

**OPEN TO THE SPIRIT:
UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA CONGREGATIONS ENGAGING THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CANADIAN CONTEXT**

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ADVANCED PASTORAL STUDIES

**Title of Dissertation/Project: Open to the Spirit: United Church of Canada
Congregations Engaging the Twenty-First Century Canadian Context**

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ABSTRACT

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Congregations need encouragement to meet the challenges of their twenty-first century contexts in faithful and lively ways. This study focuses on thriving congregations as a way to help other congregations deal with issues of declining membership, diminishing resources, and a loss of social and political voice. Using a post-colonial feminist lens, the dynamics and methodologies of nine diverse United Church of Canada congregations in Toronto Conference have been explored in order to glean clues, marks and strategies for creating vibrant faith communities.

In this dissertation, classical, feminist, Canadian, and post-colonial theological thought is engaged as a means of developing an ecclesiology that can inspire a liberative praxis for congregations. An examination and social analysis of the Canadian multi-cultural and multi-faith context reveals evidence of colonialism, sexism, and racism in church and society. Without intentional resistance, the church continues to perpetuate unjust systems and structures. Results both affirm and challenge traditional thinking and call for attention to justice-making, right relationship, inclusivity, and mission.

From an examination of the research data, the quality of openness was found to be the overall interpretive theme for these faithful and lively congregations. This openness includes welcoming the gifts of people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. It

means engagement with new ideas, new practices, and new ways of thinking about God. It is characterized by permeable boundaries that affect who uses church buildings, who makes decisions, who leads worship, and who belongs. Openness encourages collaboration and partnership across traditional institutional borders for the sake of justice-making. The increasingly private and closed world of the church is made more public and welcoming through this quality of openness.

Within this overall theme, five key traits were noted: *Radical Welcoming: Open to 'the Other'*; *Risk-Taking: Open to Change and Transformation*; *Loving: Open to Journeying with Friends, Neighbours, and Strangers*; *Empowering Leadership: Open to the Gifts of All*; and *Justice-Making: Open to the Wounded and the World*. These five traits were found to be inter-related, dynamic and organic, affecting and strengthening each other as they are practiced.

For those congregations that were already seen by their peers as *faithful and lively*, affirmations as well as challenges are offered in order to help them live out a postcolonial feminist praxis. There is a call for greater humility and boldness with suggestions. These include: *Being open to re-thinking our theologies in a multi-cultural, multi-faith and neo-colonial world*; *Being open to articulate our faith and hope based on the gospel for our time*; *Being open to processes of self-examination and self-critique as a community*; *Being open to risking more boldly for justice*.

Implications of this study are especially useful for leaders responsible for congregational leadership. Acting into the five key traits of openness can be a helpful framework for reformation and transformation of the church.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I recently heard the story of a small rural congregation in the central Ontario, that held an Easter sunrise service this year. Since their community is located on the shores of Georgian Bay, members had decided to hold it on a nearby dock at the edge of the bay. Afterwards, they planned to go back to the minister's house for champagne and orange juice. Folk from the community had been invited. However, planners expected only a small number of them would attend and perhaps in total there would be about twenty people.

So the morning arrived and eighty-five people showed up! The service was simple – connecting the Easter story to the natural rhythms, precious resource and beauty of the environment around them. The people of this little congregation were overwhelmed and delighted. Everyone came back for refreshments and the house just overflowed. New life and resurrection were evident that morning. New life in that congregation, new life for those people in the larger community, new life as Christ rose from the dead once again surprising everyone with good news.

In a time when many mainline congregations are struggling, signs of new life are welcome indeed. In the United Church of Canada (UCC), many congregations are facing the challenges of an aging membership, a decline in numbers, and a general weariness in leaders, lay and ordered. Changing realities have made it difficult for most congregations to continue to operate in the way they have in the past. Some congregations are facing

crises made more bleak by limited funds, deteriorating buildings, and an inability to retain staff. Others are adapting and transforming themselves along the way.

Across North America, the end of Christendom, the awareness of the painful consequences of Christian imperialism and colonial practice, and the rise of the Christian right further complicate matters.

Books on church growth, on planting new congregations, on reforming and transforming churches abound. Models of the mega-church, the regional church, the satellite church or the program church, seem popular. We see church growth in other denominations in Canada and south of the border, and wonder what we are doing wrong. As United Church congregations navigate in this stormy sea of circumstances, they must make difficult choices for their present and their future.

This study was initiated to discover the marks of faithful and lively congregations in this time of challenge and confusion – congregations that are transforming themselves and being transformed. I wanted to understand how some congregations respond to the Spirit in their midst. I wanted to examine how God's good news is evident in their life, ministry and mission. Along with this, I was curious about clues and implications for a postcolonial ecclesiology that might emerge.

Intuition and Suspicions

My suspicions about faithful and lively congregations were that they probably had a clear understanding of mission; that their faith formation related to discipleship and ministry lived out in neighbourhoods and communities. I suspected that these congregations had a good idea of what God's good news is for our time and could see

themselves being part of that good news in our world. I suspected these congregations engaged in active evangelism, hospitality, and welcoming. Attention to Christian tradition, our UCC tradition and theology, was probably important. Leadership, both lay and ministry personnel might also be key. I guessed that congregations may have become faithful and lively through having weathered conflict, having dealt with the challenges of diversity, and worked toward respectful relationships. A congregation's sense of connectedness, to the world and global issues, might also be an important factor. Through this project, I hoped to learn more about how congregations can be both agents and recipients of justice/love, healing, reconciliation, and new life following the way of Jesus.

Present Concerns

UCC congregations in the early twenty-first century face challenges of context and mission. Demographic changes of the last decade in south central Ontario, Canada, where Toronto Conference (TC) is situated, have had a profound effect on the nature of the neighbourhoods in which these congregations are situated. Some can no longer claim to be *community churches* any longer as ethnic minority populations around them bring their own brand of conservative Christianity, or none at all.

Too often congregations are flagging under the weight of aging buildings and rising costs. Concerns about finances, the lack of volunteers, and the absence of children, youth and young adults, weigh down the aging members who are left. Demands on family time and a consumerist culture compete with Sunday morning worship and mid-week groups offered by congregations. And amidst this post-modern, post-Christian

context, internal UCC debates about sexuality, racism, and other justice issues push many congregations into conflict and acrimony.

My Question

Even though the UCC faces an overall crisis of identity and purpose, some congregations are thriving. With vigour and passion they embody God's Spirit of love and justice in worship, congregational life, and in their engagement with community and world. If the Holy Spirit sends gifts of joy and disturbance to the church, why aren't more congregations faithful and lively? What makes these congregations faithful and lively? What can we learn from them about being church in this time? Given the church's heritage of colonization, can white ethnic majority congregations truly be faithful?

All of our congregations exist in a context of ethno-cultural and religious plurality, neo-colonialism, and globalization. Confusion about the meaning of *Christian mission* and *evangelism* often robs congregations of energy, purpose and joy. It also inhibits the church's potential to be lively, transforming communities of faith and justice. Present literature on congregational development is often focused on an American context and fails to address Canadian and UCC issues. There is a need, then, for Canadian resources which could help congregations learn new ways of becoming more faithful and lively.

Purpose of the Research Study

Congregations need encouragement to meet the challenges of their contexts in faithful and lively ways. This study focuses on thriving congregations as a way to help other Toronto Conference congregations deal with issues of declining membership,

diminishing resources, and a loss of social and political voice. Using a post-colonial feminist lens, I have explored the dynamics and methodologies of nine thriving, diverse, UCC congregations in Toronto Conference in order to glean clues, marks and strategies for creating vibrant faith communities. As part of my work as Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Congregational Development in Toronto Conference, I have undertaken this research as a way to learn more about how it is that some congregations thrive despite the changing socio-political and cultural environment in which they find themselves.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, I am using the following terms in specific ways. For *marks of the church*, I mean the signs of Christ's presence in the church. By *feminist perspective*, I refer to a perspective that considers the needs and advocates for the full humanity of women, men, and children everywhere, as well as the integrity of creation.¹ By *postcolonial perspective*, I mean looking at the world from the point of view of people from previously colonized places, and their descendants. Postcolonial theologies "reflect on God's welcoming and liberating presence in our lives and world by analyzing and resisting the ongoing effects of colonialism on the colonized and the colonizers, and joining God in recreating a world which is life giving for all ...and the whole creation."²

By *ethnic minority congregations*, I mean churches that self-identify with a cultural and language group other than white European. By *ethnic majority congregation*, I am referring to churches predominantly comprised of members and descendants of white Europeans who, in Canada, form the dominant ethnic/racial group. *Ethnicity* and

¹ Letty M. Russell, "S F T S Research Methodology Class," (San Anselmo, USA: 2006).

² Letty M. Russell, "Hospitality in Postcolonial Perspective," in *Susan Draper White Lectures* (United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities: 2006).

culture are terms understood and used in complex and ambiguous ways. I am struggling to use terminology that doesn't perpetuate racism, yet describes the reality of power imbalances based on heritage, skin colour, and facial features. Paul Bramadat in, *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, defines an ethnic group as “any significant group of people, typically related through common filiation, or blood, whose members also usually feel a sense of attachment to a particular place, a history, and culture (including a common language, food, and clothing)... Many scholars now suggest that ethnicity, the sense of belonging deeply to a ‘people,’ is constructed or least heavily influenced by a variety of political and economic forces.”³

I used the terms, *faithful* and *lively*, in my research project without presenting participants with any neat or set definitions. Instead, I let participants create their own definitions as they grappled with responses to questions. From the study, I have developed new insights into these terms which I will develop in forthcoming chapters.

Qualifications

I work as Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Congregational Development (CF&CD) within Toronto Conference in central Canada, one of thirteen juridical regions within the United Church of Canada. The UCC is Canada's largest Protestant denomination founded in 1925 from Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational roots. Toronto Conference comprises Toronto, Canada's largest city of three million people, as well as many smaller cities, towns, suburban, and rural areas. In my work as Conference minister for Christian Formation and Congregational

³ Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto, Canada: Pearson Longman, 2005), 8.

Development for the last six years, I have been actively involved in research with congregations and Presbyteries who are discerning needs for ministry in their context. These groups have also been working for transformation at structural, systemic, and programmatic levels.

At a regional and national level, I have helped initiate strategies to encourage new understandings and practices of hospitality and evangelism in our congregations. My ministry, which includes leadership in urban, suburban, and rural congregations, provides me with both the experience and the pressing concern to address this topic.

As a feminist, I have been working on social and political change, especially for women, in the church and the world for the last 20 years. As a teacher, educator and facilitator, I have studied and put into practice organizational and change theory, and used feminist adult education methodology in health care, educational, and church settings. Finally, I come to this research from my own long-standing yearning for a congregational home that is nurturing, challenging, lively, faithful, and committed to justice.

As a Conference minister, I share responsibility with committee and task group members for resource development, animation, facilitation and strategic planning in the areas of spiritual nurture, evangelism, communication, stewardship, leadership and congregational development with the three hundred congregations within our bounds. This present research grows from initiatives already underway which focus on hospitality and evangelism as part of congregational development.

Social Location

To understand my perspective as a researcher and educator, the reader will need to understand the social location from which I approach this work. By social location, I mean the economic, social and political perspective from which I operate in the world and in the church.

I am a white Euro-Canadian woman who is middle class, middle-aged, physically able, and straight. In my own life, I carry the seeds of Canadian colonial history. I was born in England and emigrated to Canada at 15 months old with my parents. We came to a small town in central Ontario where my parents knew one English friend. Being white, English, and educated, meant that settling in to this new country was relatively easy.

I grew up learning that England and France were our two *founding nations* who, between them, had settled the land and brought *civilization* to a vast and empty country. We learned about the *Indians*, but they were presented as remote and wild, part of the romantic background of our nation. We were the *native Canadians* with our white skin and European heritage.

Ironies and contradictions abound as I remember that three miles from my home town Midland, was Penetanguishene, a predominantly French speaking village with an Indian name - *land of the white rolling sands*. A few miles further west again was *Christian Island*, an Ojibway/Anishnawbe native reserve - its location and space defined by the colonizer's religion and by the government's Indian Act. The hierarchy of privilege and status in our area was obvious - descending from white English, to French, and then to Indian. In the schools, on the streets, in popular conversation, we knew who *the*

insiders and who *the outsiders* were. But, as Christians, we were cautioned to be nice to the *other* even if we were afraid of their difference.

For most of my life, my whiteness has been invisible to me - a magic cloak of entitlement that I didn't even realize I was wearing. For many of us in the UCC, the changing demographics of church neighbourhoods and the nature of Canadian immigration patterns have forced us to see our white middle class cloaks, but not always the magic of entitlement and the legacy of oppression that goes with them.

Since its inception in 1925, the UCC has focused on the social gospel. I am proud to be a member of this denomination. It continues to offer prophetic witness to Canadian society and the world in the areas of: gay rights (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered GLBT inclusion in ordered ministry, same-sex marriage, Affirming congregations⁴); economic justice; Middle East relations; women's rights (ordered ministry, sexual abuse policy, feminist theological schools); and aboriginal relations, even though our policy and practice are not always congruent. Issues of racism in Canadian society and the church are prevalent.

I took my theological education at the Centre for Christian Studies, a feminist UCC theological school. I trained as a diaconal minister and chose to remain lay, rather than be ordained or commissioned, as a reaction against clericalism and hierarchy in the church. This decision was also a commitment to the ministry of the laity and to the living out of a feminist ecclesial model.

⁴ Affirming congregations are those United Church of Canada congregations that have undergone an intentional process of study and reflection to become open and welcoming to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people, and by association, are part of the Affirming churches network.

I consider myself a radical feminist – one who sees the need for structural and systemic change in the world in order that power and resources are shared for the common good. I have been active in the feminist movement in Canada and in the church for the last twenty years. I have also been changed by global immersion experiences in southern Africa, Central America, the Middle East, and Asia, and through the International Feminist Doctor of Ministry (D. Min) program. My heart is with people everywhere who suffer because of neocolonial, political and social systems that perpetuate first world greed and hegemony. I am disturbed by Canada's present right leaning government which seems to be moving ever closer to the fundamentalist hegemony of the US Empire.

My communities of struggle and accountability are in my local church and with feminist friends who challenge and support me in critical thinking, public witness, and spiritual nurture. Because of the safety and flexibility of those communities, I am able to endure feeling *other* in many situations without feeling *homeless*.

Nature of the Study

To discover the answers to my questions and to deepen my sense of the Spirit's work in Toronto Conference congregations, I implemented a research project to study the marks of faithful and lively congregations in the spring of 2006. All nine presbyteries in Toronto Conference were asked to take time on their regular meeting agenda to have members each write, on a ballot, the name of one congregation in the Conference that they perceived as faithful and lively. They could also give the reasons for their choice. Seven presbyteries submitted their ballots. From these names, I tallied results and chose

congregations that were frequently cited. Happily, congregations from all nine Presbyteries were named.

