrained tradition of rules, and whether it is an articulated rule or just an articulated comment why should we judge or decide who can connect to this celebration of new life? Sacraments help us to remember the story, and to remember our history. It seems so strange to me that we lift up and celebrate our story of becoming inclusive and

remember our history but only fully engaged participants in the congregation can come to the font.

In the sacrament of our life, we build community, we are community. But, more than that, we are sent back out into that community, called to make a difference, called to be reminded and to remind others, that we are not alone; that faith is real food. It is real Bread. It is real connection. Thanks be to God!

Chapter 4

Sin, Confession & Forgiveness

In the summer of 1986, in a large open area in the evening on the campus of Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, the Right Reverend Robert Smith, Moderator of the United Church of Canada offered an apology to the First Nations people of Canada. The day had drawn dark, and the sacred fire was bright with the glow of the orange and blue flames licking the logs with the smoke rising and swirling into the night. Bob, in his gown and stole, representing the largest protestant denomination in Canada stepped forward to offer the words that our First Nations people had wanted to hear for a long time. (Figure 43) Everything was prepared, everything was ready, and as he began to speak, he leaned closer to the sacred fire to illuminate his words. He leaned in, and the smoke swirled and drew a tear from his eye as he spoke the words that had taken the church many years to write. We admitted that we

Apology to First Nations Peoples (1986)

Rt. Rev. Robert Smith

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured. We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel. We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were.

As a result you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.

31st General Council, 1986 Record of Proceedings, p. 83-85, 94, 230-44, 666.

Figure 43 1986 Apology

had “tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were.” This was the first formal apology offered to the First Nation’s people of our land, but it was just the beginning of a transformational journey into a new relationship for the United Church of Canada. What is powerful about this story, is not the words offered though, but instead, the process as we reflect on the idea of Sin, Confession & Forgiveness.

[Two Years Later] At the 32nd (1988) General Council in Victoria, Mrs. Edith Memnook, a representative of the All Native Circle Conference constituted at that Assembly, responded to the 1986 Apology. The Native people acknowledged but did not accept the Apology made in Sudbury in 1986; they said a formal statement would be forthcoming. (Figure 44)

This was not to be an event or a moment; this was to be something more, something real, and something authentic as a new relationship was forged. “The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity.” At this 1988 meeting, the United Church of Canada established a 13th Conference called the All Native Circle Conference that included all Native United

Response to the 1986 Apology
The Apology made to the Native People of Canada by The United Church of Canada in Sudbury in August 1986 has been a very important step forward. It is heartening to see that The United Church of Canada is a forerunner in making this Apology to Native People. The All Native Circle Conference has now acknowledged your Apology. Our people have continued to affirm the teachings of the Native way of life. Our spiritual teachings and values have taught us to uphold the Sacred Fire; to be guardians of Mother Earth, and strive to maintain harmony and peaceful coexistence with all peoples. We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, the Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. We recognize the hurts and feelings will continue amongst our people, but through partnership and walking hand in hand, the Indian spirit will eventually heal. Through our love, understanding, and sincerity the brotherhood and sisterhood of unity, strength, and respect can be achieved. The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us.
1988 Record of Proceedings, p.79

Figure 44 1988 Response

Churches across the country. This was a dramatic piece of work being done in an effort to ensure that this was not to be a “symbolic gesture” of contrition.

The ANCC becomes the church’s first and only non-geographical Conference. ... The new Conference is a distinctly Native way of being part of the United Church. “Native people,” he says, “were just sitting on the sidelines, it was almost as if decisions were made for them and they could comment if they wished.”

(Salter, 2005)

In 1998, the United Church led the way in a country struggling deeply with its leadership role in the Native Residential School’s torrid past. The Right Reverend Bill Phipps, Moderator of the United Church of Canada led by example as the United Church stepped forward to admit to our role in that program as he offered a second apology (Figure 45) as our country stood with our head held low:

Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

(1998 Apology)

The United church has worked very hard to build those relationships over the years that have passed, taking ownership, being part of the ANC Truth & Reconciliation process where we, as a church, and as individuals heard of the depth of the pain caused in our country, on our watch, as we, the church, “with missionary zeal”, destroyed the way of life of those that walked the land for generations before our arrival here.

Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities (1998)

From the deepest reaches of your memories, you have shared with us your stories of suffering from our church's involvement in the operation of Indian Residential Schools. You have shared the personal and historic pain that you still bear, and you have been vulnerable yet again. You have also shared with us your strength and wisdom born of the life-giving dignity of your communities and traditions and your stories of survival.

In response to our church's commitment to repentance, I spoke these words of apology on behalf of the General Council Executive on Tuesday, October 27, 1998:

"As Moderator of The United Church of Canada, I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of The United Church of Canada, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage that this cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation has perpetrated on Canada's First Nations peoples. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry.

"To those individuals who were physically, sexually, and mentally abused as students of the Indian Residential Schools in which The United Church of Canada was involved, I offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused.

"We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens."

Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

"We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future."

The Right Rev. Bill Phipps, United Church of Canada General Council Executive,
October 1998

Figure 45 1998 Apology

This may seem like a lot of information to offer about something that could be considered as being distant, and quite removed from individuals in a local congregation in suburban Toronto, but it was how we started the conversation evening about Sin, Confession & Forgiveness. It is both a powerful story, and a powerful example of the three, pushing us to a fourth piece of the equation: how we live out the act of our confession.

We moved into a brief conversation of definitions, and, as folk of my generation often do, I started out with some **Wiki Definitions** of the phrases we were going to be spending the evening with. (My emphasis)

Sin: In Abrahamic contexts, sin is the act of **violating God's will**

Confession: A statement made by a person or a group of people acknowledging some personal fact that the person (or the group) **would prefer to keep hidden.**

Forgiveness: the **intentional and voluntary process** by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitude regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions such as revenge, with an increased ability to wish the offender well.

What forgiveness is NOT:

Forgiveness is different from **condoning** (failing to see the action as wrong and in need of forgiveness), **excusing** (not holding the offender as responsible for the action), **pardoning** (granted by a representative of society, such as a judge), **forgetting** (removing awareness of the offence from consciousness), and **reconciliation** (restoration of a relationship).

We had set four goals for the evening's conversation

1. An understanding of the dynamics between all four parts of this conversation: Sin, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation – that not all parts are possible to achieve
2. What is our definition of sin
3. To come to an understanding of a life example of facing a transgression.

4. Articulating an understanding of what the words mean.

To move from the more distant example of the apology of the United Church to the First Nations people of Canada, we moved into a time of individual journaling. With lots of paper, pens and pencils provided, we reiterated our commitment to privacy for this session and asked folk to spend some time journaling their thoughts for the following questions:

Journaling Activity

Think of a time that a wrong was done to you

- Where were you in your life?
- How did it feel at the time?
- How does it feel now?

Think of a wrong that you did

- Where were you in your life?
- How did it feel at the time?
- How does it feel now?

Find a time in your life when you did something 'wrong'. How did you

- Acknowledge that as a 'sin' or 'wrong'
- Confess it / Ask forgiveness
- Live out your apology

From there, we moved safely back to a wider conversation. I best articulate feelings through song. Someone from the congregation I serve gave me this shirt for Christmas (Figure 46 Outburst of Song), it is really quite appropriate for me actually: Caution: prone to sudden outbursts of song. I love the shirt.



Figure 46 [Outburst of Song](#)

As I was thinking about sin, the image that came to mind (Figure 47) as the familiar understanding of the way we have experienced sin in the past was from this,

please note, I had to edit the words because I am uncomfortable with the original language.

Just as I am, without one plea,
 but that thy LOVE / ~~blood~~
 was shared with me,
 and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

(Elliott, 1834, VU 508)



Figure 47 [Guilt](#)

How does that feel as far as familiarity with a traditional understanding of sin, does that resonate, coming, head bowed, meek, knowing we failed to make the right choice, or at the very least that we know we probably deserve to be punished.

To me, that is an image of a dichotomous pair. “If something's *dichotomous*, it's divided into two distinct parts. It can describe a plant whose leaves pair off in opposing buds or anything — a government, a relationship — that has two divisions that are sharply opposed.” (vocabulary.com -

dichotomous) We are either living in sin, or we are not, we are either sinning or we are not, distinct, separate and divided from a ‘right’ way of living.

