

A Dialogue Sermon – We are the Church

***Shared at St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury - June 14, 2015
by the Rev. Catherine Somerville and the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman***
Scripture Readings: Psalm 100; Ezekiel 17:22-24; Mark 4:26-34

Catherine Q 1: So the United Church is 90 years old. That seems like a short time, especially when our congregation dates back almost 200 years. How can that be?

Bill Answer:

As a denomination our history is relatively short, but the roots of our denomination go back centuries. We see ourselves as part of the world-wide Christian faith, so our origins go back to Jesus and the first disciples. As a Protestant denomination, our beginnings go back to John Calvin and the reformed tradition, including John Knox and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and the Methodist tradition with its roots in the renewal movement of John and Charles Wesley. St. Andrew's was a Presbyterian Congregation at one time, but we also have roots that are Methodist. In parts of Canada, deliberately planned "Uniting Churches" also existed, particularly on the Prairies, years before the United Church was formally constituted. While in our current formation, constituted by an act of Parliament, we are just 90 years old, the sources for our structure, organization, and traditions within the faith go back for centuries.

Catherine Q 2: So what's the big deal? Why are we acknowledging the 90th anniversary?

Bill Answer:

Every year is a good time to remember our past, and to plan for the future. This year is no different than any other. We also know that changes in our society, leading to changes in expectations around spiritual matters, and growth in the multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-religious nature of our country, means that we need to be open to a new future.

The United Church asked for a Comprehensive Review Working Group to be formed following the last General Council in 2012 to review the United Church and to make recommendations for the future in terms of structure, governance, financial support, and ongoing ministry. This review is a major undertaking, has been completed this year, and the working group has tabled its report which is going to the 42nd General Council in August, 2015. Many see this time as a new beginning for the church as it seeks to understand what it needs to be and to do in living out the mission of God to the world.

Catherine : That makes sense, but some may wonder why is the church worrying about its governance and structure, when we should make our mission and ministry our focus.

Catherine Indeed, the focus of the church needs to be on its ministry as it seeks to live out its understanding of God's mission to the world. This is clear. Yet the structure of the church, especially when it becomes too cumbersome or too expensive to operate, can get in the way of living that mission. The United Church has a structure that depends upon a very large number of volunteers for it to continue to function, and we do not have the membership numbers to justify such a structure. What is worse, many feel the committee structures are so onerous it takes away from opportunities to serve others directly. Our time is spent in meetings and planning, not in doing. What is more concerning as a matter of principle, our financial support for activities in mission and outreach beyond the local congregation are not as great (in terms of real dollars) as they were 25 years ago. That means we need to reinvigorate all that we do so that our members see the value, and purpose, of our shared activities as a denomination. Local congregations can and do share much in their local context, but we also can do much more with the resources we share across the denomination for partners in Canada and around the world.

Bill Q 4: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Catherine Answer: Well, for example, our creed says that we are the church, and we live “with respect in creation.” In our local congregations, we can do more to recycle and compost. We can implement programs to cut heat loss and encourage conservation. Some congregations have implemented solar heating projects that have reduced their costs and also supplemented the energy available to their neighbours by sharing surpluses on the grid. We used to have solar panels here at St. Andrew’s Place – we were ahead of the new wave of technology, but unfortunately they did not work as effectively as current technology.

These are great steps. Together, however, we can be pro-active in concerns for the environment as a whole. We support partners who are severely impacted by climate change and the resulting damage that is taking place due to flooding and mud slides as glaciers melt in neighbouring mountainous regions. We can help partners as they face the resulting damage from mining operations that may include toxic waste or contaminated water. Local ecological projects are worthwhile; global concerns demand a concerted effort by our whole denomination in cooperation with partners in Canada and around the world.

Bill Q 5: Okay, I get it. But what can I do, and others here?