From this initial list, I chose a group of congregations that represented the diversity of Toronto Conference: urban, rural, suburban, ethnic minority, ethnic majority, intercultural, small, and large. Another factor was ministry personnel. I hoped to include women and men, ethnic minority/majority, straight and openly gay/lesbian ministers. Ten congregations were chosen to participate. Unfortunately, one of these was ultimately unable to take part. Each of these congregations was then invited to be part of the research project by choosing participants from their congregation to complete a response form. In the case of five of these congregations, participants were also asked to be part of a two hour focus group interview. (For a brief description of the nine participating congregations, see Appendix “A”.)

With the help of my advisor and reflection group, I created a standardized response form for all participants. Questions for the focus group interviews were not standardized but based on the responses received from each congregation in an effort to deepen my understanding of their situation. Between September 2006 and January 2007 response forms were distributed and fifty were returned. Five focus group interviews were also conducted. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed. I also attended at least one worship service with each of the nine congregations in the winter and spring of 2007.

Board chairs and ministry personnel were asked to choose five to seven respondents from the congregation who would each be willing to answer a Response Form and, for five congregations, to attend a focus group gathering about their

congregation's life. The group was to include: a long time member; a newer member or attendee; a youth or young adult; a Board member; and one or more ministry personnel. The overall group was to reflect, as much as possible, a balance of women and men, ethnic minority and ethnic majority participants.

A small number of interviews with denominational elders were also conducted, recorded and transcribed.

A summary of all the response form findings was created and sent to all participants, the CF&CD task group, my advisor, and my Doctor of Ministry (D. Min.) Reflection Group. I then organized, analyzed, and interpreted the data. Consultations with the task group, my advisor, and the D. Min. reflection group helped me to discern and propose practical applications of these findings for other congregations.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant signed a release form that gave permission to use their response form answers or focus groups responses for the research study and dissertation. To ensure confidentiality, no actual names of participants are used in this document. Congregational names, however, have been used with permission.

I chose to use a feminist qualitative research methodology⁵ as it best lives out the practice of honouring the experiences of people engaged in living a particular struggle. It lifts up their reflections on that reality as a way to bring about social change. In other words, I hoped that the experience of being part of the research itself could be a

⁵ Feminist qualitative research theory claims that a dialogical relationship is necessary between all those involved in the research process. Rather than emphasizing "good science" as the objective, the purpose of feminist qualitative research is liberative praxis - political change for social justice. The process of doing research and creating theory can be empowering for all those involved.

transformative experience for those people and congregations involved, as well for the Conference and for me as an educator and facilitator. Certainly, gaining information from Canadian, United Church of Canada, and Toronto Conference congregations provides a needed alternative to the plethora of American resources on congregational development, that are flooding Canadian book stores. The construction of knowledge is a political process and so to bring about social change it is important to examine how that knowledge is gathered and disseminated as well as to what it points.⁶

Benefiting from a feminist methodology, I worked with a D. Min. reflection group of four people from my home congregation who met with me regularly to offer comments, ask questions, and ground my work in congregational realities. Members of a CF&CD task group from my work setting provided feedback on my theories and brainstormed applications for ministry in Toronto Conference. My thesis advisor helped steer my progress and focus my thinking on the dissertation.

Limitations of the Study

This study took place between September 2006 and January 2007 in Ontario, Canada within Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada using nine congregations as subjects. Information was gleaned through focus group and individual consultations. In my initial selection of congregations for the research project, I had hoped that one of the two First Nations congregations (Christian Island UC and Georgina Island UC) within the bounds of Toronto Conference, would be able to participate. Unfortunately, the ending of a pastoral relationship in one congregation and the beginning of a new pastoral relationship in the other, meant that neither was in a position

⁶ Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, *Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods from the Margins* (Toronto, Canada: Garamond Press, 1989), 17.

to participate. It is unfortunate that, again, First Nations voices are not heard as the church discerns its future.

It is also clear that the situation of ethnic minority congregations in TC cannot be fully examined here but have been included in this study to a limited extent. One of the nine participating congregations is ethnic minority Chinese.

Review of Current literature

Some of the current literature that is influencing Canadian congregations comes from Christian denominations in the United States. The mega-church phenomenon, of Willowcreek and Saddleback fame, is particularly appealing to many ministry personnel here even though the smaller Canadian population dictates that these types of churches will always be the exception, not the rule. The appeal of *growing* churches is seductive especially in congregations within the Conference where populations are increasing. However, there is also an appeal, in aging congregations, that are desperately seeking ways to survive.

No doubt, books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Mission or Message*, and George Barna's *Grow your Church From The Outside In*, have some wisdom to contribute to the UCC discussion about congregational development but from a more evangelical perspective. Under the spell of the authors' positive thinking and confidence critical capacities might be suspended by readers. However, once the overarching paradigm behind these ministries is exposed a jarring reality becomes clear. The evangelical, pietistic ministry of Christian conversion of the *unchurched* directly contradicts UCC tradition, theology and ethos.

For Warren, the *purpose* in *The Purpose Driven Church*, is the growth of the church itself as the end to which, Warren says, God call us. Even though he protests that church *vibrancy* is the focus of the book, what he really means, and spends most of the book talking about, is church growth. He says that “successful ministry is building the church on the purposes of God in the power of the Holy Spirit and *expecting* the results from God.”⁷ However, those from a liberal Protestant tradition might disagree. We are more likely to claim the church as a means to strengthening the kindom of God on earth through loving one’s neighbours.

According to Warren, saving souls and making disciples for Jesus Christ are the goals, mission, and purpose of the church – one reading of The Great Commission.⁸ The *mission field*, as he pictures it, is made up simply of Christians and those who should be Christians - the unchurched. Given Christianity’s damaging legacy of colonialism and imperialism, this proselytizing strikes me as more of the same. No critical social, economic and political analysis of privilege and power is to be evidenced within the neo-colonial empire created by the world’s wealthiest nation. No attention is paid to the multi-cultural and multi-faith North American context. This is a gospel focused on marketing, capitalism, and personal morality. The UCC is a church of the social/global gospel tradition whose overall purpose is social transformation for the sake of all people and the earth. This book could not endure a feminist or postcolonial critique and is incompatible with the UCC ethos.

⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, USA: Zondervan, 1995), 397.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

In the Forward, W.A. Criswell says the book is:

...committed to the idea that vibrant churches in the 21st century must be wholeheartedly committed to conversion growth. Rick Warren understands the mindset of the unchurched of this world. If churches are to be successful in evangelizing our society, which is becoming more pagan by the day, they must learn to think like an unbeliever. Vibrance means growth in numbers and conversion.⁹

Clearly spoken and a warning for all those who read further!

So Warren's measure of congregational success, or *health*, as he puts it, really does mean numbers in the pews. He does not translate success into the larger mission of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or freeing the oppressed. Individuals find health and success by being associated with the church. For Warren, *faithfulness* is demonstrated by the fruits of our efforts to grow the church: God, he says, expects to see results. Our faithfulness is demonstrated by our fruit.¹⁰

If by these fruit Christianity's historic triumphalism, sense of superiority, and practice of colonialism are being perpetuated, then I do not believe this fruit is worth growing. The fruits of our efforts as Christians and as churches need to be made real in the far more complex challenge of creating life-giving communities, as well as protecting our earth home. If all we are doing is building up the church for its own sake, then I do not consider that faithfulness. For me, faithfulness is helping to build God's kingdom on earth *through* the institution of the church.

The Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19,20) is at the crux of some thorny theological and ecclesiological questions in our multi-faith world. Slavish adherence to its mandate in literalist and strictly Christian terms is redolent of the abuses of the Crusades, or the colonial conquest of aboriginal peoples.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

Christians have ignored the traditional spiritual beliefs and practices of other groups and required them to believe in the *one and only* God.

Warren describes evangelism as based in a conservative gospel:

Another ongoing debate that affects evangelism has to do with how the church should respond to culture. There are two extreme positions: imitation and isolation. Those in the imitation camp argue that the church must become just like our culture in order to minister to it. Churches in this group sacrificed the biblical message and mission of the church in order to blend in with the culture. They are likely to endorse current cultural values such as the worship of success and welcome radical individualism, radical feminism, liberal sexual standards, and even homosexuality. In their attempt to be relevant, these church's sacrifice biblical theology, doctrinal theology and the gospel of Christ. The call for repentance and commitment is compromised in order to attract a crowd. Syncretism destroys this kind of church.¹¹

The UCC, with its radical social justice positions on homosexuality, women's rights, abortion, same sex marriage, and inter-faith dialogue would likely be dismissed by Warren as choosing culture over gospel. These UCC positions however, are based on biblical and theological principles.

Like Warren, George Barna in *Grow your Church from the Outside In*, holds similar disparaging views on denominations such as the UCC. Faithfulness and liveliness are defined by personal piety and morality. Church membership is meant to be marketed as a "multifaceted value product; part spiritual, part relational, part practical and part entertainment."¹² His reputation as a pollster and marketing guru, as well as his supposed ability to understand the unchurched, appeal to many looking for the path for church growth. Again, neo-colonial and triumphalist attitudes prevail while white capitalist marketing tactics hold sway.

¹¹ Ibid., 235-236.

¹² George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*, Rev. ed. (Ventura, USA: Regal, 2002), 36.

Barna's book assumes a fairly homogenous ethnic reality. It is based on US statistics, and census data. Barna comes from a conservative background and freely uses theological terms such as *born-again*, *being saved*, *Bible believers*, that connote a more evangelical heritage. He talks dismissively of churches that exhibit "hypertolerance and relativism"¹³ which, I'm afraid, might be his description of the UCC. Although he does raise some interesting points and useful strategies (best practices) for attracting and keeping enquirers in the church, he often reduces the role of the church to personal interactions only, without acknowledging any political justice dimension.

Primarily he focuses on the assimilation of newcomers, or those who have lapsed memberships, into congregational life for their own well being and that of the community. There is a strong sense that being a member is an end in itself. The idea of discipleship and ministry to the world is not addressed. The sense that the church needs to exist for those not a part of it, is absent.

One of Barna's key assertions is that the Bible offers *absolute truth* and therefore should be the keystone of faithfulness. He states that:

...whether absolute moral truth exists is a fundamental issue that determines the health or illness of a culture. Other research, we conducted throughout the 1990s identified our nation's movement toward the rejection of moral absolutes and the acceptance of moral relativism. Sadly, we have seen that born-again Christians are nearly as likely as nonbelievers to reject moral absolutes, in spite of their professed allegiance to the Bible.¹⁴

Clearly, UCC members would fit into the non-believer category as we are part of a church that interprets, for each age, what we believe and affirms as faithful.

¹³ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

Some ideas do deserve credit though. Barna states that:

...‘when you boil it all down, we do two things: evangelize and disciple people. So we create a place for God to work through us to do those things.’ It is not that these individuals ignore the significance of worship, stewardship or community service; rather, they simply see evangelism and discipleship as the priorities, and everything else flows from those two foci.¹⁵

This study of TC congregations examines the relationship of these five key ministries to each other and as components of faithful and lively congregations. Perhaps it is a matter of priorities after all.

Barna also holds that “God's church is not about structures, systems and resources; it is about individual people and our relationships with God. When those associations are in order, we will affect others around us, whether we want to or not.”¹⁶ He also believes that:

...the underlying assumption is that if people who attend church are excited about it, then their conviction and enthusiasm - not marketing gimmicks, sermon series, free gifts or Broadway productions - will capture the attention of their unchurched friends... ‘People like to go to church where somebody else likes to go to church. If people are going away from this place and gossiping that good things are happening here, that gets other folks interested. When church people get excited, other people want to know why.’¹⁷

Of course, it is hoped that what they are excited about is also what makes them faithful and lively.

Another influential pastor and writer in the church development field is Anthony B. Robinson. In *Transforming Congregational Culture*, Robinson addresses important issues such as hospitality, identity, and spirituality. He promotes diversity yet never directly writes about marginalized groups, social justice, ethnic or cultural differences, or issues of sexual orientation. For Robinson, like Warren and Barna, the purpose of the

¹⁵ Ibid., 143.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

church is more directed toward personal than social and political transformation. He says that “as a pastor, I find that one of the reasons that this is such a good time to be the church and to be a minister is that many people - and many of those who seek a church today - are seeking change in their lives.”¹⁸ He offers good ideas but none are grounded in social analysis or a global perspective. He seems to lack self-awareness about the power of white, male theology and leadership in the church.

Robinson cites the traditional four functions of the church as primary marks in which the church will always be engaged. He writes that:

In many ways, these are described by the classic marks of the church: kerygma (worship and celebration), didache (teaching and learning), koinonia (community and care) and diakonia (service and witness). These provide a basic structure for beginning to describe a congregation's mission and ministry. These can be described as ‘the four core ministries of most congregations’. And the overriding purpose of the four is Christian formation.¹⁹

Again, emphasis here is important. What is the purpose of the church? Is it to make Christians, to grow, or to mend the world?

Another American male author, however, provides a different view of congregational life in his book *Recovering the Sacred Centre*. Howard E. Friend proposes, from his own experience as a Presbyterian pastor in many congregations, that churches and individuals need to recover spirituality as their sacred core and *raison d’être*.²⁰ The church, he claims, needs to be a sacred space. He proposes using mission trips and outreach as ways to fully live the gospel of good news and new life. Amongst other ideas, he stresses a basic threefold principle of:

¹⁸ Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids, USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁰ Howard E. Friend, *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the inside Out* (Valley Forge, USA: Judson Press, 1998), 23.

Journey Inward/ Journey Outward/In Community to help members of congregations make a paradigm shift to a more spiritual way of living and being church. Other principles include: being in the world; partnership/ solidarity/ mutuality; be in, but not of the world; protect the dialogue, affirm the dialectic; high touch, hands on mission; discernment, then decision-making and planning; the blank check principal; faithfulness, not success; the partnership principal; the reverse of mission principal; not my will, but yours be done.²¹

Friend's ideas form a refreshing change from the management and marketing hype of Barna and Warren, and offer a more justice based perspective on the life and mission of a faith community.

Cheri DiNovo is an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada who worked in a congregation in a poor inner city neighbourhood of Toronto. In her book, *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing a Community From the Outside In*, she tells the story of Emmanuel-Howard Park United Church and its struggles to understand God's call. By using queer theory, scriptural references and a post-modern approach, she examines the meaning of evangelism for our churches today. Like many congregations in Canada, DiNovo and congregational members reviewed the literature of the church growth movement, and visited the Saddleback and Willow Creek churches. Finding the theology thin and the consumer model unappealing, they then contrasted those experiences with the ministry and mission of Riverside Church in New York City and the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC.²²

At the core of this book, interviews with members of the congregation – both middle-class and marginalized - tell the story. The location of this congregation in an area frequented by *strangers* - addicts, transsexuals and prostitutes - shapes their ministry and mission. The congregation not only welcomes the *other*, but becomes other to its former

²¹ Ibid., 187-192.