Balanced or dichotomous



Figure 48 Balanced or Dichotomous

But that’s just not my image of myself. That is not my image of God. That is not my idea of sin. Instead, I would suggest, a different understanding of sin, this is the one that came to me as the balanced pair, (Figure 48) that one exists with the other: Day

and night; Romeo and Juliet; winter and summer; Yin and Yang, both parts together, held in a creative tension. The words that fit to my voice are instead

Don't be afraid. My love is stronger;
 My love is stronger than your fear.
 Don't be afraid. My love is stronger
 And I have promised, promised to be always near.

(Bell & Maule, 1995, MV 90)

But for these two songs, are they balanced, or are they dichotomous? Is sin about the strength of our relationships OR is sin about us simply admitting defeat in the presence of a higher power and asking forgiveness? Is it a 'hail Mary' or a quick confession, or is it how we live it out? The first question to hold on to: Is sin about being balanced or dichotomous? Is it either sin or not? Is it a binary question with a simple zero or one indicating a switch in an off or on position? Do you live either a life of sin or of purity?

James Taylor, a prolific United Church Writer that lives life to the fullest out in the Okanagan Valley of beautiful British Columbia in his 1997 book entitled *Sin: A New Understanding of Virtue and Vice* pushes my thinking about sin. He uses the word evil too easily in his definition for my taste, but still causes me to think. "The mindset that makes evil possible has traditionally been called Sin." The Mindset matters. Evil is, in a sense, our recognition that things have gone wrong. Damage is being done. Something or someone is being hurt. But these bad things don't always result from bad motivations." (Taylor, Pg. 17) To me, evil is way out there on the scale. We all live with moments where we distance ourselves from God and from each other, but this idea of Taylor's brings with it the melody of Woodworth, that we are "poor, wretched, blind".

It just does not work for me! “The evil we perceive all around us is made evident in actions. Those actions happen only because certain people think in certain ways. Robertson Davies put that thought this way in his novel *The Rebel Angels*: Evil isn’t what one *does*, it’s something one *is* that infects everything one does. The Sin is the mindset.” (Taylor, Pg. 23) No! Absolutely not! Sin is not evil, evil is evil, Murder is sin, Paul Bernardo “is a Canadian serial killer and rapist, known for the highly publicized sexual assaults and murders he committed with his wife Karla Homolka and the serial rapes he committed in ... Scarborough” (Wiki) is evil. 99.9% of us live life in a normal way, a mostly healthy way, a reasonably hopeful and helpful way, and although there is at times “pain caused by hurtful words or wrongful deeds; pain caused by misunderstanding or pride; pain that has been a barrier from reconciliation and peace” (CGP, 504) God knows “our loneliness; the feelings that no others can know or share; our anxiety and fears, you know that we have left things undone; all we could have said or shared or achieved”. (CGP, 504) Those are the things that separate us from God, that distance us from the source of life. It’s not all about sin, it’s about hard decisions that we make and face the consequences for. And still, in the midst of the ‘yuck’ we can see, if we are willing to seek, the presence of God in it all, calling us forward into something more.

In a very early essay (1974) John Cobb, a process theologian commented on how differently people are seeing the world through the idea of a Christian perspective on sin. He speaks of how a struggle for both identity (whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable – Wiki) (which may be the easier of the two) and integrity (a concept

of consistency of actions - Wiki) is changed in a post-Christian culture. “Our children have grown up in a different world – a world in which Christianity is perceived more as a phenomenon of history than as the given ground of meaning. Insofar as Christian Commitment is a living option at all, it is one of many. Their generation knows unconsciously, if not consciously, that the struggle for identity and integrity in this pluralist world is a difficult one.” (Powell, 83)

That Christian understanding he articulates as being a phenomenon of history seems of lesser value today. But he continues in the article with something that I would suggest provides the opposite scriptural example to sin, the yin to the yang, the Juliet to the Romeo.

Meanwhile I have searched elsewhere for the stimulus and discipline I once found in traditional pious activities. I will mention three areas because I believe that they are fairly typical. The first of these is Christian social action. Christian living does not focus primarily on the practice of private inner exercises, but on loving others and expressing that love in practical ways. It is not the one who says Lord, Lord, who pleases God, but the one who gives a cup of cold water to the thirsty. But giving cups of cold water is not a casual and painless activity. It is one that requires clear thinking, planning, organization, and personal discipline

(John Cobb in Powell 1974, 90)

Sin isn't for me something we do, for the most part it is simply those things that we have not done, those things that have prevented us from seeing the need for the cup of water and doing something about it. I would suggest in today's context, is the description of sin that might carry forward for people in a healthy way. We do wrong things at times. We experiment. We hurt people (either with or without intention), but in my faith, sin is simply those things where we have not cared for another in need. My

father contracted Poliomyelitis during his 2nd week of Grade 10 in Peterborough; he was a patient at the Riverdale Isolation Hospital in Toronto for a year and spent 7 weeks of that stay in an Iron Lung as the disease consumed the muscular development in his upper body. I spent my life around people with varying abilities, wheelchairs, crutches, canes, hearing assistive devices, etc., but I also grew up in a church and one of the scriptures that I really struggle with in thinking about sin was from the Gospel of John.

This version is from “The Voice: A new Bible Translation that reads like a story”:

While walking along the road, Jesus saw a man who was blind since his birth.

Disciples: Teacher, who sinned? *Who is responsible for this man’s blindness?* Did he commit sins that merited this punishment? If not his sins, is it the sins of his parents?

Jesus: Neither. His blindness cannot be *explained or* traced to any particular person’s sins. He is blind so the deeds of God may be put on display.

(John 9:1-3: the Voice)

I couldn’t handle the equating of disability with sin. Did my dad do something wrong to get Polio? Did my Grandmother?

Is sin and forgiveness about getting it right or wrong... or about being in right relationship?



Figure 49 Right, Wrong; Relationship

I couldn’t accept either option. It is not so easily just a “right” or a “wrong” but how we live in relationship with one another. (Figure 49) This scripture talks of that ‘cup of water’ how we treat others, how we include others, that opens our life up into the direction we are called to live in the midst of this creation.

In the midst of it all, we find a way to be in new relationship. Not to blame the past, but to find a new present that draws us forward. Consider a very traditional

prayer of confession from many of our pasts, with this particular version from the Anglican Church in Canada and the *Book of Alternative Services* (BAS):

We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
Have mercy on us and forgive us, **
That we may delight in your will.
And walk in your ways,
To the glory of your name.

(BAS, 185)

** I'd change that line to; challenge us to be more than this O God.

As I indicated in an earlier chapter, Ronald Allen speaks beautifully of God's love: "The process God has more power than any other entity, but God is not omnipotent, that is, God cannot unilaterally cause things to happen. God's power is limited... by nature. The difference between God's power and all other kinds of power are twofold: **God's power is utterly inexhaustible and is always used for love...** God's power operates not by force but by lure. In each occasion, God tries to lure people toward possibilities that offer the greatest expression of love in a particular circumstance." (Allen, 37) Marjorie Suchocki an incredible writer in process theology tells a story about God's role or way of engaging with us. Not in a demand and punish understanding, but as an invitation, a hope, or, what she calls a lure. "In the relational categories of process thought, God creates *with* the world. We actually think this is a much stronger way to express God's power. A children's fable once told about a rivalry between the wind and

the sun. Which one would be able to remove the coat of that man down there on the road? The wind thought that it could, and so it blew and blew and blew with great force. Unfortunately, the strength of the wind was such that the man just drew his coat more firmly around himself. Then it was the sun's turn. The sun just beamed its rays down upon the man until finally he grew quite warm—and removed his coat. In process terms, the wind worked coercively, trying to force its will upon the man, but the sun worked persuasively, luring the man's cooperative action. To be able to elicit the willing cooperation of another is a far greater power than simply to force the other to do as one wishes." (Suchocki, 2003, 7) God lures us, God invites us, and God draws us unto the idea and promise of right relationships. "God continues to feel the positive and negative effects of the actions of the entities that make up the world, discerning which are consistent with divine love, creativity, and justice. Specifically from Suchocki's Whiteheadian perspective, "Applied to God, God evaluates, contrasts, judges the world according to God's own character till the world is conformed to God." (Suchocki, "The Last Word?") For Suchocki, **this means that God, who feels the feelings of the world, feels the agony and joy of the world.** Resurrected subjects, knowing themselves as God knows them, feel the effects of their actions, agony or joy, on others." (Keller, 2011, 131) But what do we do with those things that distance us from God? It was incredible to watch people engage in the journaling process in the evening session. Everyone, myself included had a lot to write as we reflected on the pieces of our lives that we indicated were times when we did 'a wrong' or felt 'a wrong' was done to us. This led

into a wonderful conversation about a prayer of confession. I offered a story to the group for consideration:

I hold a Master of Arts degree in Social Transformation Ministry (2004), one of only two awarded by St. Stephen's College as part of the University of Alberta. The Social Transformation Program was cutting edge at the time. It was both a degree and a certificate. Half of the group were folks with at least a Bachelor's degree, hoping to complete an academic degree, and half were folks that worked hands on in the Social Services arena in and around Edmonton. There was a police officer, someone who works almost full time with the Rational Recovery method for dealing with addictions, several who work with getting folks off the street, some who worked in the shelter system, some who worked in the realm of food banks and several who had lived on the streets. It was a great group of people to engage with and was an opportunity to learn like no other. In one of our sessions there was a conversation about prayer, about church, about faith. One of the women, who had 'seen it all', commented about how she had been pushed down her whole life. She had made some tough decisions in life, maybe we would call them wrong decisions, but she lived through them and was spectacular! But, she commented when she was going through the crap of life, the last thing she wanted to do in church was to be forced to remind herself that she was a sinner. She wanted to hear good news, she wanted to hear something that would

How do we articulate our sins, those things that take us out of right relationship?
To God?
To each other?
To a friend?
Participant

How do we live out the letting go?
Participant

inspire her and challenge her to live life more fully in relationship with others and with God. I never did another Sunday Morning prayer of confession again. In the prayers of the people I usually include the line, “for those places where we have distanced ourselves from you and from each other O God, draw us back into unity through you.” Many would consider that a whitewash, but I was changed by this conversation. I was changed by this new relationship.

Part of the struggle of sin is how we carry it; and, more importantly, how we let go of it. In his book on sin, Jim Taylor offers a powerful anecdote about sin:

A story describes two Buddhist monks, one older, one younger, walking along. About noon, they came to a swiftly flowering river. A young woman, pretty but slight, was afraid to cross by herself. The older monk, without hesitation, picked up the woman and carried her across to the other bank where he left her to go on her way.

The two monks proceeded on their journey. Late in the day, the younger monk could contain his concern no longer. My father, he said, using the customary deference to an older man, how could you do that? Our vows forbid us to touch any woman. You not only touched that woman – you carried her in your arms across that river!

Yes, I carried her across the river, the older man smiled sadly, but you, my son, have carried that woman with you the whole afternoon.

(Taylor, 223)

Just as our possessions can sometimes possess us, our obsessions can often obsess us. They take control. There can be too much weight, there can be too much wait, for this young monk, the cup of water was too much to give, and yet that cup became too much for him to carry, even the empty cup was more than he could bear.

One of my favourite stories in the Bible is taken from Matthew 15:21-28 where Jesus is changed by a woman in need trying to care for her daughter:

Jesus left that place and withdrew to Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman—a non-Jew—came to Him.

Canaanite Woman (wailing): Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is possessed by a demon. Have mercy, Lord!

Jesus said nothing. And the woman continued to wail. His disciples came to Him.

Disciples: Do something—she keeps crying after us!

Jesus: I was sent here only to gather up the lost sheep of Israel.

The woman came up to Jesus and knelt before Him.

Canaanite Woman: Lord, help me!

Jesus: It is not right to waste the children's bread by feeding dogs.

Canaanite Woman: But, Lord, even dogs eat the crumbs that fall by the table as their master is eating.

Jesus—whose ancestors included Ruth and Rahab—spoke with kindness and insight.

Jesus: Woman, you have great faith. And your request is done.

And her daughter was healed, right then and from then on.

The Voice

Jesus was doing his thing, he had his idea, he had his plan that he and God had worked out in life and WHAM! This woman, with words of conviction, slaps him in the face. "How dare you! God has given you gifts to use and share, and you think you can decide who does and doesn't get them!" And in that moment, "SLAP!" in that instant, Jesus was changed. God was changed. The mission of Jesus moved beyond the children of Israel. I fundamentally believe that through the life of Jesus God learned as much about humanity as humanity learned about God. The only hymn I won't sing is by R.B.Y. Scott, a United Church Minister and Old Testament Professor who begins the hymn with the line "Eternal, Unchanging, we sing to your praise." (VU 223) My God, the one in

whom I live and move and have my being (Acts 17:28) is changed, is affected, by how we live.

Into the theological realm of sin though, those things beyond sharing the cup, those places where life is taken or life is destroyed or life is violated, for those acts of hatred or violence or abuse, how do we find our way through that? What is the Christian calling in facing up to the transgressions?

Thomas Bandy: Food for Faith: A contemporary commentary on the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada. 1994

If Sin is regarded only as a moral failure in our human decision making and action, then Christ need only be another wise human teacher or prophet... We believe, however, that sin is more radical than this. Sin holds humankind in such bondage that even if we were shown the right way, and even if we were motivated to do it, we would not be able to do so. Our human decision making is so warped that we are not able to choose the good; our human power to act is so enfeebled that we are not able to will what is right... Sin that is as radical as this requires more than a teacher. It requires a liberator and a healer. No power is greater than sin except God; therefore, God in person is required to overcome sin.

(Taylor, Pg 218)

I still leave room for that understanding, for those things that we can't let ourselves get through or past, but I think, I hope, for most people this level of hurt and need isn't part of their day to day existence.

The classical question about the problem of evil asks, "If God is all-good and all-powerful, then why is there 'evil or why do people suffer?" Because process theology does not affirm God's power as an authoritative or coercive power, it offers a response that supports both the freedom and responsibility of creation and God's concern for the common good. To the extent that we use our freedom to diverge from God's call, there is evil in the world. Evil is not an isolated event because of the interdependence of the world. When one of us chooses to operate in a way that is divergent from God's call, it influences all of

us. We often do this repeatedly within systems of power and influence, and create greater problems—systemic evils.

(Keller, 2011, 18)

The further we move from the life we are called to share, the deeper we go into the mire of evil. It used to be, in what many would call the 'good old days' that you lived life on this earth to the best of your ability so you didn't have to go to hell when you die. Flames. Torment. Hunger.

I used to believe in heaven, but I didn't ever think that God decided who got in and who didn't. Instead I had an image that when you died that you entered naked into a room of mirrors where you could see your whole life; the good, the bad, the ugly, and when you had seen your whole life, and could come to terms with your life you pushed on the mirror and it fell away. That image got me through an early understanding of heaven, but now, to my surprise, I have found instead what I need in my understanding of John 14:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In God's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life;

The story continues.

"I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you, yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also."

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

(my mish-mash of verses)

To me there are two ways to hear that story, that if you believe in God in that far-away place, with pearly gates and paths of gold, that a place is prepared, but, also, if you believe that God is much closer to us, right here, with us and within us with every step with every breath, then based on that second description, that place is made for us with God, right here with and within each of us who remember. That the life lost remains with and within us with each step and each breath. That is the heaven that works for me. Karen Baker-Fletcher, in her essay entitled *Holy Spirit and Womanism in Creating Women's Theology: A movement Engaging Process Thought* speaks about God in a powerful way that broadens Marjorie Suchocki's thought:

God is in all places, but God is not a place. Suchocki fails to attend to the fact that "heaven" and "hell" are metaphors that describe the joy or agony of God's experiencing the feelings of others in resurrected experience. These are not metaphors for describing God. They are metaphors for describing the experiencing of joy and agony, the effects of every entity of the world on other entities.

(Baker-Fletcher, 132)

God is more than an experience of joy to me.