Catherine Answer: Special events are often a time to give a gift for what is important to us. We could give a special gift to the Mission and Service Fund in honour of this milestone anniversary. Envelopes are provided for those who may wish to do just that. Far less than 50% of our members support the Mission and Service Fund as a denominational fund, yet through that fund we not only work with partners in Canada and the wider world community, but we also depend on that funding for resources, educational events, support to theological education, and staffing for our denomination’s programs. The advantage of a denominational fund is we share the opportunity – in fact, if each member of the church gave \$1 a week more to the Mission and Service Fund, then we would increase our total funds by over 25%. When we all give, even if only a small amount, great opportunities open up.

Catherine Q 6 Okay, Bill, but what do you see for the future of the church in the next 10 years as we approach our 100th anniversary. You have written a book on the changing church – what do you and others see as the future?

Bill Answer: Ed Kruse and I argued in our book *Wake Up, Church!* that the local congregation has been one of the most important transforming institutions in communities for hundreds of years. It is within the congregation that partnerships have been initiated, ideas shared, and new understandings developed.

Leonard Sweet is one of the most prolific preachers and teachers about the church today (and of particular interest to me since an article he wrote in the 1970's on the mission of the church initiated my own doctoral studies almost 20 years ago). Sweet has suggested in a book entitled *Post-Modern Pilgrims* that we need to bring the first century passion and enthusiasm of believers who followed Jesus in those early generations of the faith into a 21st century context. People may use different language – they say they are “spiritual” and not “religious,” or they want to be “hands on” in their involvements rather than send money to “distant organizations,” yet we all are driven by a desire to find a sense of truth and value in life that goes beyond our day-to-day activities. The language of “soul” and “spirit” no longer is foreign to most people – we want to understand all of the ways that we can find wholeness and hope in the world. The local congregation can be, and should be, a place where questions are entertained and new ideas debated and shared.

As our Moderator said on Wednesday, the day of the 90th anniversary of our church, when speaking to a gathered throng of United Church members and supporters outside Sarnia City Hall, “I like The United Church of Canada because I do not need to check my brains at the door.”

We can ask contemporary questions, and enter into current debates, but we also need to remember that some ancient wisdom can still be helpful for us as we are open to the spiritual guides who have gone before us. It can be a simple goal if we are open to God's wisdom for us all. We need not choose between preserving the past, or becoming more contemporary – we can do both.

Catherine Something like the wisdom of Yogi Berra, the New York Yankee catcher of 50 years ago: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

Bill That is true, Catherine, but that does sound like a sports analogy to me. But Yogi really was saying we make life too complicated by seeking all of the answers before we simply go out and share life. That was Jesus’ message – share life with others.

Catherine Q 7: Is it really that simple?

Bill Answer: Yes, It is that simple, and that complicated. Have you ever gone to the doctor and she suggests that you walk 30 minutes a day to lower your blood pressure? Or have you been told you should drink more water and less coffee? Or maybe you remember healing stories in the Bible where a leper was told to bathe in the river and he would be cleansed? Sometimes solutions to our particular challenges are easy, but we must take the first step to change our behaviours and reach out in love. In the scriptures today is the story of the mustard seed – a small seed that has a major impact on the economy of the Middle East. Small efforts, sincerely done and carefully shared, can make a real difference for others, and within the world at large.
Yes, it is that simple – and that important.

Bill Q8 So here at St. Andrew’s we are having many ways to celebrate the anniversary of the church. Remind me (and everyone else) what is taking place.

Catherine Answer: Last night we had the two silent movies, with Bob Hall at the key board. And this afternoon at 4:00 p.m. we will have an amazing concert – tickets are still available. And it will be followed by a pot luck dinner to honour Bob Hall’s music ministry here. We celebrate 90 years of the church, but we plan for a future yet to be experienced, yet to be revealed.

Bill Q9 So I am to come like a piano keyboard this afternoon, wearing white and black. But the main reason for the celebrations this weekend is to show our thanks to God, and our appreciation to one another, within this community of faith.

Catherine Answer. Amen to that.