²² Cheri DiNovo, *Qu(e)rying Evangelism: Growing a Community from the Outside In* (Cleveland, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 34-42.

self in so many ways. Sanctuary is found, people are changed, worship and governance are turned upside down, white middle class members are evangelized by angels in the guise of strangers. Learning to live with *queerness*, learning to follow a *queer* Jesus, discovering the queerness in all has challenged the theology and practice of a traditional congregation.²³

Cheri is a colleague of mine who has worked in the area of evangelism on a Conference level task group. Her story is riveting, refreshing and deeply moving. She documents the process of engaging and disengaging, accepting and rejecting, forgiveness and reconciliation, compassion and empathy, entailed in building relationships across social barriers. She honestly admits that “one of the first things we needed to confess was that we didn't have anything to offer anybody, other than food, prayer, the sharing of scripture, and shelter. Later, we were able to offer financial help, pastoral support, and community.”²⁴ This is the story of a community built out of radical hospitality, love and hope.

Because this is the very recent story of a congregation in Toronto Conference faithfully grappling with the challenges of living God's good news with the poor and the marginalized, and in so doing, transforming itself, I find it very hopeful. The breakdown of a colonial mindset seems evident through the congregation's experience of engaging in relationships with those previously seen as the other, queer, strange. New discoveries for all lead to celebrating the joy of diversity.

Finally, *Jacob's Blessing: Dreams, Hopes, and Visions For The Church*, by Donna Sinclair and Christopher White, offer what they call on their cover an “Alternative

²³ Ibid., 190.

²⁴ Ibid., 187.

to the Remnant and Mega-Church Models". They propose that congregations faced with change in the twenty-first century wrestle with their context, their history and theology in order to develop a vision. Grounded as they are in United Church of Canada ethos, Sinclair and White's ideas are closer to home, and include an awareness of the continuing effects of the colonizing history of our church, as well as current social issues in Canada.

Sinclair writes that:

Before we can find ourselves at home again in the church, we must make our peace with the aboriginal people whose inheritance we usurped just as Jacob sold Esau's birthright.... for the Christian church in North America to wrestle with its collective sin is very hard and very necessary. The notion that we have the only way to salvation -- that Christians know best -- was institutionalized in Canada in our Indian residential schools... it has led this nation's four historic mission churches -- Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Presbyterian -- into a powerful confrontation with themselves.²⁵

Jacob's Blessing: Dreams, Hopes, and Visions for the Church focuses on UCC congregations. Sinclair and White look at the attitudes, values, and yearnings of people within our congregations and reflect on how these might be developed and transformed into the elements of a vibrant church. They touch on many topics such as: the identity and ethos of the United Church of Canada; the mystery of God; welcoming strangers; teaching our successors; encountering the economy; and harmony with God.

What was helpful about this book is that it is specifically about congregational life in the United Church of Canada. It deals with our Canadian context showing a good grasp of reasons for decline in our churches.

The authors present practical, theologically grounded ideas to help congregations stay faithful through: knowing the Jesus story; analyzing and understanding their context;

²⁵ Donna Sinclair and Christopher White, *Jacob's Blessing: Dreams, Hopes and Visions for the Church* (Kelowna, Canada: Wood Lake Books, 1999), 27.

carrying the good news; and bringing healing.²⁶ They make many practical suggestions on how to invite folk from the un-churched generation:

Church and society alike need the wisdom of age, the enthusiasm of youth, and the restless searching of the middle years. A vital church cannot be either an adults-only retirement complex or yuppie recreation center. It needs to be more like a village - with all the joys and frustrations that come with small-town life.... all too often, neighborhood and rural churches become private clubs, where newcomers are welcome only if they understand the rules, the language, and the way that things are done. Congregations exclude people by refusing to change, by not being open to new ideas, and by wishing fruitlessly that things could be the way that they were in the good old days when churches were full and society seemed [but wasn't] less complex.²⁷

Written by two longtime United Church of Canada members, this book convincingly grapples with timely issues, and offers both inspiration and practical suggestions for a new vision of church. Its approach is more broad than *Qu(e)rying Evangelism* but there are elements of overlap and shared wisdom that ring true about the nature of evangelism and reclaiming our identity as the UCC.

Framework of the Dissertation

I approached this topic, looking to discover the marks of faithful and lively congregations. Doing this research has broken open clues and possibilities that may help congregations be the church in more just and life-giving ways within their wider communities and the world, by attending to feminist postcolonial concerns. I have found that indeed there are current marks of the faithful and lively church. These marks will be named and elaborated upon in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter One, I have introduced the problem, the present context of UCC congregations in Toronto Conference, and the study as a response to present challenges

²⁶ Ibid., 176.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

regarding congregational identity and purpose. I have also explained my social location and reasons for working on this project. As well, I have outlined the framework of the dissertation, the limitations of the study, and presented a brief review of current literature on congregational studies.

In Chapter Two, I examine the problems facing congregations regarding declining membership and loss of vision and purpose, and then offer a critical social analysis.

Chapter Three examines the doctrine of the *marks of the church* and includes the views of several theologians. The perspectives of classical theologians, international postcolonial feminist theologians, North American and Canadian theologians are canvassed regarding the doctrine of the marks of the church.

In Chapter Four, I present my analysis of the findings from the research project and name important areas of ministry that have emerged.

Chapter Five offers an interpretation of the data with five key traits of faithful and lively congregations.

Chapter Six presents implications and possible applications gleaned from the conclusions of this study. Some of these remarks are addressed to leaders and staff responsible for congregational development. Others address the nine participating congregations.

CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL ANALYSIS

In a postcolonial feminist process of action and reflection, an examination of the social location of Toronto Conference congregations is important. Through this process, I have sought to discover connections that point to economic, cultural, political, and social forces at play in the TC context. Naming and analyzing these contextual issues helps determine the deeper blocks that impede congregations from becoming faithful and lively bearers of God's life-giving spirit. It also offers the opportunity to imagine ways of resisting patriarchal and colonizing forces in our world.

Diminished and Strained Resources

In its "Report to the 39th General Council 2006," Toronto Conference reported that "resident membership figures for the year ending 2003 were 53,546 with the 2006 estimate declining to 48,000. ...The number of preaching places has declined from 318 at December, 2001 to 301 at the end of 2005."²⁸ Not only do these figures affect the Conference as a court of the church which financially relies on assessment by membership, but they, of course, present a picture of a very challenging situation for congregations. Some congregations have closed, some have amalgamated and many are struggling to determine their future. Yet, religious affiliation figures from the 2001

²⁸ David Allen, *Report to the 39th General Council 2006* (Thunder Bay, Canada: Toronto Conference, United Church of Canada, 2006), 162.

Canadian Census suggest that three hundred and fifty thousand people identify as United Church in this region.

Partly because of diminishing finances, the Conference has recently voted to begin a process of re-structuring that will turn its nine presbyteries into four. As well, present program staff will be reduced and then deployed one to each of these new presbyteries. Proposed job descriptions for each of these new staff cover an impossible range of responsibilities from personnel and property to program and public witness. Along with a loss of familiar geographic and communal reference points for presbyteries, there will also be a loss of specialized leadership. How this will impact the faithfulness and liveliness of congregations is yet to be seen.

Another reality is that of an aging membership. Many congregations have few members under forty and suffer not only from a lack of a younger perspective, but also from the absence of younger families and the youth and children that come with them. Despite a recent national marketing campaign meant to attract folk in the thirty to forty-five age range, many congregations feel it is too late. There is regret as they try to move forward without the next generation of church members to carry on the heritage of the congregation. There is sadness too at the lack of spontaneity and the spirited presence of children. Some of these congregations feel as though they are not being faithful because they are not growing. In one TC presbytery a researcher found that, because congregations had begun that way in the 1950s, their “root story reinforced the message that growth and expansion have been and still are the visible signs of Christian

faithfulness and spiritual progress in the United church.”²⁹ Loss of morale and hope is inevitable it seems.

Along with an aging membership, large and costly old buildings plague many congregations, especially in the inner city. Physically inaccessible structures, rabbit warrens of rooms from successive additions, cavernous church school areas built for Sunday Schools of up to two thousand children, and gracious half filled sanctuaries haunt many. They remind congregations of the *good old days* of the 1950’s and 1960’s, the postwar boom when the church was buzzing with people.

Behind the obvious building concerns, ancient electrical, heating, and plumbing systems, plague congregations. Year to year, these expenses eat up large portions of congregational finances.

In a litigious age, insurance costs have skyrocketed, and government water and fire code regulations mean costly upgrades. For established urban, suburban and rural churches, there is a heavy financial cost to keeping church doors open. Some congregations, that have closed or amalgamated, have sold their buildings and property and invested in the renovation of the buildings of their new *home* church. Others have jointly invested in new church development in the Conference. Some have decided to use the proceeds to invest in mission projects.

Situations of aging congregations and buildings lead to a general weariness of present members, the loss of programs that fail without ready volunteers, and the crumbling of governance structures and organizations that were set up to deliver the ministry and mission of the church. Even in congregations where younger members take

²⁹ Gary Redcliffe, "Accounting for Hope," *Potentials in Print*, no. Fall (2004): 6.

part, the many outside demands on the time and energy of younger families compete with church demands.

However, in the geographical middle area of the Conference, which is commuting distance from Toronto for many workers, some congregations like Norval United and North Bramalea United, are growing and bursting at the seams with new housing developments on their doorsteps. Their building issues are quite different as they struggle to help their newly Christian members grow in faith as well as fund major expansions or build new structures altogether.

In a post-Christian era, new housing developments don't necessarily mean new church members, though. Some of our congregations have not had the new membership they expected from the residential growth in their areas.

Demographic Factors

Pluralism

Demographic factors affect the reality of TC congregations today. The changing ethnic make-up of the Conference is rooted in many waves of immigration to Canada beginning in the post WW II years with Europeans. Successive refugee migrations and displacements from South East Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and eastern Europe, along with the controlled immigration of white collar workers from all over the world, continue up to the present.

According to the 2001 Canadian Census, in geographic areas covered by Toronto Conference, the *official* home language is English, but the largest non-official home

language is Chinese, with Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Punjabi following.³⁰ As Canada's largest city, Toronto receives many of these immigrants and refugees looking for economic stability, and support from already established cultural communities. Forty percent of the population of the Toronto Conference region in 2001 was classed as *immigrants* - born in a country other than Canada, mostly coming from Italy, the United Kingdom, India, China, and Hong Kong. Statistical figures for immigrants from 49 countries were named in all. The majority of recent immigrants (1996-2001) came from China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.³¹

In parts of Toronto, new immigrant populations in the suburban areas bring their own brand of conservative Christianity with them, or have no church affiliation at all. As one congregation, Ebenezer United reports, Chinese immigrants from mainland China are building massive new evangelical churches right beside UCC churches. Toronto is such a multi-ethnic and multi-faith city now that congregations can no longer expect that most people in the neighbourhood will attend their UCC community church. This has been quite a shock for members of Ebenezer.

There is a plural religious landscape all over the greater Toronto area. Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Eastern Orthodox places of worship cover the landscape, formerly the territory of the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. At the same time, UCC congregations seem to be faced with far too many church buildings in areas where cultural and religious identity has radically changed.

Paul Bramadat also notes that these days:

³⁰ Statistics Canada, "United Church of Canada Profile Report, Canada 2001 Census," (United Church of Canada, 2006).

³¹ Ibid.

No religion can exert a simple hegemonic influence over other religions or over our society as a whole. Clearly, this demonstrates Canada's commitment to progressive multicultural principles. However the virtual exclusion of religion from public discourse (including its absence from, or awkward presence in, national ceremonies, media coverage, and most public schools) has produced a kind of religious illiteracy. The result of which is that Canadians are increasingly ignorant about world religions, including Christianity.³²

UCC ethnic minority congregations in Toronto, originally formed to offer language, cultural, and spiritual support to particular groups of new immigrants, also face challenges as newer immigrants with different backgrounds from the same mother country, make the city and suburbs their home. At the other end of the continuum, churches like Toronto Chinese United, with second and third generation English speaking children and grandchildren of founding church members, are eager to offer worship alternatives that abandon the more formal ethnic Chinese liturgy. This helps to keep young people from leaving the church for majority white congregations, or dropping out altogether.

First Nations congregations continue to be financially supported with mission support grants as these tiny churches serve needy, wider communities. Personnel problems and changes are common and dramatically affect the fragile nature of these congregations. Like white communities, pluralism is a major factor in their social context. However, for First Nations peoples, this manifests itself in varied and conflicted world views, theologies, and perspectives on the church

Age

In the more northern rural areas traditionally connected with farming, massive golf courses, retirement communities, and their resultant infrastructure, are being built to cater to affluent *young old Baby Boomers*. These people seek a more pastoral clime and

³² Bramadat and Seljak, eds., 5.

relaxed lifestyle. The membership of some congregations, like Sarawak United near Owen Sound, and Heritage United in Washago, is swelling as healthy and active church members, who used to belong to city churches, retire up north to cottage country.

In Canadian society as a whole, as a recent Environics study showed, most younger people in the thirty to forty-five age range, not already affiliated with a church, have never heard of the UCC nor do they have any clarity about its identity. Worse still, “people in this demographic do not identify worship styles or time constraints as the prime barriers to joining a faith community. More than anything, it is the perceived content, that they think they will find at church, that puts them off.”³³ Perceptions persist that organized religion tells you what you have to believe when young people would rather work this out themselves. A majority of research participants stated that they seriously doubted that if Jesus were alive today, he would be associated with organized religion. As well, many of these young people don’t find church leaders credible and see nothing to be gained by being part of church life.³⁴

Denominational Agenda

Finally, being part of the UCC means that a conciliar structure connects all congregations to the work and action of the national church through its General Council meetings and staff. Over the years, through national and global partnerships and political activism, many justice and peace priorities have been brought for discussion, resolution and study. A process of consultation and education for action with congregations usually precedes and results from these ethical statements. In the last twenty-five years or so,

³³ Environics, "Emerging Spirit: Research," (United Church of Canada, 2006), 2.

issues of sexuality and sexual orientation have been hotly debated at General Council (GC) and throughout the church. Last year's GC statement which affirmed the UCC's commitment to permit same-sex marriages was another decision that reverberated in congregations. Some congregations are still reeling from the 1988 decision to ordain and commission homosexuals with partners. After this latest decision, all congregations were given the right to determine for themselves if they wanted to perform same-sex marriages in their congregations. Much education and many conversations have been going on over this last year as congregations again discussed the thorny issue of sexuality.