Although that felt like a tangent, you can't have a conversation about Sin, Confession and Forgiveness without a thought to the traditional consequences of Sin. As we live our life thankful for what we have, we know that we also live at times in a way that harms others or ourselves and we need to constantly call ourselves and others to live better lives. Lois McAfee in *The life of Prayer in Resistance* pushes my thinking about the flow of a prayer of thanksgiving that we can't just be grateful without seeing what that life of abundance challenges us to move towards. She says "Thanksgiving may also bring about contrition and confession. If we enter into our thanks deeply, we

cannot help but become aware that while we offer thanks for the bounty that enriches our lives, others are begging God for a meager share. In fact, no prayer

Progressive means a safe place to share doubts.
Participant

of thanksgiving is complete without confession and a passionate cry for change of both self and society.” (MacAfee, 2008, 38) That is not a confession about what we have done ‘wrong’ that is a confession of how we must continue to work to bring change to the lives of others. That is a different understanding of an old idea of confession. We grew up with weekly prayers of confession in the United Church, but they seem to have fallen away in many places. Maybe progressives ignore sin? Maybe the United Church as a whole would prefer to let it slide.

I titled a sermon on this topic **ForgivER – ForgivEE** and concluded it by asking:

What do we do, when what we have done diminishes people?

What do we do, when what we have done diminishes others?

What do we do, when what we have done diminishes Self?

Lent has traditionally been that time when we contemplate diminishment and release. We think of where we have been diminished, and where we have diminished others on this journey through life. The topic is tough. It stirs within us some incredible feelings about making some room for others, about caring for ourselves and caring each other. If sin is about Distance from God or from each other, we need to take a step forward, reach out and connect. For we have all been called to life abundant, and wherever that call takes us, wherever that path may go, we can say together in

conviction, that wherever it may lead us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God.” We concluded the sermon with the hymn God Weeps:

God weeps at love withheld, at strength misused,
at children's innocence abused,
and till we change the way we love, God weeps.

God bleeds at anger's fist,
at trust betrayed, at women battered and afraid,
and till we change the way we win, God bleeds.

God cries at hungry mouths, at running sores,
at creatures dying without cause,
and till we change the way we care, God cries.

God waits for stones to melt, for peace to seed,
for hearts to hold each other's need,
and till we understand the Christ, God waits.

(Murray, 1994, MV 78)

The service was pensive--- it worked, there was an incredible silence after sermon that called for a quick reschedule of order of service for a time of reflection. Everyone has intimate experience with sin. Everyone has intimate thoughts of confession. Everyone has intimate hope of forgiveness. Everyone has the challenge of how to live out that process as they journey through life.

What is in my cup of life?

With whom shall I share it?

Chapter 5

Progressive, Inclusive, Life Affirming

We start the service at St. Mark's with the announcements about 5 minutes before the service is due to begin. We don't print them out in the bulletin, so they sometimes take a significant amount of time, but that is another issue in the church. One morning we had a guest come up to the mic. He had been there before, he introduced himself and the congregation smiled and clapped and welcomed him, astonished at his bravery. His name was John. I had spoken to him before and knew that theologically we were in very different places. I went to stand beside him when he started because I knew this wasn't going to be good. Unfortunately, I was right. He went from the welcome to letting us know that we are all going to hell because of our openness to homosexuality and he started to quote scripture to us. People were aghast. I eventually got a chance to say that he was entitled to his opinions, but that here we are open and welcome. He sat down and it came time to light the Christ Candle. We also have a rainbow candle on our communion table, and the woman that came forward to light the candle was almost in tears. Her son is openly gay and St. Mark's was a beautiful and supportive part of his coming out process. When she came to light the candle, I brought the rainbow candle over and asked her to light it first. She seemed to garner some

Protect "sanctuary" let
guard down safely here.
Participant

strength from that. We were all in a bit of a fog. The time with the children was prearranged and there were two hymns for folks to sing, and a talk about the

Progressive – not
 aggressive
 Participant

language of the verse chosen. As that happened, I arranged for a third hymn option with the music director and projection people and got things in place to add a third hymn to the options. When the conversation with the two hymns finished I commented that I wanted to add a third one and we sang

Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still.
 Let this be our song, no one stands alone,
 standing side by side, draw the circle wide.

(Gordon Light, 1994, MV 145)

St. Mark's is not what I would call a strong singing congregation, but the congregation sang this with an intensity I have never seen. John heard, saw, and must have felt what the congregation was saying back to him and he left. A few from the congregation went out with him to ensure that he wasn't on his way to visit the kids during their morning program. It was an intensely scary morning. This fellow could have been armed and have articulated his animosity to us with intent to harm. The sermon for the day turned into debriefing the event. Tuesday night we gathered in a circle for a time to work and talk through what happened. Still it was several weeks before families felt comfortable enough to bring their children back. It was a wonderful experience in a way, drawing the congregation together as one, but there is a risk and a cost to having a rainbow flag in the sanctuary. Two weeks later, hate literature

appeared on car windshields in the parking lot during the service that left evidence that we were not dealing with a sane or rationally-thinking person.

We can celebrate,
rejoice and heal together.
Participant

Draw the Circle Wide was the final piece from the liturgy for the congregation on the morning that it became an affirming congregation “working for the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in The United Church of Canada and in society.” (<http://affirmunited.ause.ca>) The congregation gathered in a circle around the sanctuary and passed multi-coloured yarn around the circle connecting each other and committing themselves as individuals to this larger process of being a whole. This process happened before the great influx of newcomers to the congregation. When we used to sing this song in a regular service before John arrived, half of the congregation would almost have a tear in their eye and half stand there looking at them wondering what it is all about. But the experience on that Sunday morning drew us together in a strange new way.

The Mission Statement of St. Mark’s United Church is as follows:

St. Mark's is called to be a progressive, inclusive, life-affirming Christian faith community in The United Church of Canada that is committed to engaging faith, scripture and tradition in progressive ways, seeking to be inclusive of all regardless of ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, race or sexual orientation and striving to affirm the inherent blessing of life found in all Creation.

(St. Mark’s, 2008)

It is from that statement that we take our tagline, Progressive, Inclusive, and Life Affirming. The 2006 Strategic Planning Document of the congregation

Progressive, Inclusive,
Life Affirming are
intertwined – constantly
changing – a living entity.
Participant

brought some background to those words.

Progressive – in both faith and practice we will not be bound by fixed, historic, orthodox traditions or understandings of God, but looking forward, unfolding in faith and thought; open to Change [spirited], connected to healthy community, responsive/dynamic [vs static], theologically/adaptive/changing, thinking/ questioning/future oriented

Inclusive - we want to reflect the multiplicity of faces we see in our city, to be respectful of and learn from the faith traditions around us, and ensure that services, actions, and words are accessible to all, especially to those for whom "church" is unfamiliar or perceived to be hostile; diversity, consciousness / respectful of other's needs, eliminate isms, nonjudgmental, ageless, welcoming, accessible (physically, actions, gestures, language, ritual

Life Affirming – seeing and celebrating the holy and sacred in our very midst, even in that which and those who seem foreign to us, caring for the environment, caring for each other and for others, and seeking ways to live kindly, generously, and responsively; Environmental / ecological respect, inspiring, responsible for world and other's lives, positive, joyous, thankfulness, gratefulness, hopeful, decisions stand, best love, attention to good of others, "outreach", Mission & Service / Benevolent, social, blessings of live for all, in life, in death, in life after death, choose life.

(St. Mark's, 2006)

But, the challenge with these statements and the tagline of Progressive, Inclusive & Life Affirming is that they are not fully owned by the whole congregation. They were in place when half of the congregation arrived and they accepted them as part of St. Mark's, but they don't yet have what I would call 'real ownership' of them. The work of this project has been to draw the congregation into a unified ownership of an understanding of who we are and what we are to be about asking "In what ways are we Progressive?"

This is, and has been, and will continue to be a process of the whole congregation hearing the words, and making room for the words to expand their world

No one left behind.
Participant

of faith in a new direction. If these are living words, then it is not half of the congregation's task, but the entire congregation's task, to find new ways to adapt, change and expand how we will live out this goal.

The most significant struggle or challenge, with our tagline is with the word "Progressive", not our definition of the word, but simply the use of the word. Progressive was used far too aggressively in the experience of our newcomers from West Hill. It meant to them, in their previous context of ministry, that familiar pieces of their life of faith were being taken away from them. Period. Done. Although the Progressive Christianity USA, Organization was a direction that folks had agreed to move forward with as a congregation, what became the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, operating out of West Hill, went dramatically beyond the American version to a place where people in the congregation were no longer comfortable participating. All connection to language of God or of Christ was removed.

