

“Moving Forward with the Spirit: A New Milestone”

June 2, 2019

by Rev. Peter Hartmans

for the 1st Annual Meeting of the Canadian Shield Regional Council

Greetings from our first meeting of the Canadian Shield Regional Council, Sault Ste. Marie. I am writing as your new Executive Minister, Peter Hartmans, and I am delighted to be serving the Canadian Shield Regional Council. “Moving Forward in the Spirit” is the theme for our meeting and practically a good theme for this period of enormous transition within The United Church of Canada. Our Presbyteries and Conference have come to an end, and we have created a new Regional Council, with new boundaries, new relationships and a common geography in Northern Ontario and Quebec. 2019 marks a milestone for The United Church of Canada from coast to coast to coast.

Today, reading from Ezekiel, we read a passage about new beginnings, new life and a new milestone in the history of Israel. Ezekiel was writing during one of Israel’s darkest hours. The city was under siege and the city and temple had been burned to the ground. For Israel, saying this was a time of transition was an enormous understatement, but for Ezekiel, despite the tragic circumstance, he accepted an invitation by God to move forward in the Spirit.

Ezekiel provides such a vivid picture of new life, a new beginning. The passage describes a valley of very, very dry bones, all lying in the desert, lifeless with a memory of a vibrant past. This was a time to despair, but God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal can these bones live?” Ezekiel answers, “O Lord God, you know.” Then God said to Ezekiel, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, “O dry bones; I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am Lord.” Ezekiel said, “So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked and there were sinews on them, and flesh has come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophecy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds O breath, and breath upon these slain, that they may live.’ Breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” This was a milestone, the beginning of new life for Israel. This was a new chapter from the literal ashes of the City.

Milestones happen in all our lives; sometimes you realize they are happening, milestones like the first day of your retirement, the day you finished high school or when you say goodbye to a loved one. Other times milestones are not so clear, you can often only see them when you reflect back on your life. For me the biggest milestones in my life were not clear to me until long after the event. I had finished a Greek exam and I had received another poor grade. For me the phrase “it’s Greek to me” was a lived experience and it was not positive. I had studied and studied, and I was not having success. I made an appointment with my professor to discuss strategies for improving my grades. At my appointment with my professor, I was surprised how emotional I was at the appointment. I needed to pass Greek to be able to graduate; it was a

requirement for graduation. I was so frustrated, as you could be very successful in Seminary and because you could not master an ancient language, you could literally not graduate. I needed to learn Greek, pass, or my time at Seminary would come to an end, without success. Even now, I remember how surprised this very dry academic non-emotional professor was when an emotional student showed up at his office. I imagine he wanted to figure out a way to get me out of his office as fast as possible. He suggested a Greek tutor and he scribbled down a name and phone number and said that perhaps his best student in Greek could provide support. I took the scrap of paper and he shuffled me out of his office. I stood in the hallway and I was bewildered and a little surprised at how abrupt my professor had been. For me he did not seem very supportive and I did not feel I had a solution to my Greek problem. How could one person, who I had never met, help me? I had three months until graduation and getting a passing grade in Greek needed to be a priority. The professor did not appear to want to help and all I had was a scrap of paper in a dark hallway, with a name and a number. What I didn't realize at the time was that the little scrap of paper in my hand would change my life forever.

Today we are finishing the first Regional meeting of the Canadian Shield Regional Council. This gathering in Sault Ste. Marie marks the beginning of our communities of faith joining together with representatives across the Region. January 1, 2019 marked a milestone, the end of Presbyteries and Conference, the end of former structural connections and the beginning of a new way of being and connecting in Community. For many of you, you may not be familiar with the details of our transition. For The United Church of Canada, this is the biggest structural change since 1925, when congregations from across the Region decided to become one church, The United Church of Canada. As our new Governance structure states,

“Governance is understood as a tool through which the organizational Church empowers mission... it is designed to support and inspire the mission of the local communities of faith.” Each community of faith from across the Region is working together, as the United Church living out the gospel. The gathering in Sault Ste. Marie both practically and symbolically symbolizes our coming together as one. As our United Church of Canada manual states: “joining our collective hearts, voices and resources to witness to the gospel and vision of Jesus for a compassionate and just society, both in Canada and around the world.”

This gathering at St. Andrew's United Church in Sault Ste. Marie today marks another milestone with the Ordination of Susan Peverley. Today for Susan, we mark the beginning of a new chapter of her life. After many years of praying, planning, learning, studying, our Region has been invited, in partnership with the new Office of Vocation, to ordain Susan. For Susan I suspect this milestone comes with many emotions – a sense of accomplishment, hope, fear, joy and anticipation, and most of all, moving forward in the Spirit. My prayer for Susan is that she will be richly blessed as she begins this new role and journey serving the Church. This new adventure will be filled with twists and turns, one moment you are having a deep theological conversation with someone about life, death and faith. Another moment you are at a board meeting, at 9:30 on a Tuesday evening, trying to figure out how the congregation can replace the furnace by next

Sunday. The latter was never taught in Seminary, and is a surprise to most new ministers. However, this is ministry, especially in our Region, discussing life and death one moment and discussing which brand of furnace is best for the Church in the evening. For Susan, she is entering an adventure which will be both exciting and frustrating all in the same week. No doubt she will experience great joy but also times in the desert. We as a Church will walk with her, moving forward in the Spirit.

Looking back at Ezekiel, he was describing transformation. The Spirit of God making new things. Breathing life into dry bones, trusting the Spirit. For me back in seminary, I had no idea that the little piece of paper would change my life forever. At the time, I was feeling very low, for me, in my short 22 years, I had my darkest hour. I was not sure I was going to finish. Would I need to drop out? Would I fail? I prayed: "God I need your help, if I am going to finish I need your help." Visiting my professor did not seem like much of an answer; I was given a piece of paper with a stranger's name and a phone number. I was in the desert and it was difficult to see life. My only option was to move forward in the Spirit. I wanted to throw the paper in the garbage, but I reluctantly decided to move forward. I went home and called the number. The Greek tutor seemed glad to help and we agreed to meet at a local library. The tutor told me that they would be wearing a red ski jacket. I went reluctantly to the library and waited. I could identify with Ezekiel's description of dry bones, feeling lifeless. The tutor arrived and we started to study. I started to become hopeful and the tutor was patient, and the tutor supported me for the next few weeks. The semester ended and I passed Greek. At the time, I had no idea my time in the desert and the little scrap of paper, with a phone number and the name Alice, would change my life forever. Alice would become my wife and we together, would have three beautiful children. We have been married 26 years. For me in the desert in 1992, I decided reluctantly to move forward in the Spirit, the bones came alive.

For Susan today with her ordination, we mark a milestone.

In 2019 for the United Church of Canada, we mark a milestone.

I think this transition for the Church is very abstract, how will it impact my local church. However, we are beginning a new chapter as a Church. As we move forward into this new day for our Church, we are indeed moving forward with the Spirit. Amen