Some of our TC congregations, like Trinity-St. Paul's United in downtown Toronto, have already been performing same sex marriages and are strongly GLBT affirming in their nature and witness. Some in this research study have been struggling once again to deal with this issue which challenges their sense of what is right, godly and just. Dalston-Crown Hill United near Barrie, a small rural congregation, worked through a tough but intentional education process to come to their affirming position. Others, like Collier Street United and Norval United, have come to places of stale-mate, stymied in their efforts to make any decision, and so, have shelved the conversation for the moment.

Sadly, given the many justice concerns in our country and world today on which the church could speak prophetically and act for change - poverty, homelessness, aboriginal justice, environmental destruction, racism - the concern of many in congregations is the survival of the church as an institution. Mission then becomes confused with keeping the building open and propping up outdated structures and systems. Faithfulness becomes equated with keeping the numbers up. Some look to forms of *evangelism*, converting those around them, as a way to do this.

This post-modern, post-Christian context presents a severe challenge to congregations as they themselves seek to clarify their identity and mission. Whether they are in decline, growing, or just holding on, the changes and challenges most congregations face are formidable. What worked in the mid - twentieth century is not working in the early twenty-first century. Our members admit that “United Churches are no longer who they have always claimed they were – contributing members of local neighbourhoods. Those neighbourhoods no longer know United Churches are in their midst, and don’t seem to care much anyway.”³⁵

The Legacy of Colonialism

In response to declining numbers in our congregations, many in the United Church of Canada have begun to stress the importance of hospitality and evangelism for our future. Defining what evangelism means for our church in this time, however, is proving difficult. The Great Commission, the biblical source upon which much evangelism has been based, poses problems for us in a pluralist society. The off-putting, hard sell evangelistic tactics of some Christian denominations combined with the painful legacy of our own colonial-type evangelism, in this country, make us wary.

Many in our congregations recall personal experiences of the church's lack of hospitality and complete judgementalism related to divorce, teen pregnancy, and women's leadership. More recently, controversy over the participation of gays and lesbians, publicity about clergy abuse, and the complex and distressing consequences of Indian residential schools, cast a pall over our image of ourselves as welcoming. We may want to be friendly and welcoming but our institutional past and present speak otherwise.

³⁵ Redcliffe: 9,10.

In our congregations, hospitality for many means coffee hour with the "insiders" - mostly white and middle-class - those who are already part of the club. In the language of our national marketing campaign, *seekers* (those who don't know who we are) and *recovering Christians* (those who know who we used to be and wonder who we are now) may be looking for a spiritual home. Congregations know they should be welcoming but have mixed reasons as to why. Some are hoping to bring in new volunteers and generous givers so roofs can be fixed and committee membership bolstered. Where is God and God's mission in all this?

What is the relationship between our history as a church in Canada and our ability to truly welcome all? How does our lack of consciousness about the connections between colonialism, gender and religion challenge the integrity of our welcome? What would it take for UCC congregations to become truly welcoming?

The UCC as an institution wears the face of the colonizer. After eighty years we see the painful legacy of the Indian residential schools system and we struggle to know what to do. Despite General Council apologies in 1986 and 1998, many congregations have not even begun to unearth or own their colonial past, never mind the denomination's apology. Many people still carry an old colonial worldview.

While white Canadians deny, aboriginals suffer. Sharon Butala in her book, *Wild Stone Heart*, tells of hearing a CBC broadcast of a lecture by a First Nations woman in Saskatoon. A woman in the audience asked:

What can I do to help Amerindian (sic) children in my classroom? The speaker shot back, her voice cracking with anger, '*You can admit that you're the problem!*' In an instant she got a grip on herself and added some qualifying remark that marginally took the sting out of her accusation, but I doubt very much that anybody in that audience...was much fooled by it. She was very angry, again I

thought, at what she saw as the unconscious racism in the question, so angry that for an instant she couldn't hide it.³⁶

Colonialism in Canada

Colonialism was a system that used the tools of racism and sexism for economic ends. Linda Carty writes that:

England, along with France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands began to colonize most of what is now called the 'Third World' back in the sixteenth century. For those European nations, gaining possession of colonies played a central role in the development of capitalism from its mercantile to its industrial phase. The colonies provided the raw materials that formed the industrial base for the trade and commerce that led to modern capitalism.³⁷

Winona Stevenson, a member of Fisher River Creek First Nation, in her article, "Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada," explains how colonial relationships were imposed to facilitate the agendas and goals of the colonial agencies:

The colonization of First Nations Peoples by Western European nations and later by Canada, has had a number of phases, each with its own set of overlapping economic, social, political, and legal agendas. Mercantilists wanted our furs, missionaries wanted our souls, colonial governments, and later Canada wanted our lands. Five hundred years later colonialist wants are still unsatiated - First Nations Peoples across present-day Canada continue struggling to protect their natural resources (lumber, minerals, and water), to protect their traditional ways of life from missionary incursions, currently in the form of Protestant fundamentalism; and to reclaim stolen lands and self-government jurisdictions.³⁸

The church, the colonial governments and their commercial ventures, such as the Hudson's Bay Company, co-operated to create a winning hegemony of intersecting interests. The French colonial project employed the Roman Catholic church to convert

³⁶ Sharon Butala, *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields* (Toronto, Canada: Harper Canada, 2000), 174,175.

³⁷ Linda Carty, "The Discourse of Empire and the Social Construction of Gender " in *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought*, ed. Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson (Toronto, Canada: Women's Press, 1999), 35.

³⁸ Winona Stevenson, "Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada.," in *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought*, ed. Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson (Toronto, Canada: Women's Press, , 1991), 49.

and *civilize* aboriginal peoples to make them "more loyal and stronger allies."³⁹ Even though Aboriginal survival skills were essential when the English colonists first arrived, once established, the English turned on their Aboriginal hosts, "driven by land lust and exonerated by manifest destiny ideology."⁴⁰

A discourse carefully crafted from race, gender and theology held systems of Victorian patriarchy firmly in place in the "New World".⁴¹ This discourse eventually became law through the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and then the infamous Indian Act of 1876 which remained in place well into the mid twentieth century.⁴² Colonists arrived with "predetermined ideas of appropriate female behaviour and status which served as their lens for understanding the behaviour and status of Aboriginal women."⁴³ Aboriginal women were judged by the standard of women in European society - the pinnacle of civilization. The ideal of female domesticity put self-discipline over nature and idealized the "cult of true womanhood."⁴⁴ Scholar, Katherine Weist says that:

The appropriate position of women was confinement to the household where they were enjoined to subordinate their wills to their fathers, husbands or nearest appropriate male relative, and to direct their energies to the efficient management of the resources their men provided. The ideal woman was characterized by the virtues of piety, purity submissiveness and domesticity.⁴⁵

Canada's white settler ideology, through which Canada became and still is a white settler nation, dominated first by Britain and now the US, "frames Native peoples, as well as immigrants and refugee women and men of colour, as "outside" the nation...The government continues to define and delimit Indian identity and thereby undermines

³⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

⁴² Ibid., 75.

⁴³ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

resistance."⁴⁶ The high incidence of aboriginal suicides, violence, and poverty attests to this. As well, Denise Nadeau maintains that "in failing to name the structural racism and classism inherent in Canadian 'Indian Affairs policy' and immigration policy and practice, the churches function as the handmaiden of our neo-liberal nation state that walks hand in hand with US imperialism."⁴⁷

United Church History

In our history as a liberal church, Marilyn Legge notes that the UCC social gospel tradition was "dominated by men's experience in the public sphere and consistently neglected women's experiences and the private sphere." These weaknesses have reinforced the underlying white patriarchal values of our theology and the middle class view of Canadian reality.⁴⁸

Theology can be colonized too. Legge points out that:

Mechanisms which elevate theology above its rootedness in historical process and subordinate theology to serve dominant group interests construct a situation of 'ideological captivity.'...Ideology thus functions to mystify experience by distorting actual social relations of domination and exploitation. The result is alienation which reveals itself in 'false consciousness,' the internalization of a view of the world as pre-ordained or static. In this way theology encourages attitudes of inferiority, passivity, and subservience towards the people and structures with which power is lodged. When people accept the world as 'naturally' structured in hierarchical order, their perception and capacity to mobilize for social transformation are blunted."⁴⁹

Many congregations in the UCC, I believe, are held in this ideological captivity and are blinkered even further by the legacy of the radical Christian movement's failure to see beyond its own white supremacy. The resultant creation of insiders and outsiders in

⁴⁶ Denise Nadeau, "Feminist Anti-Colonialist Practice in a Euro-Canadian Context," in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church*, ed. Aruna Gnanadason and Shannon Clarkson Letty Russell (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2005), 66.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁸ Marilyn Legge, *The Grace of Difference: A Canadian Feminist Theological Ethic* (Atlanta, USA: Scholars Press, 1992), 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

Canadian society, and within the UCC, severely complicates the understanding and practice of welcome that we might offer.

Church historian, Phyllis Airhart writing for the UCC's 75th anniversary in 2000, says that for the founders of the United Church in 1925, the goal was to help to bring the nation of Canada together with a common purpose. These founders:

...envisaged the new church as a stakeholder involved in fashioning Canada and Canadians; it would be the conscience of the nation. The leaders of the uniting denominations were convinced that they would build a strong church by overcoming the limitations of difference, and they sought unity in what they could believe and accomplish together. Their view of how to build a strong nation mirrored that assumption about difference as a challenge to be transcended.⁵⁰

Airhart points out that we view diversity very differently today putting the United Church's founding identity in peril. Because we saw ourselves as thoroughly Canadian we "didn't need to be introduced to the community because everyone already knew who we were or what we did or didn't stand for. There was no need to communicate, no need for evangelism." However, the Indian residential schools issue, Airhart believes:

...has exposed the vulnerability of its (the UCC's) self understanding, as expressed in its dual sense of mission. The dream of a common faith and the Christianization of society now seem to be assimilationist and paternalistic. This change is not just a *rejection* of the sacred in Canadian life; it is something other than secularization and evinces a shift in the way in which we connect religion and public life in a pluralistic society. Both parts of the founding vision - both the impulse toward unity through affirmation of a common faith and the ideal of Christian service as a way of furthering the church's public witness to the nation - are in trouble at the moment. After 75 years we have not become the united and uniting Church of which the founders dreamed.⁵¹

Paradoxically, the UCC, through its history and into its present, has been and is both a victim and purveyor of colonialism.

⁵⁰ Phyllis Airhart, "A 'Review' of the United Church of Canada's 75 Years," *Touchstone* 18, no. 3 (2000): 24.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 27.

Women and the Church

As part of the examination of culture and its influence on the church in Toronto Conference, it is important to consider the social construction of gender. From a woman's perspective, questions must be asked about who benefits from a particular interpretation of culture and how that system is maintained.⁵² Questions must also be raised about the ways church traditions have helped to justify these cultural practices through theology and biblical teachings.

The United Church Women's (UCW) organization in our UCC congregations has been a strong place for women to find support, nurture and meaningful service over the years. It is an example, though, of some of the structures that are failing for congregations in our present context. For many younger women, the UCW now seems stuck in its ways. It seems to have lost much of the outward looking focus of its predecessor, the Women's Missionary Society, and has come to be seen as a stodgy and uninteresting group of *mothers*. Younger women want sisters not mothers, and want to be freed from the traditional women's roles as homemaker and wife, now reified in the church. Most are not interested in *life memberships* and polite conversations. On their spiritual journey, they are looking for depth, truth telling, and a new definition of womanhood.

In her research with women in Kenya for her book, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, Musimbi Kanyoro found that, for women, the Bible is used as a mirror to culture and is seen as good only in so far as it protects culture.⁵³ She feels it is essential that people learn how to question and examine culture as they face realities like poverty, violence, and AIDS. Kanyoro observes that “gospel and culture are two faces of the

⁵² Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 55.

church, and between the two the Church has decided that gospel is the better one. Yet it is clear that the greatest needs of Bware (Kenyan village) actually stem from culture. The gospel will only be understood through the eyes of culture.”⁵⁴

Because of the destructive aspects of culture, women carry multiple identities and bear multiple oppressions or privileges depending on their life situations of birth, race and class. Legge notes that “the politics of identity and the struggles experienced by women differ widely. There is no ‘essential woman’ but rather different kinds of women and gender identities shaped by culture, for good and bad.”⁵⁵ Immigrants to Canada, aboriginal women, and women of colour often carry with them different forms of cultural gendering while at the same time they face gendered messages from dominant white Canadian culture.⁵⁶

As well, “through cultural images in stories, narratives, and photographs, Canadians are divided into a normalized group and ‘others.’ Others illustrate the prevalence of racialized images of femininities: the dutiful Asian or Islamic wife and daughter, the happy and grateful immigrant worker, the sexually available First Nations woman, the controlling Black mother, the unassimilated immigrant women unable to adequately socialize her children, the ignorant and oppressed third world women.”⁵⁷

Celine Dubé says that even though women in Canada have reached relative equality over the last few decades, we “still live in a patriarchal society that rests on the idea that woman's life must be organized and defined in relationship to the man's.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁵ Legge, 217.

⁵⁶ Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson, eds., *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (Toronto, Canada: Women's Press, 2005), 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁸ Celine Dube, "The Systemic Causes of the Oppression of Women: Presentation at Oser L'esperance," *Groundswell*, no. Final edition 1988-1998 (1998): 6.

Patriarchy “is a social system which supports and sanctions the predominance of men, brings about a concentration of powers and privileges into their hands, and therefore, leads to the control and subordination of women and generates unequal social relations between the sexes.”⁵⁹ Examples of the harmful effects of patriarchy in Canada are: violence against women that is not taken seriously by police; unemployment and underemployment that is especially high for women; white women's domestic freedom built on the backs of women of colour. Dubé continues:

Our culture and institutions function as if woman's first role were that of wife and mother, that is, of a person put in charge of taking care of her husband and of having and raising children. The ideal woman is represented with the Madonna as model: demure, frail, beautiful, chaste, respectful, cooperative, attractive, and a servant. These female characteristics prepare her for marriage and relegate her to the private world of the family. Her most precious assets are her capacity to procreate and her care for the family. Her work at home remains unpaid, her work outside the home, underpaid.⁶⁰

Patriarchal society defines and rewards women who meet the white, heterosexist ideal and punishes those who vary from that norm in any way. Because of the intersections of their multiple subjectivities, women themselves are complicit in the maintenance of patriarchal systems and structures and internalize their own oppression. That is why it is difficult for women to critique culture and break its control over them. It is both complicated and dangerous.

Conclusion

Toronto Conference congregations live within a social context influenced by demographic changes, immigration, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and sexism. Whether

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

they are aware of it or not, these forces influence faith communities and test their ability to live with integrity as the Christian church.