Living PILA is constantly
changing
Participant

Both organizations are built on Eight Points, but as the table below shows, (Figure 50) there is a dramatic difference in understanding between the two.

<p>Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6</p>	<p>Progressivechristianity.org USA http://progressivechristianity.ca/prc/?page_id=6</p>
<p>By calling ourselves “progressive” we mean that we:</p>	<p>By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who:</p>
<p>1. centre our faith on values that affirm the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life, the inherent and equal worth of all persons, and the supremacy of love expressed actively in our lives as compassion and social justice;</p>	<p>Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;</p>
<p>2. engage in a search that has roots in our Christian heritage and traditions;</p>	<p>2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;</p>
<p>3. embrace the freedom and responsibility to examine traditionally held Christian beliefs and practices, acknowledging the human construction of religion, and in the light of conscience and contemporary learning, adjust our views and practices accordingly;</p>	<p>3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to: Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, Believers and agnostics, Women and men, Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, Those of all classes and abilities;</p>
<p>4. draw from diverse sources of wisdom, regarding all as fallible human expressions open to our evaluation of their potential contribution to our individual and communal lives;</p>	<p>Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;</p>
<p>5. find more meaning in the search for understanding than in the arrival at certainty; in the questions than the answers;</p>	<p>5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;</p>
<p>6. encourage inclusive, non-discriminatory, non-hierarchical community where our common humanity is honoured in a trusting atmosphere of mutual respect and support;</p>	<p>6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;</p>
<p>7. promote forms of individual and community celebration, study, and prayer that use understandable, inclusive, non-dogmatic, value-based language by which people of religious, skeptical, or secular backgrounds may be nurtured and challenged;</p>	<p>7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;</p>
<p>8. commit to journeying together, our ongoing growth characterized by honesty, integrity, openness, respect, intellectual rigor, courage, creativity, and balance</p>	<p>8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.</p>

Figure 50 Eight Points

We are, in this process trying to use “language against language to liberate from the restriction of language” (Beardslee & Lull, 1989, 32). It is not as easy as it might sound. The Very Rev. Dr. Gary Paterson, 41st Moderator (2012-2015) of our United Church of Canada posted in a blog a healthy description of what progressive can mean from a workshop he attended:

Post-evangelicals and post-liberals are coming together, in an emergent, progressive Christianity, with spiritual vibrancy, theological depth, and holistic mission, that offers a simple, compelling articulation of good news and life practice...following the movement of the Spirit, by seeking reconciliation with God, our neighbours, and the earth; making a fierce and constant commitment to God’s justice; nourishing generous Christian communities that unapologetically proclaim and seek God’s Kingdom in their shared life and in the world.... We can do more together than we could ever dream of alone.

(Paterson, 2013)

It requires re-assessment by us from time to time, to see if we are actually being this way. We would need to assess where we have missed the mark.

Participant

In the process of this fifth evening’s conversation looking at our ‘tagline’, there was a movement of understanding of things that were shared by people.

You could see a change in the body language of some in the group as they got a chance to speak of how much that transition to “progressive’ had hurt them in their previous congregation, and how you could see them acknowledge that they had been heard by the group. Maybe we need more chances for people to be heard. People were introspective, talking about how they dealt with and continue to deal with the congregational transformation they have experienced in their journey to St. Mark’s. There was a willingness

Respectful even if we don’t agree.

Participant

to explore and listen, not to be tied to the past, but to begin to think about what we could be as a congregation.

We may feel we are on a ledge looking over, but not out on a limb by ourselves.

Participant

One of the places where there is a ‘cultural’ difference in language and understanding has been around the team ministry work at St. Mark’s. There used to be an invitation offered to a person: “Mary, we think that you have the potential within in you to lead the Worship Ministry Team at St. Mark’s.” Within that statement was an understanding that Mary might bring a new way of working with worship in the congregation that might stretch and challenge the congregation, but the critical element was that the nominating process trusted that Mary would bring herself to the ministry and the congregation would be different because of the gifts she would exercise in leading the worship ministry team. When I arrived and was planning my first Advent and Christmas season, I remember asking a few people “how is Advent done here?” The response was that there isn’t one way. It’s beginning to feel like there is. That is a fundamentally different understanding of both the individual involved and what the task of leadership is to be. It is an understanding that the gifts you bring to the ministry will change our ministry and that is good. The opposing thought to this idea is that a committee has a list of tasks to do, and we need to get the right person on board to chair the committee that will get the things done right. In a progressive, inclusive, life-affirming environment, there has to be a trust in the people to do the right things, rather

We have to be inviting, more than simply accepting: But, there is a caveat. We have to be prepared for discomfort. Risk is implicit.

Participant

than to do things right.

Before coming to St. Mark's I read through several years' worth of annual reports to learn about the congregation before I applied. The fact that the person that was the financial 'reader', who is a Chartered Accountant, was the chair of the worship ministry team amazed me. In my previous congregations, that person would have to be on the finance team, to help ensure that we did **things right**, and here she was empowered and encouraged to do **right things**. This remains a continual, healthy tension in our understanding of how we live out our mission through the lens of who we are as we work with the nominating

Vigilant in accepting where people are
Participant

It is easier in theory than in practice to live up to these words.
Participant

process helping facilitate each year's transitions in leadership positions as well as finding the right people to support the ministry teams. A reflection recorded in a 2007 edition of the congregational MEMO Newsletter, offers a comment from Don Uhryniw, a United Church minister from St. John NB. He says that "a congregation can either be one that hammers nails or rolls away stones, a powerful reference to the crucifixion and resurrection story". He says "We've opted to roll away stones". That remains for me, a powerful image as we reflect on how we live out our ministry in a team based environment with half of our congregation coming out of a committee based environment.

The world is changing, the church is changing and we need to find a new way to be ourselves, to be a unique community of faith. I believe that the General

It requires re-assessment by us from time to time, to see if we are actually being this way. We would need to assess where we have missed the mark.
Participant

Open to look for new ways to explore faith.
Participant

Practitioner model of congregation, all things to all people is past, people no longer walk to their community church, and in our last statistical evaluation

of our ministry only 37 out of 128 families live in our traditional geographical zone. As we reflect on who we are and what it means for us to be progressive, inclusive and life-affirming, we hone in on what we are called to be. We can't plan ourselves into the future, but as we grow further into our faith and continue to adapt as a congregation, we will become more than we have been before.

It is that opportunity that we strive for, that in the growth and new understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a community we will find something new. But that does not mean that we aggressively throw away those things that connect us to our tradition of faith. I'm a stickler for using the bible at worship, and I know that the word progressive for many has meant that they have lost the stories of faith. Some congregations describe themselves as "taking the bible seriously, but not literally". I can't decide if I like the phrase or not.

Brings hope to questions, not judgments. You can question and yet still belong.
Participant

I make homemade cucumber relish every year with my daughters. I have my grandmother's food chopper that I attach to a kitchen chair and my daughters and I grind up cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, and onions. My daughters usually wear their downhill ski goggles to peel and grind the onions. I made it every year growing up with

Be honest about value of things.
Participant

my Mom, and she grew up making it with her Mom. I was the youngest of three boys so was always voted (pronounced

sent) to be the one to help mom, but I loved it. I still do. The recipe is from Mrs. Stewart, a lifetime friend of the family. We all make the same recipe, but no two

Progressive is living up to
faith responsibilities.
Participant

batches turn out the same. I never eat grocery store relish, only homemade. I also make steamed Christmas pudding every year. Carrots, potatoes, dates, currants, raisins, cherries and don't forget the brown sugar sauce with the dark rum added just before serving so you don't cook off the punch. This year I still had a pudding in the freezer and commented that we didn't need to make one for Christmas. I was corrected by my youngest daughter. "We make Christmas pudding every year and will be doing so again, get the old one out and we will eat it, and make a new one. It's what we do." I did as I

was told. I tell these stories because they provide my best explanation of the value of scripture. These are the recipes of my family. I added an apple to the recipe for the pudding, and I switch out the suet for oil. I also double the

The three words are a
marker and a pointer,
where we are, and where
we are going.
Participant

amount of tomatoes in the relish because I like the little red bits, but these are part of "who I am." I always say that they are "Grandma's Recipes," but they are my memories of working with my mom in the kitchen I grew up in. The recipes are passed on; hopefully my daughters will make relish and Christmas pudding when they have their own home.