CHAPTER THREE: EXAMINING CHURCH TRADITION

Whether in North America, Asia or Africa, it is clear that the church often fails to live into its role as just and loving community. When seen through the eyes of women and colonized peoples, so many issues seem to block the church from being faithful and lively, transforming and transformative. Letty Russell says it is essential that “the church rethinks the meaning of its self-understanding as a community of Jesus Christ in every changing circumstance.”⁶¹ She contends that in our time there is a need not only for reformation but for “revolution, of building a new house of freedom where people’s hopes for human dignity are incorporated in both social structures and expressions of faith and service.”⁶²

In order to rethink our self-understanding as the church in Toronto Conference, it is important to examine what others have said about ecclesiology through time and across other regions of the world. I will examine the thoughts of theologians from the early church, from twentieth century Europe, to contemporary two-thirds world feminist, postcolonial, Canadian and United Church of Canada perspectives. For me, the burning question for the church in our time is: are these theologies of the church, from ancient and modern Christian tradition, sufficient to move the church to a postcolonial feminist praxis?

⁶¹ Letty Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, eds., *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies* (Louisville, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 75.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Historic Doctrines

The doctrines of the church arise from the church's struggles through the ages to live faithfully following the life and teachings of Jesus. As Christians, our primary source of information about Jesus' life is the Bible in which various witnesses, interpreters and preachers have left compelling impressions. Three of these scripture passages sum up much of the teachings of Jesus and are of particular importance to the mission of the church: Matt. 25: 31-45, where we are called to feed the poor, clothe the naked, and free the oppressed; The Great Commission, Matt 28:19, 20, where Jesus calls us to go out and make disciples of all nations; and the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31) where Jesus proclaims that to love God and to your neighbour as you love yourself is the greatest of all the laws. Though each of these passages is open to interpretation, from them the church has gleaned its purpose.

The first attempts to follow the way of Jesus, after his crucifixion and resurrection, resulted in experiments in being church. In Acts and the writings of Paul we learn about the character of the early church. These were often house churches that strived to be egalitarian and generous. They were concerned for widows and the poor. They were also loosely connected with sister churches. But, they were also prone to disputes and conflicts and very much influenced by their particular socio-political context as part of the Roman Empire. Attempts to guide these churches, through visits and letters by Paul and other apostles, eventually became set down doctrinally in the fourth century with the naming of the marks of the church.

At the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, referred to the true church as *one, holy, catholic and apostolic church*. But as

Jurgen Moltmann notes, it is not clear how these qualities were to be understood.

However, because they have been set in this Creed, and located in the section dealing with the workings of the Spirit, he believes they are meant to be understood in faith.⁶³

Moltmann goes on to say that “if the church acquires its existence through the activity of Christ, then her characteristics, too, are characteristics of Christ’s activity first of all. The acknowledgement of the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ is acknowledgement of the uniting, sanctifying, comprehensive and commissioning lordship of Christ.”⁶⁴ So the unity of the church, its holiness, catholicity, and apostolic character all refer to Christ’s actions through the church and not to the qualities of the members or the rituals of the church itself. The church exists because of and in Christ. Moltmann sees these attributes as statements of faith and hope that lead to statements of action for the church. He says that “faith, hope and action are the genesis of the form of the church visible to the world in unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity... The church lives in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic rule of Christ through faith, hope and action.”⁶⁵

Through Christian history other signs of the church have been proposed. Two from the Reformation period complement these original four. The Reformers, concerned with correcting abuses in the church, determined that the pure (scriptural) proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments were also foundational to the church. Moltmann explains that:

The two Reformation signs of the church describe from within what the traditional attributes of the church describe from without, so to speak. Without the pure proclamation there is no messianic church, gathered together for unity in Christ. Without the fellowship of the table and the one baptism the church has no

⁶³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York, USA: Harper & Row, 1977), 337.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 339,340.

catholicity. But then the reverse is true as well: without unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, there is no pure proclamation and no right use of the sacraments.”⁶⁶

From the original four marks, the *unity* of the church is experienced in the gathered congregation of different people held together in love. This unity allows for economic, social, physical and cultural differences; for varieties of gifts and skills; for strengths, weaknesses and various abilities. Moltmann says that “it is a unity of diversity in freedom.”⁶⁷ It is a unity founded in Christ’s open table. Within this unity is also solidarity with all other Christian churches especially those under persecution. For Moltmann, unity is not only a sign but a task for the church in the world:

That is why the unifying power of the sacraments cannot be separated from the tasks and forces of social and political justice. The unity of Christ, which must not be divided, is not only unity with his disciples and the fellowship of believers but, based on that, is also his unity and fellowship with the oppressed, humiliated and forsaken. The church would not witness to the whole Christ if it were not a fellowship of believers with the poor, a fellowship of the hopeful with the sick, and a fellowship of the loving with the oppressed.⁶⁸

Unity is also exhibited when the church works for peace and justice in social and political movements. Moltmann’s thinking lifts up the tenets of liberation theology and recognizes the necessity of a political church.

Catholic, meaning *universal*, refers not to the present state of the church, but to its mission and hope. Bringing the *kingdom*⁶⁹ of God on earth is the mission of the church that is meant for all peoples and the earth itself. Moltmann notes that catholicity should be viewed in an eschatological context of future total salvation. He defends the church’s preferential treatment of the poor and oppressed as a means that benefits the poor as well

⁶⁶ Ibid., 341.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 343.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 345.

⁶⁹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’s feminist translation of the eschatological *kingdom*.

as the rich and comfortable in the end. The intent is ultimately directed toward the whole.⁷⁰ However, the words *mission* and *salvation* have often been misused and misunderstood in the church, connecting catholicity with colonial conquest, missionary ventures and proselytism even in a religiously plural world.

Moltmann recognizes the flawed character of church members and the sometimes corrupt nature of the church. However, he believes that the church is *holy* “precisely at the point where it acknowledges its sins and the sins of mankind (sic) and trusts to justification through God.”⁷¹ As Christ suffered for a ministry devoted to the poor and oppressed, so too the church, when it devotes itself in hope to the liberation of these humble ones, becomes blessed.⁷² Holiness is not an ontological trait of the church, which some would claim, but a result of liberating advocacy and solidarity with the poor.

According to Moltmann, it is through its *apostolic witness* that the church becomes one, holy and catholic. Based on the witness of the first apostles to the risen Christ made known to us in scripture, the church continues its *missionary charge*. According to Moltmann, “the term ‘apostolic’ denotes both the church’s foundation and its commission.”⁷³ He notes that when the church is involved in missionary activity it is open to new and independent activities. It does not seek to replicate its own form as a sign of mission.⁷⁴ He clarifies the purpose of the church then as bringing about the kingdom. The church does this through continuing Christ’s work with the marginalized,

⁷⁰ Moltmann, 352.

⁷¹ Ibid., 353.

⁷² Ibid., 356,357.

⁷³ Ibid., 358.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 360.

rather than rowing the Christian church. He says the church's "apostolic succession is the succession of the passion of Christ."⁷⁵

In 1998, the World Council of Churches' study, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, gave expression to what the churches could agree regarding the nature and purpose of the church, while noting remaining areas of disagreement. The purpose of the study stated that the church exists "not for itself alone, but to serve in God's work of reconciliation and for the praise and glory of God. The more the Church understands its own nature, the more it gets hold of its own vocation."⁷⁶ Aside from a greater emphasis on the use of *God* rather than *Christ*, it is similar to Moltmann's. The writers state that:

Being the creature of God's own Word and Spirit the Church of God is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The essential attributes of the church are not its own qualities but are fully rooted in its dependence upon God through his (sic) Word and Spirit. It is one because the God who binds it to himself (sic) by Word and Spirit is the one creator and redeemer making the Church a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all created reality. It is holy because God is the holy one who in Jesus Christ has overcome all unholiness, sanctifying the Church by his Word of forgiveness in the Holy Spirit and making it his own, the body of Christ. It is catholic because God is the fullness of life who through Word and Spirit makes the Church the place and instrument of his (sic) saving, life-giving, fulfilling presence wherever it is, thereby offering the fullness of the revealed Word, all the means of salvation to people of every nation, race, class, sex and culture. It is apostolic because the Word of God that creates and sustains the Church is the Gospel primarily and normatively borne witness to by the apostles, making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth throughout the ages.⁷⁷

Disagreements among denominations relate to whether preaching and the sacraments are the means or the witness to God's spirit; the significance of the ordained ministry as bearer of God's truth; and the theological importance of institutional continuity. However, there is a sense that even with various interpretations:

⁷⁵ Ibid., 361.

⁷⁶ WCC, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, 1998), 8, Paper #181.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 9, 10.

The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is the sign and instrument of God's design for the whole world. Being that part of humanity which already participates in the love and communion of God, the Church is a prophetic sign which points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, a fulfillment of the kingdom of God.⁷⁸

This quotation, “the sign and instrument of God’s design for the whole world,” refers to the church in faith but certainly could be interpreted as carrying neo-colonial certainty about the church too far in a pluralist world.

The Vocation of the Church

Moltmann and the WCC note that the marks of the church are to be understood in faith, aspired to in hope, but lived in action. *In Fashion Me A People*, Maria Harris focuses on the distinctive action/vocation that defines the course of the church’s life. She says that:

We are a people, called by the gospel, called to make a difference in our world. The active attempt to make this difference is the heart of the pastoral vocation. The pastoral vocation, as the phrase suggests, is a call to, and a demand for, a particular way of living. ... We are called to care: for ourselves, for one another, for the earth which is our home. We are called to take seriously our relation to God and all God's creatures, both within and beyond the church. We are called to end our isolation from others by living each day of our lives rooted in love, rooted in the Christ. And we are called to believe that in doing so, we fulfill our destiny as a people of God.⁷⁹

Harris notes that the church is a people with a mission based on the life of Jesus:

Mission means sending. The mission of the people who are the church is to go into the world and to be in the world as Jesus was, as the revelation of God. The mission of the people who are the church is to reveal God as present to the world, as a God who cares for the world and is in an ongoing relation to the world. The mission is to reveal a God who works through active and practical ministry in the world.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, USA: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 24.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 24,25.

In order for God to be revealed through the people, they are sent to do *ministry*, which is *servicing*, and so they are to live as *servants of God*. Harris names the classic and historic forms of service as *koinonia* (community), *leiturgia* (prayer and worship), *didache* (teaching), *kerygma* (proclamation), and *diakonia* (outreach).⁸¹

Harris believes these ministries are rooted in both Protestant and Catholic traditions where “each of which honors the triple office of the Christ... priestly, prophetic and political, each aspect continuing the work of Jesus, who was himself an embodiment of the vocation to be priest, prophet and king.”⁸²

These three components, she maintains, form our calling as church: as a priestly people through blessing and doing the works of teaching in prayer and preserving traditions; as a prophetic people called to speak a word of justice and live compassionately; and as a kingly or political people, to transform the church’s institutions and systems as well as those of the world in ways that are just, life-giving and empowering.⁸³

Ministry for Harris “is the *curriculum of life* beyond the local situation, already fashioned for us by centuries of church living which have created and re-created the diversity and the interplay of ecclesial forms, as well as encounter with the entire world.”⁸⁴ Harris claims this meaning arises from the *first curriculum* of the Christian people, stated in Acts 2:32, 42-47:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses [kerygma] And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [didache; kerygma] and fellowship [koinonia], to the breaking of bread and the prayers [leiturgia]....And all who

⁸¹ Ibid., 25.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 63.

believed were together and had all things in common [koinonia]; they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need [diakonia].⁸⁵

Harris describes the church through its fundamental forms or functions, the curriculum - the priestly, prophetic, and political work of didache, leiturgia, koinonia, kerygma, and diakonia. Education is the shaping and reshaping of these elements in relation to each other. The curriculum is the subject matter this shaped.⁸⁶

For Harris, koinonia, the ministry of community and communion, is based in love. She says it is “the ministry that moves us toward the healing of division, toward overcoming brokenness, and ultimately toward achieving wholeness.”⁸⁷ This ministry of communion acts as a governing reality; a convicting reality and as-yet-unrealized and incomplete reality for the community of faith.⁸⁸ Community is also taught by the way it is lived through outreach.

Leiturgia involves the church living out its pastoral vocation to worship and pray. For Harris, this means corporate worship as well as personal prayer life.⁸⁹

Didache means teaching - what is taught, and how it is taught. This may involve catechesis, preaching, and the art of raising questions using many settings and forms. Harris acknowledges the political power of this function.⁹⁰

Proclamation, or kerygma, is centred in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. It is the word of a saving God whose word is with and for the people being formed. Harris notes that this not only involves proclaiming Jesus as the primary word of God, but also acknowledging God embodied in words and messages about Jesus.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 110-123.

Essentially, she says this is “the word of justice provoking us toward a curriculum of justice.”⁹¹ It involves areas such as preaching, scripture, theology and public advocacy.⁹²

Diakonia refers to service, loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is the work of compassionate ministry, both directly to persons and through the transformation of unjust systems.⁹³

Harris stresses that the work of living into this pastoral and educational ministry is the work of the all the people of the church not just those designated to certain offices or leadership roles. Without overtly naming a feminist postcolonial perspective, she does raise issues and offers practices that challenge the patriarchal use of power in the institutional church. She also calls the North American church to consider its privileged position in the world, and to dialogue with other religions. Harris offers a practical theology, based on the life of congregations though the ages, influenced by liberation theology, but firmly rooted in the vocation of Jesus, the Christ.

Feminist Ecclesiology from Asia Africa and North America

In the last twenty years, the whole project of doing theology has been revolutionized by groups who no longer accept the universalizing truths of an ecclesiology that is not grounded in a particular context. Women’s groups, justice and action groups, ecumenical and interfaith coalitions, and global partnerships continue to stretch us with their cries for justice and community. Feminists, womanists, Asian, African and Latin American theologians challenge the church’s idea of itself by bringing specific social, economic and political issues of their contexts into the dialogue. Three

⁹¹ Ibid., 131.

⁹² Ibid., 127-131.

⁹³ Ibid., 146.

feminist theologians, Kwok Pui-lan, Mercy Oduyoye, and Letty Russell examine the nature of the church and its doctrines and propose new metaphors, understandings, and strategies for reconstructing the idea of church in liberative terms.

North American Feminist Ecclesiology

Letty Russell in *The Church With AIDS*, looks again at the traditional marks and signs of the church but from a clearly feminist point of view of identification with oppressed peoples, specifically those with HIV/AIDS. Referring to the Protestant signs of the church "where the word is truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered," she agrees with Moltmann that they give internal witness to the marks viewed from outside the church. For Russell, right preaching, based on scripture, must necessarily mean good news is addressed to the marginalized and oppressed. She notes that scripture has little to say about homosexuality but much to say about hospitality and ministering to those who are oppressed.⁹⁴

Regarding the right administration of sacraments, she notes that the WCC Faith and Order Commission's "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry" document, states that through baptism and eucharist, there is entry into Christ and into the new covenant between God and God's people.⁹⁵ So, she says, "the word 'rightly' should include the need for the community of celebration to live out the life of righteousness or justice."⁹⁶ Russell notes then that the reformers' signs of the church involve the church in actions of justice and love that prepare the table. For her, the word truly preached and sacraments rightly administered can only be found in communities of faith and struggle. "For the

⁹⁴ Letty M. Russell, ed., *The Church with Aids: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis* (Louisville, USA: John Knox Press, 1990), 138.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

church's identity is derived from the story of Jesus' own word and action on the cross, in solidarity with the oppressed. This is our word and action as well, as we struggle for justice and life itself, together with our sisters and brothers with AIDS."⁹⁷

Looking at the early creedal marks of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, Russell declares that what is most important is not how they define the church, but how they are used and practiced. For Russell "unity includes action for justice. Holiness includes the experience of shared suffering.... Catholicity includes connection to the world as well as orthopraxy in service. Apostolicity includes 'constancy in advocacy for justice.'" ⁹⁸

In order that there be a shift in the church's perspective to those who are oppressed, Russell believes a fifth mark, that of *justice*, must be added to the marks of the church. She says that "the sinfulness of the church is such that a constant and equal reminder of its nature as a community of justice is crucial for its identity. This reminder needs to push all churches to constant self critique and expansion of their understanding of justice."⁹⁹ Russell makes this claim on the basis of the thought and life of the U.S. white middle-class church, which, she says, continues to live within the dualism of the church and the world. This dualism makes it impossible for the church to really be a community of love, justice and struggle. North American churches, she says, too often reflect culture, rather than critique culture for the sake of justice.¹⁰⁰ Like Harris, Russell sees these marks and signs of the church as vital tasks for the church to fulfill, for its own future and the future of the world.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 144.

In *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* Part I, the image of the round table permeates Russell's thinking about church.¹⁰¹ For Kwok Pui-lan and other Asian feminist theologians, the biblical images of the body of Christ and the *Jesus community* offer options for new models of church.¹⁰² For African feminist theologian, Mercy Oduyoye, church could be considered the "hearth-hold of Christ within the household of God".¹⁰³

Each of these theologians describes church contexts that fall short of the life giving community God intends. Many experience the North American church as oppressive and dismissive of the poor and marginalized.¹⁰⁴ Russell says women are seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution to the church's failing health. At a basic level, women are still not regarded as bearers of the holy, full partners with men in creation and in ministry.¹⁰⁵ The persistence of the myth of dualism and the chasm between the good news in the Gospels and the lived experience of church, offer jarring evidence of the church's failures.¹⁰⁶

African Women's Theology

In *Introducing African Women's Theology*, Mercy Oduyoye claims that women, whose lives revolve around home-making, look to the church as the household of God because women expect to be welcomed and treated with dignity there. However, many women in Africa are not house holders but do tend the hearths that provide for their families and beyond. Because Africans are organized around the hearths of women who

¹⁰¹ Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 17-19.

¹⁰² Pui-lan Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 109.

¹⁰³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 79.

¹⁰⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 22,23.

provide for them, they see Jesus in that role of nurturer/sustainer as well.¹⁰⁷ African values of kinship and community and the central role of provider marry well with the image of church as “hearth-hold with God as mother, the whole earth is the hearth and all human beings as the children of God”.¹⁰⁸ For Oduyoye, this metaphor counters the triumphant nature of some Christology as it asserts that all peoples are God’s children.

However, Oduyoye is careful to differentiate between what the church is in Africa and what it claims to be. She states that “nowhere in the world are women and men treated as being on an equal footing in the Church.”¹⁰⁹ In the African church, both men and women who have internalized the messages of women’s inferiority continue to maintain this inequality especially on the question of ordination and women’s marginalization in the church. Often the church fails to practice the laws, customs and traditions of society which safeguard the rights of women, yet, women in Africa continue to fill the churches despite this oppressive climate.

Asian Feminist Theology

In *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, Kwok Pui-lan surveying the huge diversity and changing landscape in the Asian context, finds commonalities in the way women are treated in Asian churches. Even though, as in Africa, women are the majority in those churches, colonial, patriarchal and indigenous biases against them keep women out of the centres of power and life in these communities.¹¹⁰ The egalitarian metaphor of church as the body of Christ proves false in lived reality. However, in some areas, women’s consciousness has been raised through the success of women’s movements.

¹⁰⁷ Oduyoye, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁰ Kwok, 98.

This has led to opposition to the patriarchal order and misogynist teachings and to the creation of movements to ordain women and include them at all levels of the church. Many Asian women see the hypocrisy of the church and call for a new prophetic stance that shows society and the world a “prophetic community committed to justice, peace and service with love.”¹¹¹

Common Complaints

In the church’s organization and leadership, Russell sees reflections of ancient hierarchical models that privilege white Euro-centric men who exercise “power over” in ecclesial relationships. Failure to include women, the poor, and people of colour within the decision-making and ministry functions of the church belies the spirit of justice and new life that Christ call us to and also helps to justify their oppression.¹¹² The divide between ordered and lay ministry continues to reinforce structures of domination. Eucharistic privilege becomes a dividing line to exclude women from power and authority. Dualisms which place the spirit over the body continue to get in the way of women bringing their sexuality into their roles as leaders in the church.¹¹³ New forms of leadership are emerging, models of partnership are envisioned, but Russell admits there is still much to learn in this area.

Many churches in North America continue to perpetuate the structural sin of white racism through their failure to offer hospitality and leadership opportunities to people of colour in their midst. The interwoven nature of oppressions re class, race, sex, culture,

¹¹¹ Ecclesiology Women Participants CCA, "Realities of the Asian Woman in Society and Church," *In God's Image* December (1986).

¹¹² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 46.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

and sexual orientation, reinforced at personal, social, and ecclesial levels, means the church is deeply embedded in the justification of these oppressions.¹¹⁴

For Oduyoye, the church's complicity and silence in regard to violence against women, in women's subordination, and double standards re sexuality, make it responsible for preserving an oppressive status quo. As in general society, women are not in positions of power to influence the church, so men's voices provide the only lens on life. Most women continue to support the church and meet together as a way to gain support but not to effect change in the church itself. They meet as a "church within a Church, 'a church in the round' that they seek within the pyramidal Church run by the men."¹¹⁵

In Asia, as in North America and Africa, many feminist theologians see the church mirroring the damaging patriarchal structures of society. Women are usually asked to fill gender-defined roles in the church such as cleaning, secretarial service or work with children. Women's voices are rarely heard in the decision making bodies of the church. Women's subordination is also reinforced by non-Christian influences from other religious traditions. According to Kwok Pui-lan, the Shinto religion and Buddhism associate women's bleeding with impurity. Shinto also views sexuality as negative. Buddhist beliefs portray women as inferior to men and a hindrance to their salvation.¹¹⁶ In these religions as well, men still hold most leadership roles.

Asian churches do not challenge these views and, in effect, support them through their teachings and practices. The Roman Catholic church, in Asia and around the world, prevents women from becoming priests on the basis of their sex. Paul's teachings about controlling women are often used to justify women's oppression. When women do take

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹¹⁵ Oduyoye, 83,84.

¹¹⁶ Kwok, 99.

on leadership roles they are sidelined to subordinate positions and stereotypical roles and are often viewed with suspicion by female parishioners. Married women priests must juggle responsibilities at home with work while single women leaders are scorned.¹¹⁷

Even where feminism has taken hold in the Philippines, most Christian movement leaders are men. In Korea, churches organized to serve the marginalized by progressive leaders, keep women on the sidelines. Theological schools have many women students but have few women faculty and teach Western middle-class style theology instead of theologies that address the needs of Asian peoples. Courses on feminist theology are either dismissed as not serious, or poorly attended if offered.¹¹⁸

Common complaints unite feminists around the world. An especially heavy critique, however, falls on the North American churches where white racism compounds the multiple oppressions justified by the church. Most Northern churches also have little to say about the globalization of economics and culture which serves the North and continues the oppression of the South.

Suggestions

Russell's analysis of the church includes a description. The church is a "community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome."¹¹⁹ She states that the "doctrine of the church...is an interpretation of the experience of gathering in Christ's name and then the experience of life in Christ's service".¹²⁰ In questioning biblical tradition, Russell finds that the terms *ekklesia*, the *people of the Way*, and *koinonia* or community, were used for church. *Ekklesia* means *gathered in the name of*

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 101.

¹¹⁹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 14.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 37.

Christ and can be used to define communities that understand that Christ is in their midst.¹²¹ How that is understood to be true, though, has changed who we are as church through history.

Russell suggests using the term *leadership* as a way to defuse the ministry /ordination conflict. Paul uses the term communally and relates it to the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus' actions and ministry could be deemed leadership, even though not named as such in the gospels. The relationship of power to leadership needs to be understood from a feminist perspective as shared power, power with, friendship and partnership.¹²² Russell also finds it helpful to view Jesus' challenge to the order of the religious establishment of his day as a model of iconoclasm of patriarchy. His ministry of *diakonia*, servant leadership, offered a new paradigm we can use today. In the early church, new models of leadership celebrated women's ministry and named women of importance to the church in Romans and Paul's Epistles.¹²³ In the second and third centuries, women's leadership was beginning to be contested and eventually Christendom brought with it a return to hierarchical order and the male priestly caste. This patriarchal model of church and home was cemented through the ages even in the Reformation. However, Russell notes that we still celebrate eucharist which offers welcome to all and is an inspiration to those working to include those on the margins of life.¹²⁴

For Oduyoye, issues of participation, inclusiveness, and ministry also loom large for women in the African church. Women at the 1996 conference of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians looked at the concept of *koinoia*, the sharing of

¹²¹ Ibid., 42, 43.

¹²² Ibid., 57.

¹²³ Ibid., 61.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 62, 63.

a common life. They used models from Christian scriptures that described the early church where women and men participated in the mission of God according to their God given gifts.¹²⁵ The ordination of men only counters the tradition of the priesthood of all believers. She feels women should be aided to use their gifts for the well-being of the whole church. However violence and the subjugation of women in African churches means that the hope for women is in education for *koinonia*.¹²⁶ Like Russell, Oduyoye sees justice as a mark of the true church of God. Biblical passages such as Proverbs 22.17-18 and Ephesians 5:28-31 point the church to inclusiveness, mutuality, and caring.

Mission is connected to ecclesiology for African feminist theologians. Denise Ackerman says that inclusiveness lies at the heart of the Great Commandment calling the church to be a place of healing and caring, the very essence of African women's lives. On the basis of common baptism, women also argue that women and women's views need to be included in living out the church's mission. She explains that "what brings death to women cannot be said to bring life to the community."¹²⁷ Finally, Oduyoye notes that women understand mission to be about enacting salvation/liberation and that is the work of the whole church. It is not about the kind of evangelism promoted by colonial powers. There is a feeling that mission, "working for and with goodness," should be focused especially on women as Christianity has brought such bad news for them up to now.¹²⁸

North American feminist theologians seek ways of thinking about church that might begin to change death-dealing practices and structures. In *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, Kelly Brown Douglas states that

¹²⁵ Oduyoye, 85.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 86.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

"church can be a vanguard for change or a stubborn antagonist to that change."¹²⁹ In her essay, "What it Means to be Church: One Womanist's Perspective," she notes the discontinuity between the struggle for wholeness and survival in the black church and the heterosexist, homophobic and sexist tendencies found there also.¹³⁰ She cites a Platonized theology, which disdains the body, for betraying the core values of the black church.¹³¹ This insight is helpful as it applies to the Canadian church as well. Often spiritualized religion, and transcendent theology prevent us from concretizing God's justice and good news for the poor and the alienated in our neighborhoods and world. Communion remains a two-dimensional ritual, rather than a sign of radical hospitality and generosity lived out in the streets, in economic and environmental policy, in our life ways. Douglas says that "the meaning of church is not found in speculative theological claims or notions, but rather in an act of moral commitment to life and wholeness for all God's people."¹³²

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz poses some interesting questions, in her chapter called "Being Church in the 21st Century: a Mujerista Perspective." She asks, "What is needed for the unfolding of the kingdom of God in our midst to take place? What is the church called to be, to do, to promote?"¹³³ She answers by naming that the central message of the gospel means salvation, liberation, fullness of life, human flourishing, and so our call then, as church, is to be doers of justice.

¹²⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, "What It Means to Be Church: One Womanist's Perspective," in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, ed. Letty M. Russell, Aruna Gnanadason, and J. Shannon Clarkson (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 28.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Being Church in the 21st Century: A Mujerista Perspective," in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, ed. Letty M. Russell, J. Shannon Clarkson, and Aruna Gnanadason (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 38.

Isasi-Diaz notes “that one of the key reasons why justice does not flourish nowadays is exclusion. Therefore... the Church has to promote at all times and under all conditions, inclusiveness. I think the church as an institution and as a People of God has to promote and embody a community of tender justice and inclusive love.”¹³⁴ She stresses that the church must be concerned in the here and now about those who are marginalized and oppressed, searching for ways to end oppression and open up participation. She says that “being church is not a matter of maintaining the status quo for the sake of preserving the past, but of working to bring about change that promotes justice.”¹³⁵

In her article “Ecclesiology in a Roman Catholic Feminist Perspective,” Mary Hunt talks about feminist ecclesiology as promoting social justice within an inclusive democratic assembly. She defines “ekklesia” as the democratic assembly – “the organizational model best suited to those of us who live in continuity with the Jesus movement.”¹³⁶ This assertion then becomes a challenge to congregational governance and leadership styles that limit the voices of women and others who are socially “on the edge”.

Postcolonial Feminist Ecclesiology

Looking at the church from a postcolonial perspective changes how we understand its mission and defining marks. Denise Nadeau’s essay, “Feminist Anti-Colonialist Practice in a Euro-Canadian Context” names racism and colonialism as part of the fabric of the Canadian nation and church. Nadeau challenges the church to extricate itself from the colonial mindset. Her question, “What does decolonization involve for those who benefit

¹³⁴ Ibid., 38,39.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹³⁶ Mary Hunt, "Ecclesiology in a Roman Catholic Feminist Perspective," in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, ed. Letty M. Russell., Aruna Gnanadason, and J. Shannon Clarkson (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 54.

from white supremacy?”¹³⁷ is one that our churches need to face. Whether colonized or colonizer, the process of decolonization can be an act of liberation.

Nadeau warns that we must deconstruct the image of the *white helper* and our own *whiteness* if we are ever to reframe our relationships with native women, women from the global South and immigrant and refugee women of color. “In a more subtle way, the civilizing mission of the white settler Christian woman continues today, with professional empathy and advocacy, the contemporary incarnations.”¹³⁸ This is a difficult challenge for congregations who prefer white-gloved charity to the more complex and messy work of justice-making.