To me, it's the same with the scriptures. These are the stories of my family, they are the stories that my family has lifted up and cared for, for generations. Has the

recipe been changed as it was passed down, how could it not have been, and yet, these stories have value and continue to speak to us today.

It is our conviction that Christians should take all biblical language seriously, but that they should treat it as **offering imaginative proposals**.

To treat biblical texts as proposals of imaginative possibilities is not to deny them authority. Far from it. Every suggestion coming from scripture has authority—namely, the authority of proposals that have been influential in shaping the life and community of those who have listened to scripture in the past. That what they suggest differs from the edicts attributed to modern science is certainly highly relevant to how people will respond to them, but there might yet be something worthwhile in them.

(Beardslee and Lull 1989, 41)

As we grind and chop and cook and bottle, we tell stories about family, about

Progressive is not
exclusive, closed or
judgmental.
Participant

people about and the stories I know about them. Am

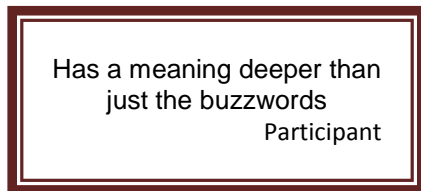
I telling my kids critical lessons of life? Nope. Am I

telling them stories of life that they might hear and

learn from in a new way? Absolutely! To be progressive, inclusive and life affirming means that you don't throw away the pieces of our past, you to change the recipe as you go, and you value where we have come from and honour that it calls us to move forward.

In the final evening session of my ministry project, looking at what it means to be a congregation that describes itself as Progressive, Inclusive & Life-Affirming, I talked about what each of the three words meant in a historical context for the congregation. As the process moved forward I asked a question – “what does it mean when PILA is one thing rather than three?” The previous Strategic Planning Document from 2006 articulated three distinctive understandings of the three words. I ask a question

differently now, what does it mean for us to speak of the three words as one goal, as a singularity as a people of faith because I don't think they can be taken apart anymore. I don't think you can be progressive without being inclusive, I don't think that you can be inclusive without being life-affirming, nor do I think you can be life-affirming without being progressive, did I get all the combinations of the three words? John Cobb says "Progressive Christians long to become a community that is radically inclusive, (e. b. Cobb 2008, ix) and I have to agree.



Marshall Bruce Mathers III, better known by his stage name, Eminem, is an American rapper, record producer, songwriter, and actor. Eminem spent much of his formative years living in a largely black lower-middle-class Detroit neighborhood. He and his mom were one of three white households on their block. (Wiki) His rap is powerful, it is intense, it is dense, it is challenging, but it is still rap, not easy listening, and yet one of my favourite songs is his "Not Afraid", when you read the words, you get a kum ba ya feeling, but when you hear it, you are moved by the challenge he calls us to find our way through together.

I'm not afraid, to take a stand,
 everybody, come take my hand.
 We'll walk this road together, through the storm,
 whatever weather, cold or warm
 Just letting you know that you're not alone
 Holler if you feel like you've been down the same road.

([Eminem](#), 2012)

It is an old song, sung in new way.

I am a visual learner, and as I worked through the evening with the folks gathered to share in this conversation I offered an image of “progressive”. I put a first image of a line on a fulcrum



Figure 51 Fulcrum

(Figure 51 Fulcrum1), more like a teeter-totter if you will, and suggested that it wasn’t the right image because if you are on one side or the other the lever shifts automatically, and more than that, if you are on one side, you absolutely not on the other. Instead I



Figure 52 Trivial Pursuit Pie

put up an image of a Trivial Pursuit pie (© Hasbro) with all the pieces in place, (Figure 52) more of an image that as you move into a more progressive theology, you get new pieces that make the wholeness of being progressive, but what was really interesting to me was that one of the women commented that you really can’t have a full pie, that you need some empty spaces (Figure 53) in that pie

because you are both picking up pieces as you move forward in your understanding of faith, but at the same time, you are constantly letting pieces go, trading them for others, leaving places blank for a while, I thought her comment on the image I put up made it even that much better for the conversation for the group. She was right. It is a process of moving and changing and being changed and being moved, all through the journey of learning more about our life of faith. Sometimes it is picking up new pieces in our understanding of faith, other times it is letting go. If



Figure 53 Trivial Pursuit Pieces

this is how we identify ourselves as a congregation, progressive, inclusive, life-affirming,
the question remains: How do we live it out?

Chapter 6

So What?

Learning to live with the ambiguity that falls somewhere between the extremes. Our daughter Sharon has absorbed hours of unsolicited advice from her parents. When she feels just about drowned by it, she cocks her head to one side, flaps her eyelashes, and asks innocently, “So, What’s your point, Dad?”

(Taylor, 243)

Preaching is hard work. It is the constant in our day to day ministry. No matter what happens during the week, we are expected to deliver a sermon on Sunday morning. I once was invited to be the guest speaker for the 25th anniversary of the ordination, of my friend the Rev. Nancy Waterman. We built the service on one of her favourite readings:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

This is a very familiar verse, and it holds within it the same division of responsibility found in the Ten Commandments. The first commandments are ones

focused on our relationship with God (love the Lord your God, No idols, Sabbath...), the rest are about relationships with people (do not murder, covet, honour parents...). For me, balancing these two types of relationships is what proclamation of “The Word” is about. How do we connect with God, how do we connect with each other? Celebrating her 25 years of ministry, I did some math:

45 sermons a year for 25 years = 1,125 sermons
25 years with 45 weeks at 40 hours = 45,000 hours
Presbytery 25 years 5 meetings/year 3 hours/meeting= 375 hours
159 Baptisms
146 Board Meetings
188 Funerals
Trustees, Budgets, Prayers, Bulletins

I spoke about that fascinating toy many of us had as kids, with disks and rings, and tiny pins and coloured pens, the Spirograph.

The original US-released Spirograph consisted of two different-sized plastic rings, with gear teeth on both the inside and outside of their circumferences. They were pinned to a cardboard backing with pins, and any of several provided gearwheels, which had holes provided for a ballpoint pen to extend through them to an underlying paper writing surface. It could be spun around to make geometric shapes on the underlying paper medium. It was developed by British engineer Denys Fisher and first sold in 1965.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirograph>

It is hard to say what the most important part of the Spirograph process was; I think it was the pins. If you didn't manage to fasten the stationary ring securely your design would be a disaster, and the cardboard lid of the box provided that the game came in just wasn't a sturdy enough. All you needed was something solid to start with, and when you had that your colours and shapes and designs would be spectacular.

You have to be able to articulate what is the piece at the centre of your faith?

What is really neat about Spirograph is that almost any pattern that you made, whatever colour you used, you could almost always see an easily defined centre of the image, (Figure 54) you would know where the middle was, no matter what size the opening would be. That became the focus of the sermon for the anniversary service. I talked about what it meant to keep something at the centre of her ministry and how she had kept the love of God and of others as that centre. She held up that passage from Matthew 22 as the centre of her ministry. I think that is the first of three key learnings from this ministry project. You have to have something solid at the centre of your life, at the centre of your ministry, at the centre of your faith. The work and challenge of ministry isn't about the expectations and dogmas of faith, it is about having an anchor at the centre, something that you can hold on to.

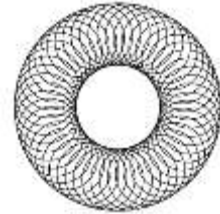


Figure 54 Spirograph

Comments about people articulating faith are easily made in the negative. “I don't believe that, I don't agree with that, I don't think that happened”, but it is harder for individuals to articulate that core piece of their faith. I too struggle with the stories of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There are different ways to identify an individual's connection to their belief system, to articulate that the life of Jesus both has value in, and, adds value to, life. Some people can, with integrity, say they honestly believe in the words of the Apostle's Creed. Most people in the United Church sign on with the New Creed, but I am even more relaxed in my criterion, that identifies, or defines one who believes in God. (Figure 55 Creeds)

The Apostles Creed	A New Creed	Me
<p>I BELIEVE in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.</p> <p>I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. (BAS, 251)</p>	<p>We are not alone, we live in God's world.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>We trust in God.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us.</p> <p>We are not alone.</p> <p>Thanks be to God. (VU, 918)</p>	<p>I believe in something bigger than myself that creates life and calls us to live well, caring for each other and the world</p> <p>I believe that Jesus lived.</p> <p>I believed that Jesus died.</p> <p>I believe that Jesus lives again because over 2000 years later we are still talking about and learning from his life.</p> <p>I believe in the holy spirit, a presence that walks with us, that no matter where the journey takes us, no matter where the path leads, that we are not alone.</p>

Figure 55 Creeds

What do you put at the centre of your faith? What is your absolute that you will not let go of? From there, you build a life of faith. I personally don't need salvation, resurrection or miracles. I don't need judgment or hell or a kingdom of heaven, but I need a God whose "power is utterly inexhaustible and is always used for love, [whose] power operates not by force but by lure." (Allen, 38) I simply refuse to live a life that doesn't make room for that 'still small voice' or that 'quiet voice' (Figure 55 1 Kings 19) that calls me and challenges me to be a better person. I don't need a life after this one, I intend to live this one to the fullest, and if someday, my grandchildren pull out my grandmother's grinder and make relish, or they pull out the recipe to make Christmas pudding, I will be remembered. I will live on.