Like Nadeau, Rebecca Todd Peters challenges notions of mission that perpetuate the church’s colonizing attitudes and practices. Peters’ chapter, “De-colonizing our Minds: Postcolonial Perspectives on The Church,” offers helpful analysis on the process of colonization that has enabled white Christians *not to know* the devastating reality of poverty and injustice in many parts of the two thirds world.¹³⁹ She contrasts the meanings of *church*, *mission*, and *evangelism* from conservative and liberal points of view. A conservative evangelical worldview, concerned with individual pietism and personal salvation, avoids the analysis and self-critique that reveals the church's complicity in unjust social structures that create racism and poverty. The more liberal worldview, sees the church as identified with the life and ministry of Jesus as he reached out to the poor and marginalized people of his day. Peters writes that “Christ's call to the church is to care for those among us who are considered ‘the least of these’ and this group of

¹³⁷ Nadeau, 69.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹³⁹ Rebecca Todd Peters, “Decolonizing Our Minds: Postcolonial Perspectives on the Church,” in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America*, ed. Letty M. Russell, Aruna Gnanadason, and J. Shannon Clarkson (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 97.

Christians lives out their calling by attending to the material and social well-being of people in need by working toward the transformation of society.”¹⁴⁰ Defining what the good news is for our world constitutes an important step in living our mission as church.

Peters argues that “the calls to justice and right relation with our neighbor are central to the Christian identity and that they require transformed ecclesiology rooted in a recognition of and respect for the ‘other’ that transforms our understanding of mission and our understanding of the telos of the church.”¹⁴¹ Because, colonization has formed our identity as well as our attitudes and actions as church, we must work to transform or decolonize the church.

Peters also notes that “as we rethink our own identity, our images and language for God will change. As we rethink the meaning of the church, we are challenged to move beyond our colonial heritage of faith as an experience of personal piety and the church as an instrument of conversion towards a vision of the church as a community of believers called to promote God's justice on earth.”¹⁴² Peters urges the church to re-interpret the Great Commission in new ways by rethinking what the Good News is for our world and how we share it:

We must rethink traditional concepts of mission. A reworked vision of the church's purpose and mission from a postcolonial perspective ought to be focused on discerning how we can participate daily in the grace filled acts of liberation that allow for the enactment of God's justice in our world.¹⁴³

Even though many churches have been caught in this colonial mentality, historically, a minority group in the UCC, have been aware since the mid twentieth century, of the harmful legacy of colonialism. They have acted to rethink the church's

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴² Ibid., 106,107.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 107.

identity and relationships especially in regard to global mission. The work of Katherine Hockin and Jim Endicott in China brought the UCC a new and painful awareness which eventually led to a radical change in its missiology.

Canadian and UCC theologian, Douglas John Hall, in *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*, reflects on the character of the church first by claiming the theology of the cross as foundational. He calls this foundation “a spirit and a method, a way of seeing the world, a mode of reflecting on historical experience and on the tradition that has been handed over to us.”¹⁴⁴ According to Hall, this affects all our doctrines, and our “understanding of our mission as our conception of Christian life.”¹⁴⁵ Like others, Hall calls the church to open its eyes to its own oppressive practices and to the reality of our suffering world. The major point that Hall makes is that the church must accept the end of Christendom. By living in denial we get caught up with “present in-house concerns - our pseudo ecumenical squabbles, our struggle to survive economically without changing our ‘lifestyle,’ our escape into liturgy and ‘spirituality,’ our precious quest for ‘right doctrine, our vestigial moralism, and so forth.”¹⁴⁶ He recommends that “we need to stick our noses outside the doors of our sanctuaries and see what is waiting for us there in the marketplace called world.”¹⁴⁷ Hall’s emphasis on the church’s role of hospitality in a world full of diversity resonates with so many others.

Hall uses the power of Reformation theological principles as his guide posts and offers them as grounding principles for the church. His enumeration of the principles of Protestant theology help UCC people to recognize the historic lineage of the

¹⁴⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey* (Minneapolis, USA: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 61.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

denomination that continues to influence who we are now. In this discussion, Hall emphasizes the necessity to educate our laity beyond easy religious clichés. He points out the difference between Protestant thinking and that of the conservative right. The latter tends to offer black and white moral answers that preserve white first world hegemony. He is concerned that what has been learned through the struggles of the Reformation not be lost to the world. This requires listening attentively to the Reformed expressions of biblical faith so that we might deconstruct and reconstruct them in the light of the present and future.

Another Canadian and UCC theologian, Marilyn Legge, sees the church's purpose and reason for existence bound up with the meaning of the word *mission*. In "Negotiating Mission," Legge gives a postcolonial critique of mission as it has been derived from traditional understandings of the Great Commission.¹⁴⁸ In order to rethink missiology for the twenty-first century, Legge takes seriously the Canadian experience of colonialism, especially with aboriginal peoples, and the church's complicity in that oppression. Moving toward reconciliation and wholeness for the church can only happen, she says, with the acknowledgement of these past wrongs.¹⁴⁹ She writes that "God's mission for the sake of the beloved world includes healing ourselves with the solidarity of others and that justice/love is a single standard for diverse discourses of mission."¹⁵⁰ For Legge, the mission of the church must resist the civilizing and colonizing practices of the

¹⁴⁸ Marilyn J. Legge, "Negotiating Mission: A Canadian Stance," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 368 (2004): 117.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 122.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: 119.

past perpetuated by dominating church attitudes.¹⁵¹ She suggests a model of partnership as a paradigm for mission.¹⁵²

Pamela Dickey Young in her book *Re-creating the Church: Communities of Eros*, acknowledges that the church faces many challenges considering its imperialistic past and its present plural context. She contends that churches need to be clear about their identity and be ready to speak about their particular mission in their communities. She sees this as important in order to break down the perception of Christianity and Christian churches as being conservatively monolithic and univocal. She has a vision of the church as "a diverse collection of communities of Eros finding their common identity in the shared memory and presence of Jesus Christ. By *eros*, Young means a mutuality in loving that includes giving and receiving. Church members and others experience power, joy, and self-transcendence in the mutual pursuit of the good of the whole, instead of the traditional ethic of self-sacrifice."¹⁵³

However, for Young, the traditional marks of the church provide no useful function since "we gloss over the very real historical changes and differences that have challenged the church over time."¹⁵⁴ In the present ecumenical situation, Young wonders what kind of oneness could be achieved at the expense of contextuality. She feels that declaring oneness denies the very real diversity of the church around the world.¹⁵⁵ Her argument against unity relates to its meaning centered in Jesus Christ, who, she says, is interpreted in many ways.¹⁵⁶ She says the visible church is not holy, even though it

¹⁵¹ Ibid.: 121.

¹⁵² Ibid.: 129.

¹⁵³ Pamela Dickey Young, *Re-Creating the Church: Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg, USA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 13.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 154.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 152.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 153.

strives to be. In a religiously plural world, where many Christians recognize that Christianity is only one way to be religious, the catholicity of the church, is also in question. This mark she says, tends to imply an exclusivist view of the religious world that brings all religions under Christianity.¹⁵⁷ Young acknowledges that, rather than through episcopal succession, for the church to be apostolic, it must strive to live out of faithfulness to the apostolic witness of Jesus Christ. She concludes by saying that:

...churches are not automatically life-giving. Nor can they rest on past laurels or traditions. Churches must be continually remaking themselves to rise to the challenges of living the gospel in each time and place. Only then can they be places where one might expect to find flourishing and right relationship -where eros connects us to God, to self, and to all others in the universe.¹⁵⁸

Although I agree with Young's critique of the church, I don't agree that the doctrine of the marks of the church is unusable for our age. Even though agreeing on common values and understandings may never be possible in the worldwide church, I think these marks still speak to the re-formation and transformation of the church in Toronto Conference.

The UCC has recently engaged this doctrine of the marks of the church, as well as its signs and functions, in a new statement of faith. Through many studies and documents over the last ten years the United Church of Canada has spoken out and sought to educate congregations about Christian-Muslim relations, Christian-Jewish relations, aboriginal spirituality, same-sex marriage and racial justice amongst other issues. Three recent documents, "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire," "Mending the World," and "Towards a Transformative Vision for the United Church of Canada," seek to awaken the church to its neo-colonial and plural context and offer ways the church can respond by

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 154.

living and acting justly and faithfully in the world. In 2006, the General Council adopted a new statement of faith called, “A Song of Faith,” which sums up many of the theological principles and hopes for the church embodied in these documents.

A 2006 UCC Statement of Faith

This latest statement of faith for the UCC seeks to provide a *verbal picture* of our faith in the midst of our particular social, political, and historical twenty-first century context.¹⁵⁹ Contextual issues that influenced the statement were: the hunger for relationship in society; the shift of the church’s power and influence from the centre to the margins of society; a plural world where our sense of truth must exist besides others’ truths. Other influences included: the market economy, empire and systems of domination which threaten right relationship and equitable distribution of resources; the climate of terror where fear tends to motivate violence instead of trust in God’s love and healing power; and the fragile nature of the earth itself crying out for healing and sustainability.¹⁶⁰

In relation to the church, this statement reminds the UCC of its commitment to stand with the oppressed “resisting forces that exploit and marginalize.” It recognizes the need for a new postcolonial interpretation of mission based in justice “moving from models of charity and conversion toward a model of mutuality, ‘grounded in partnership and solidarity.’”¹⁶¹ Another important aspect of this statement is the feminist self understanding of the UCC as an inclusive church “honouring and acknowledging the

¹⁵⁹ UCC, “A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada L’eglise Unie Du Canada,” (Toronto, Canada: The United Church of Canada, 2006), 14.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14, 15.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

value of all people regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, economic class, and so on.”¹⁶² Diversity then is seen as blessing and is evidenced in the statement’s use of inclusive language. In relation to scripture, the UCC seeks to “take the Bible seriously but not literally.”¹⁶³

A Song of Faith affirms many of the classic marks of the church, grounded in Christ. The church is one “seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ’s presence in the world.” It is holy because “we are called together by Christ as a community of broken but hopeful believers loving what he loved, living what he taught, striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place....”¹⁶⁴ There is a sense of catholicity expressed when “our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints, experiencing the fulfillment of God’s reign even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.”¹⁶⁵ Apostolicity is recognized because “our ancestors in faith bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living; upon their lives our lives are built.”¹⁶⁶

The statement also affirms the ministry functions understood by the early church related to proclamation of the gospel, community, liturgy, teaching and outreach as well as the importance of the role of the sacraments. As a church, we are called to “embody God’s love in the world requires the ministry and discipleship of all believers.”¹⁶⁷

Regarding proclamation of the gospel, we are to “continue the story of Jesus through embodying Christ’s presence in the world”¹⁶⁸ and “witnessing to the good news.”¹⁶⁹ The community is built up and “called together by Christ, as a community of broken but

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid

¹⁶⁶ Ibid

¹⁶⁷ UCC, 8.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

hopeful believers. ...Using particular gifts and ministries of leadership, lay and ordered, some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering.”¹⁷⁰

Regarding liturgy, the sacraments are administered by some believers as ways of, “teaching us to be alert to the sacred in the midst of life....Baptism into the covenanted community, signifies God’s love and our response to it.”¹⁷¹ Communion is sacred when we “welcome all, none shall go hungry, we gather as Christ’s guests and friends, commissioned to feed as we have been fed, love as we have been loved, forgive as we have been forgiven... the open table speaks of the shining promise of barriers broken and creation healed, remember the promise of Jesus and price he paid for who he was, for what he did and said, and for the world’s brokenness.”¹⁷²

The statement goes on to say that the teaching ministry is carried out by some who “build up the community of wisdom... and remember the promise of Jesus and the price he paid for who he was, for what he did and said, and for the world’s brokenness.”¹⁷³ Outreach ministry is a means to “stand with the oppressed and work for justice.” We have been “commissioned to feed as we have been fed, love as we have been loved, forgive as we have been forgiven...Some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering.”¹⁷⁴

In the spirit of our ever evolving apprehension of God’s spirit in relationship with us as church, the UCC claims this statement of faith as:

...a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its conviction in relation to the world in which we live....This is not a statement for all time, but for our time. In as much as the Spirit keeps faith with us, we can express our understanding of the Holy with confidence. And in as much as the Spirit is vast and wild, we recognize that our understanding of the Holy is always

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 7, 8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷² Ibid., 8, 9.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

partial and limited. Nonetheless, we have faith, and this statement collects the meaning of our song.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

From early times, the church has sought to define and articulate the nature of its identity, mission and ministry. In every age, scholars, activists, and theologians have examined and critiqued these traits, functions, and marks seeking to more clearly describe signs of the presence of Christ within the church. This research study offers one more opportunity to look closely at the lived reality and ecclesial hope found in Toronto Conference congregations in the twenty-first century.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Too often, in congregational development literature, theory is presented from the expert's perspective - outside and top down. It lacks the groundedness and immediacy of the lived experiences of the faith community. Using a feminist methodology, I have focused on hearing voices from inside congregations, where the locus of change and hope for transformation is located.

Findings, from the research project with Toronto Conference congregations, offer glimpses of hope and struggle. In their ministry and mission together, these congregations live out good news for our time. In this chapter, I will highlight the major areas of congregational life that were named as important by participants in their focus group interviews and response forms (see Appendix "D"). Readers will become acquainted with factors that have influenced these faithful and lively churches, and practices that help keep them faithful despite inevitable discouragement.

The seven important areas of ministry that emerged in the research are:

Relationships in the Faith Community; Meeting Challenges; Connections with the Wider Community; Worship; Spiritual and Faith Nurture; History and Heritage; and Leadership. For each of these aspects of church life, I will offer a general description, then highlight several key themes. Comments, insights, and stories from participants will provide illustrations and examples.

Relationships in the Faith Community

By far the strongest area discussed and written about in the research relates to the quality of life in the faith community. All congregations expressed appreciation and deep satisfaction for the caring, nurturing and life-giving aspects of their faith communities. Participants noted that practices such as welcoming, hospitality, caring, support, and compassion led to a greater sense of acceptance and the feeling of "loving family" in the congregation. These qualities extend to the stranger and outside community too.

Welcome

Experiences of welcoming cover the gamut from personal encounters to corporate ventures. One participant recalled his first impressions of the congregation as a "friendly place with a healthy feeling and energy about it. It also felt relaxed and unpretentious. We knew a few of the members here and found the others to be very open to welcoming newcomers, and glad to have us join them." Others named the buoyant atmosphere as welcoming. One participant wrote that "humour and laughter is very much encouraged within the congregation. It's a happy place to be. You are welcomed with a smile as soon as you walk in the door and you can count on our worship leaders making you laugh at least once or twice during service."