The second learning from this process is that the conversations of faith and

1 Kings 19:11-13 The Voice

Eternal One: ¹¹ Leave this cave, and go stand on the mountainside in My presence.

The Eternal passed by him. The mighty wind separated the mountains and crumbled every stone before the Eternal. *This was not a divine wind, for the Eternal was not within this wind. After the wind passed through, an earthquake shook the earth. This was not a divine quake, for the Eternal was not within this earthquake.* ¹²⁻¹³ After the earthquake was over, there was a fire. *This was not a divine fire, for the Eternal was not within this fire.*

After the fire *died out*, there was *nothing but* the sound of a calm breeze. *And through this breeze a gentle, quiet voice entered into Elijah's ears. He covered his face with his cloak and went to the mouth of the cave.*

understanding aren't about the historical stories, they are about what is happening in the world right now; shootings in Toronto, terrorism, the struggle for oil, the challenges in Gaza / Israel / Palestine, Syria, the religious and cultural diversity of the community around us. We have to know what is going

Figure 55 1 Kings 19

on in the world and we need to not be afraid to talk about it.

We are called to Preach, to challenge, to call out, to encourage and to empower, but that is not the norm in the church. Every congregation has people on every side of every issue, and every issue stirs passion in the folks that connect personally with that issue, and there is struggle, there is conflict, and it is safer to not risk the journey. I'm guilty of playing it safe, but I have also gotten in trouble for slamming the Prime Minister, or the Mayor. It is hard to cover both sides fairly without an opinion offending some or another. It is easier to let things go. In my reading I was shocked to hear of this research study's results. Although it is dated, I would suggest it is still in 'play' today, and the pieces I emphasized still speak.

In 1968, a team of sociologists asked 1,580 Protestant clergy, selected at random from California churches, what kind of sermons they had given in the preceding year. That year had been one of the most tortured in American history, having witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, the burning of dozens of American cities, the issuance of the Kerner Commission report on racism, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the six-day war in the Mideast, the withdrawal of Lyndon Johnson from the presidential campaign, and the starvation of tens of thousands of Biafirans in Africa.

In such a tumultuous year of moral chaos, one might expect volumes of commentary from the pulpit. This was not the case. Instead, only 6 percent of the sermons preached spoke substantially to social and political issues. Moreover, most preachers who dealt with such questions did so only in passing. They "touched upon" social questions far more than they "mainly devoted" sermons to them. ...

Nor is it the case that the above conclusions are wrong by virtue of being based on an outdated study. Two 1988 studies of clergy in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) came to essentially the same conclusions. One, drawing on the self-reports of 90 percent of Disciples senior ministers who participated, indicates that these

We have to know what is going on in the world and we need to not be afraid to talk about it.

Participant

pastors are most reluctant to address their congregations precisely on those issues where they perceive the greatest gap between them and their congregations. ...

Conclude the sociologists: "It is as if there had been no Sermon on the Mount." It is apparently not the case that laypeople hear sermons articulating Christian approaches to major issues, but remain deaf to what they hear. Rather is it **that laypeople "cannot be blamed for ignoring sermons that were not preached."** The theological root of silence lies in the assumption on the part of preachers that the chief function of a sermon is to comfort the distressed. ...

Factors other than theological ones, of course, influence the clergy toward silence on serious issues. Congregations seldom pass out rewards for the "most courageous sermon of the year." Many clergy are convinced that their congregations object to relevant sermons. Yet because some clergy do preach such sermons, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that **when the pulpit is silent, the silence is self-imposed.**

(Allen and Williamson, 1991, 40)

I emphasized two lines in that quote, "That laypeople cannot be blamed for ignoring sermons that were not preached" and that "when the pulpit is silent, the silence is self-imposed." Those lines tell me, that we have an opportunity to have conversations with folks, the same conversations they have with themselves as they read the paper or go out for coffee. It is hard to balance the time to experience the holy with feeling of anxiety when we delve into the difficult conversation topics.

What do we say when we preach? What do we not say? The challenge in preaching is to continually pull an old story into a new way of seeing or thinking of our connection with God and with each other. Phyllis Trible, author and feminist scholar, comments,

"All scripture is a pilgrim wandering through history, engaging in new settings and ever refusing to be locked in the box of the past," nicely captures the sense of scripture and its subsequent interpretation as an adventure, a sense shared by process thinkers.

(Allen and Williamson, 1991, 74)

The stories of our faith are not just stories of the past. We may hear them as “stories of old”, but we still manage to find ourselves in the story today. The stories are alive, the stories are still speaking.

The "God is still speaking," a campaign by the United Church of Christ [USA] to remind us that God still has a lot more to say. The comma was inspired by the Gracie Allen quote, "***Never place a period where God has placed a comma.***" For the UCC the Comma is a new way to proclaim "*Our Faith is 2,000 years old, our thinking is not.*" The Comma invites us to believe that God speaks through other people, nature, music, art, a theorem, the Bible, and in so many other ways.



Figure 56 Comma

<http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/about/>

The God is Still Speaking campaign (Figure 56 Comma) has encouraged us to reach out and work to connect congregations with their communities again. That is the task of preaching, to help invite people into the comma, to find a new way of thinking about something that is old, and let the stories call us to something more, preaching scripture in a way that can affect how we live. But we have to be faithful to that text as we enter into the conversation.

The purpose of the preacher's exegesis is to recover a text's witness concerning the situation of the world, God, and God's relationship to the world. The integrity of the text is a fundamental issue. In a genuine conversation, we want to hear what others have to say and not simply what we wish they would say. A great temptation of biblical interpreters is to read the text in the light of their own agendas, values, and practices. The name for this is eisegesis: consciously or unconsciously hearing the text says what the interpreter wishes it so say, even when the text does not so speak. Thus, a first step in working with a text is to be suspicious of how one's exegetical and theological predispositions are influenced by political ideology, economic and social prejudice, ethnic and racial sensitivities, national and international loyalties, personal moral values, and phobias.

(Allen and Williamson, 1991, 93)

There is a balance, a rather delicate balance to this challenge of eisegesis. We must constantly read and dig into different understandings of the stories of faith. For me, preaching isn't about "The Answer" to the reading, but rather, it is about "The Question" it causes us to ask.

Preaching is an art and should open up the creative energy of the hearer in their listening as we open up and delve into the story. Elizabeth Achtemeier, one of the leading evangelical voices in the Presbyterian Church (USA), offers an understanding of what she called "poet language" and how it functions:

"Finally, artists, of whatever medium, rarely confront us directly with the demand that we accept their words or adopt their views and perceptions. The poet does not say, "This is truth; believe it." The dramatist does not insist, "This is the only way human life is." The painter does not imply, "This is the one shape of reality." **Instead, these artists present to us that which they see, in words so evocative and expressions so suggestive that we are enabled to enter into their experiences and to see the world as they see it. They prompt us, by their imagery, their imagination, their nuance of expression, to live through what they have lived and to know what they have known. Thus they enlarge our vision and give us new possibilities for seeing and doing.**

(Beardslee and Lull 1989, 33)

How do we see the world? How do we see the story of our faith? How do we hear it speaking? What did it say? What was the context of that conversation? What might that conversation be like in the current day? What has value in the question? Bill Morrow, my preaching professor at Queen's pushed into my head the critical question of preaching "What was the conflict that was taking place at the time that required an answer to be written down". What are the sides and understandings that we can glean from the story? There is never simply one answer or direction in the reading. Think for

a moment of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. How many sermons have you heard on that reading? There is a joke about the older preachers that they “have preached on just about every perspective in that story except that of the fatted calf”.

The sermon brings to the hearer the opportunity to find their meaning of incarnation; it shows us where God is in the story.

How does the sermon make room for God’s spirit to change us, to lure us, to call us to something more? Preaching and prayer give us the same challenge and opportunity, “Essentially prayer is “attention to God,” openness to [God’s] lure, and readiness to serve as [] instrumental agents in the effecting of the divine purpose; answer to prayer is not a denial of this, but the way in which we are led to see more profoundly what is that divine purpose and hence to “grow in grace” as its willing servants.” (Pittenger, 127) If we can’t make a connection with people through our experience of faith, then those people will not come to have a real relationship with God. They will miss out on the power of a community of faith to refuel, and the experience of the holy to recover, and their life, which may seem good will eventually fall short, lacking in satisfaction. Miyoung Paik, in her D.Min.@Drew thesis entitled *Becoming Alive With Prayer*, had, in her project sessions folks writing prayers. One of the most poignant ones included in her thesis was an adaptation of the 23rd Psalm submitted by participants:

Can you imagine life without the shepherd? Are we taking for granted the power of Psalm 23 today? Listen to this reversed paraphrased version of Psalm 23 by Linda Gladden and Alisha Hansen, members of the 2005 Companions in Christ Bible study group:

I am IT; I have no shepherd; I want it all.
I am drowning in deep rapids.
I have no soul and I am going joyfully down the wrong path.
God is dead. I am so afraid, what will I do?
He is no longer my leader or guide.
He cannot help me when I am in deep distress.
He is not the light for my paths.
When I am in horrible trouble and despair,
He is not with me. I am so alone.

(Paik, 51)

We simply do not want to go there. "The process God (The one who knows us, and whom we know) has more power than any other entity, but God is not omnipotent, that is, God cannot unilaterally cause things to happen. God's power is limited... by nature. The difference between God's power and all other kinds of power are twofold: God's power is utterly inexhaustible and is always used for love... God's power operates not by force but by lure. In each occasion, God tries to lure people toward possibilities that offer the greatest expression of love in a particular circumstance." (Allen, Pg. 37, 38)

This is an image of God in that incredible relationship that I hold deeply, inviting us into the dance of life and the dance of faith. I was so excited to find in my research others think as I do. I used to think like this, but worse than that, I thought I was the only one that thought like this. That was an incredible gift to me in the work of this D.Min. Program and project, reading so many new ways of thinking gave me the opportunity to connect so deeply to my experience of faith! For me, the preaching moment isn't about telling you the way to live, but instead inviting you into the story to find a new way of thinking about or seeing God in your lives. It is an invitation for you to consider a different way of life, or the same life from a different perspective.

You have to know what is going on in the world and preach a story that fits into the context of what people are living now. That old adage of a preacher with a newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other still fits, it still speaks. But, in today's context people hold up their iPad and can say this is "The Word of God." Although there may be a Bible "app" in there too, the iPad, or iPod, or iPhone is their life. The challenge for ministers continues to connect them with something bigger than their devices, to come out of their iCocoon, to lift up their heads and examine the world and see God as part of that world.

The final piece of what I have learned from this project is the realization that there is a cost to being a church that is on the "bleeding edge" of faith (what used to be called the cutting edge) that defines itself as "progressive". "There is no such thing as a free lunch." There is a cost to change in any congregation. When the previous minister at St. Mark's, the Rev. Alan Hall 'came out' in 1988 to the congregation, many people left, the congregation came in to do a formal evaluation of his ability to "Maintain the Peace" When that concluded with his staying on in ministry the congregation worked hard to find a new state of equilibrium as a changed people, in a new church, inclusive of all.

People came to check out St. Mark's and found a new church home. Fully half of the congregation I serve are refugees, exiles, migrants, expatriates from West Hill. I offer the Wiki description for Expatriate because it really shows what the word means:

ex·pa·tri·ate: verb (used with object), ex·pa·tri·at·ed, ex·pa·tri·at·ing.

1. To banish (a person) from his or her native country.
2. To withdraw (oneself) from residence in one's native country.
3. To withdraw (oneself) from allegiance to one's country.

(dictionary.reference.com)

It is the best word though because it means both a removal of an individual by another, and a decision to withdraw oneself. That tension between the two sides of that word is still real for too many. It is still hard to say if they withdrew or if they were banished.

There is room both in the church and in the story if we make it. There is still room in the story if we don't hold it so tight. There is room in the story if we do things well we know that faith can make a difference in people's lives. It's not a yes/no world any more – it's both/and. Church and faith are no longer about getting people to do **things right**, it is about trusting people to do **right things**. The right things are to connect with God, to be in relationship, to care for one another. It is no longer about writing a cheque for the homeless; it's about sitting down to some pancakes with someone who lives on the street and learning their name, their face, and their story.

It's about relationships – with the community – with each other – and with God... we have to come back to that third relationship.

Len pushed me on the conclusion telling me that I had to get out of the words. "True post-modern church isn't about the words. It's about the soundtrack or story." I must admit that I got stuck on that, and then, 5 days before the final draft of this writing was due, someone started a meeting with a reflection from their email. It was by the Rev. Alan Parker writing for the *Still Speaking Daily* Devotional. He wrote about having friends over for dinner and finally one guest commented: "I grew up in the church; I just wish someone had told me somewhere along the way that those stories in the Bible

weren't true." His response – "Part of me was heartbroken. Yes, someone should have told him that – gently, and with a guiding hand. But part of me wanted to say, "Well, how old were you when you figured out, all by yourself, that 'The Little Engine that Could' was both not true, and absolutely true?" (Parker, 2015)

That is the story – that is the image – that is what I see the faith we are constantly becoming is about. The challenge isn't to learn and hold information, the challenge is to distil (Figure 57) the 405,000 results that arrive at your device with each click and decide what does and does not have value.

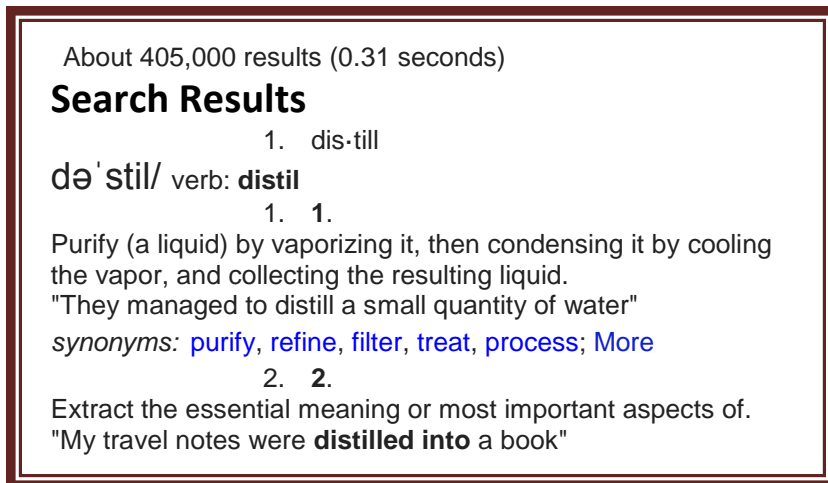


Figure 57 Distil

What is not true?

What is absolutely true?

What is both?

Like the questions for each of the topics of this project:

What is it?

What isn't it?

Why is the point or value in it? / Why do we do it anyway?

To be faithful today: You have to know what is at your centre. You have to connect with what is going on around you. And you have to accept that there is a risk as you move ahead in faith.

Jim Taylor's daughter was prone to ask "So What?" The results of this project in Bumper-Sticker form:

- Prayer: It changes us.
- Worship: It connects us – not just with each other – but with God.
- Sacraments: - It's not magic – The words become more than words
- Sin, Confession & Forgiveness – calls us forward.
- Progressive, Inclusive & Life Affirming – It's not something we are, it is something we are Constantly becoming.

So What? I conclude with a line that answers that:

**True communion with God in prayer
comes only after all the words have been spoken.**

(Lewis 1976, 38)

In that silence, we are constantly becoming.



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