For an ethnic minority congregation, welcome means reaching out across language and religious barriers. One Toronto Chinese United member commented that "guest speakers from other congregations and ordinary guests, Christians and non-Christian, are welcomed with open arms." As well, another participant noted that

members “speak the Chinese ‘common language’ to new immigrants from mainland China and make them feel that our church welcomes them.”

Deep welcoming for some of these congregations involves an intentional decision to become an *Affirming* community that welcomes gays, lesbians, bi-sexuals, and transgender peoples (GLBT). One participant remarked that “along with the sermons, we felt a strong sense of community within the congregation. We were quickly welcomed into the Trinity-St. Paul’s (TSP) fold. It is an affirming congregation that accepts everyone, much like Christ accepts and loves all. We felt like it was a model for God’s message.” Other congregations, though not officially named, are affirming in practice. A Dalston-Crown Hill member observed that “the congregation of Dalston – Crown Hill (DCH) is remarkable and genuinely friendly in a way that many people find compelling. Recently a lesbian couple moved to the area and began to attend worship and experienced that welcome. .. the welcome and warmth of our congregation kept them coming back and this is where they now worship.”

One participant noted that it was important that some people took the lead in welcoming new folk. She said, “We have a number of people in the congregation who are very good. They aren’t shy about talking to people and they make a point of seeking out those they don’t know. You only need two or three of those people in a congregation to make all the difference.”

Other congregations have a Welcoming Committee that, as one participant noted, “develops activities and events that open our doors and create opportunities for us to be really welcoming to ourselves and to others - friends and neighbours.” However, participants acknowledged that welcoming isn’t just the responsibility of the committee.

“We don’t have to worry if it’s the work of the welcoming committee – we are all welcomers,” said another respondent.

Caring, Support, and Compassion

Moving comments were made about the blessings received from being part of a caring, supportive and compassionate community. Caring and support took many forms, as one participant explained:

The care that people express in what they do...Molly who walks through snow drifts on every wintry Sunday morning to turn the heat up so that the sanctuary will be warm by the time we gather...John who faithfully blows the snow, and brings the biggest tree from his home for Christmas...the delightful blend of tacky Christmas decorations merging with the sophisticated touch of a master gardener and an artist...It’s a congregation that gives a rose to each member, and a standing ovation to all the members of the UCW, when after decades of faithful service, they decide to find other ways to be faithful and close their UCW chapter...It is the care-full honouring of each other and each other’s experiences...It is also the magical way that things happen.

Many see their caring congregation as an inspiration and the source of their spiritual growth. One respondent reflected that:

The congregation helps to inspire me and support me. It cares for my family and is giving my family an opportunity to grow spiritually. I feel like the folks here look out for me. They forgive me and move beyond my mistakes, pick up after me when I forget things and let me know that I am appreciated.

Compassionate support for some is a matter of life and death, as one participant explained:

Very shortly after moving two years ago, it was discovered that I had breast cancer, followed by colon cancer and then two thirds of my liver had to be removed. Through the radiation treatments, chemo and several hospital admittances, the pastor and the congregation helped strengthen my resolve to live each day to the maximum. Prayers, visits, cards, baking and lots of offers to help are still in the forefront. Each gain in my health is cause for rejoicing.

Support is offered despite the cost and inconvenience. One DCH member recalled that “a newly separated mother in our congregation needed to move with her son. A

dozen members of the congregation showed up in a snow storm to help her move.”

Others see caring within the wider community and world as an extension of that experienced in the congregation. One respondent observed that “there are some authentic people who deeply care for the church, for their spiritual journey and the concerns of the world.” Another participant named experiences of caring outreach that continued within the congregation:

A few years ago we were told of 3 teenagers whose mom had died and whose father was in jail. Their brother (oldest of 3) was trying to provide for them. As a church we paid their rent, and furnished their apartment. Each month they were each given a small amount of spending money. The 13 year old had a birthday party so a friend and I organized a party. A member in our church now has the 2 girls living with her. The youngest is in college. The boy has now married. What a blessing to our church to have them as part of our family.

Children and Youth

Children and youth are regularly seen as part of the community in all but one of the congregations I researched. Sarawak United has been affected by both the demographic shifts of an aging general population and the influx of *Baby Boomers* retiring in their area. Most congregations chose one research participant who was a youth or young adult. However, all congregations value the participation of children and youth. Programs are offered in different ways in these churches depending on the size and resources of the congregation and the number and interests of those involved.

Participants spoke about how the involvement of children and youth in congregational life affects them. One said, “I love being with the children and it gives me much satisfaction when they find their own voice and expression in the community.” A parent wrote that “my kids want to attend Sunday service and youth group activities. I appreciate the opportunities for leadership and responsibility that the youth group offers

my kids.” The minister of one congregation admitted that a critical aspect of being faithful and lively is “the presence of the Sunday School and the Youth Group. Without them, as a minister, I would almost die of loneliness of spirit.”

With regard to programs for children, many of the churches spoke about enthusiastic and gifted leaders and Sunday School teachers. One participant explained that “children are sent out to Sunday School by our enthusiastic leaders who not only demonstrate their love for Jesus, but also set the tone for an enjoyable learning experience.” Importantly, participants regard teaching and learning as being mutual and dynamic for teachers, children, youth and the general congregation. One Collier St. participant explained:

I think the children’s program lets the older members of our congregation see our faith through the eyes of a child. I think our children’s program helps not only the children to be faithful and provide that for the congregation, but they provide a great opportunity for the leaders to be faithful and lively. Being part of this whole big church is a great thing. I think working with the children, which is my strength, keeps my faith lively – that’s what makes it for me.

A young adult shared that “we teach them (children) about Christ and Christianity and faith but they also teach us about it too. They are not limited. It really does renew your spirit to see just how big a part children have in this church.”

Programs for children and youth are seen as an investment in the congregation’s future. One interviewee observed that “when you come to our services on Sunday morning and you look at the programs during the week there is a lot of investment there in young people, in kids, who are going to carry it forwards.” Children with special needs and those experiencing grief are assisted and mentored by volunteers in some churches. These congregations work hard to respond to the needs and interests of children and youth despite competing activities and a sometimes conservative Christian influence at

school. Their message of an alternative life-way following the gospel of Jesus is defined in a loving rather than exclusive way. One participant explained:

(Our message) isn't to define us dogmatically, but I think it has to define us by the fruit of our living, by the harvest of our spirit that this really is what the faith is all about. I think if that is strongly enough planted in us, then I would like to think that we will be able to deal with those tough challenges.

The presence of children completes the congregation's sense of community and family, as one participant described:

I find working with the children to be very satisfying. We ensure that our young people feel welcome and safe in their church involvement. We have had several "Fifth Sunday" worship services that are aimed at the young and young-at-heart. These are a lot of fun and allow us to come together as a whole family and celebrate our sense of community.

Relationships with youth are important to these congregations. Creative and flexible programming, in co-operation with other churches, proves to be energizing and exciting for everyone. Experiences of social outreach benefit youth themselves and spill over in many ways into the congregation. One participant recalled that "last year, the youth group organized a benefit concert for the Stephen Lewis Foundation and they invited other youths in the presbytery to participate. Five churches ended up presenting music, dance, drama and video. It was an uplifting, informative, and fun evening."

Another congregation benefited as their youth participated in a global exposure trip to Chiapas, Mexico. For the youth themselves, these experiences have been eye-opening and life changing. One trip participant commented:

The Mexico Youth Experience allowed the youth to gain new perspectives on religion, social justice, art and beauty. Exposure is important. It is key to have opportunities in your lifetime to change your perspective and your view on how the world works...Seeing a lot of poverty but a lot of hope was a key theme. One simple but silly example – everybody smiled. If you smiled, they smiled back. North America? Not so much. But somehow everybody managed to be friendly there which is a big change. Something as simple as receiving a smile from

everybody on the street can change the environment you are in – even in the midst of poverty and injustice, there is a lot of hope.

Congregations recognize, as one respondent noted, that “youth are in a classroom setting enough already and there are other means to teach faith, including talking with them, rather than at them.” A Toronto Chinese United member stressed that “in the youth programs we discuss many international needs, diversity, and issues facing the children/people in other countries. We strive to donate money to such programs, and remind youth that even the smallest donations count.” For ethnic minority congregations, straddling the generations can be especially challenging as language and cultural gaps widen. Being aware and making an intentional effort to engage youth and young adults has made a difference. One member said that “our efforts are on strengthening the cooperation between our Chinese and English ministries with stress on further understanding of our younger generations.”

Diversity

Another key aspect of life in the faith community is diversity and inclusivity. All the congregations studied named their openness to and celebration of diversity as central to their identity. Diversity for these faith communities encompasses age, ability, ethnic identity, sexual orientations, social and professional status, and theological perspective. As one participant noted, “No one is forgotten at any age or stage of their lives. Our church sees children, teens, young adults, adults, older adults, those with a cognitive impairment, and shut-ins as valued members of the congregation.” These congregations go out of their way to include all. One respondent explained that “members and adherents in the community, and in nursing/retirement homes, who can no longer attend church on a regular basis, have special services, luncheons and communion provided for them at the

church. Rides to church are offered by volunteers for those not able to drive anymore.”

Many participants talked of their congregation having a welcoming, inclusive spirit. A TSP member said that “we see the rainbow at TSP a lot. It is a good symbol of the commitment to diversity.” One Sarawak participant felt the diversity in the community was:

...like a big quilt. I think we are all quilted - all of our colours, and all of our spectrums, and our shorts, narrows and wide analysis of events. It's all in there with a nice big basted stitch. I think there is a great appreciation for the colours we create.

Some were thrilled with the diversity they found in their congregation and sought even more. One ministry person remarked that:

Ebenezer stood out quite dramatically because it was ethnically diverse in its members. I thought, ‘Wow – my kind of church.’ I was very happy that I was called to this church. There was a sociological study done one time and the question was, ‘What makes a city cool?’ The sociologist said that what makes it cool is the presence of gay people.

One large urban congregation that has programs with differently abled and mentally delayed people, celebrates their participation in worship and in the pastoral ministry of the church. They delight too in the growth and fulfillment of these individuals as they discover their gifts for ministry. One participant told a story about a remarkable young woman:

She herself is sharp as a tack, but is so physically limited. The joy that she has brought to some of these people is just incredible. So I don't think it's just what is faithful and lively that we do on site. I think it is a person like Mary. I don't think she would have done this a few years back but because of her connectedness here has decided to give herself a way a little bit and it is astounding. ...She said the visiting has changed her life.

Some see diversity as a sign of the safety of the congregation. A participant noted that “the presence of ethnic diversity in the congregation is an indication to me that it is a

welcoming and safe place for everyone to be.” That safety also applies to those who are looking for a church that allows them the freedom to think and theologize for themselves.

One grateful survivor of toxic religion explained that her congregation:

...employs an ability to utilize everyone’s skills and abilities to present events that include everyone but don’t overwhelm anyone with “religiosity”. God is there but not “in your face,” the way I remember it as a child. I stayed away from the church for over 20 years as a result of my upbringing. This congregation simply allows me to worship in the way that is best for me and they rejoice in whatever form that takes.

One congregation learned how to widen its loving through some tough learning and listening about true inclusion. In a desire for its leadership to become more ethnically diverse, Ebenezer United puzzled with the problem of its all white Board. One Board member at the time recalled that:

We made that long and slow journey to allow diversity to happen. One of things I remember when sitting around the board table when it was all white, was trying to figure out what it was that we were doing that was discouraging visible minorities from stepping forward - things that we were blind to. I remember, as is usually the case, it was one of the few black men in the congregation that had to do the hard work in telling us what we couldn’t see. A congregation nearby was closing and so they gave us one of their stained glass windows – they wanted it to have a home. It arrived in the narthex and we thought it was a nice gift. But John, who was not on the board at the time, raised for the board that this was a nice window but asked, ‘Where are my children?’ because all the children were white. And so we had long discussions about whether we should change this window before we accepted it. That kind of opened our eyes. So later, when an older woman in the congregation decided to dedicate two stained glass windows in the new sanctuary, we were smart enough to say to the people who were making the stained glass, that we wanted the children to be multi ethnic..... When the stained glass window was installed, showing Jesus as the shepherd with children all around him, we required the suppliers to redo the window. They had overlooked or ignored our instruction to include children of many races.

This process of self-examination took courage and a willingness to view the church from the perspective of the socially marginalized. Then it took persistence to remember and implement the lesson learned.

Responding sensitively to people arriving from other religious and Christian traditions is also important to these congregations. Newcomers arrive and are welcomed into the community but given space and time to work out their own beliefs. One TSP ministry person explained that:

We have a lot of people here who have come from another church tradition that just wore them out, or they didn't have enough latitude, or they couldn't think outside the box to find it meaningful anymore. They were part of it because their families were all part of it. They come out of university by themselves or with friends, and they want to break outside the mold – not the least to figure out their own thinking when it comes to church or religion or spiritual growth. And I think a lot of newcomers are in that category, not all, but a lot. They'll say, 'I had a strong Roman Catholic background,' or, 'I had this background or that background but I've been away from it for awhile and I need to discover for myself who I am.' I think we do try to make room for that without insisting that too much be this or that. Some people just come and they don't get too involved in the community because they just need to figure out themselves.

Acceptance

Finally, undergirding life in the faith community - making it possible to be welcoming, caring, and inclusive - is a general sense of unconditional acceptance which often translates for many into the image of "family."

Participants new to the UCC, shared that acceptance was the quality that surprised them most about the congregation. Refugees from more fundamentalist denominations felt simply accepted without having to jump through hoops of any kind. One woman shared that she:

...came into this congregation suspicious and wary of judgment, in part because I am a single parent and I consider myself delightfully eccentric. Whether it is their faith or their nature, or both, they have accepted my daughter and me with a heartfelt welcome. It was just so timely for me because, it has been fourteen months. Two years ago I wouldn't have ever thought I'd be back inside the doors of the church. Now I'm signed up for this course and everything is just happening in a timely progression.

New people to the congregation appreciated the lack of pressure to conform or take on tasks immediately. A Collier St. ministry person recalled that:

... many people who have come into membership during my ministry at Collier Street have expressed that they felt an unconditional welcome ... and acceptance of who they are and where they are on their faith journey ... and relief that they are allowed to “be” and aren’t pressured to “do”. That place of “doing” comes when they find their place among us and are moved by the Spirit to begin giving rather than just receiving.

People whose life situations have changed through death, separation or aging appreciated the quiet acceptance of their new identity. One participant revealed that “being accepted and recognized by my congregation means that my life as a widow and a retiree is greatly enriched. I find my community is lively and the world has become precious to me.”

Acceptance extends to those who don’t fit the usual middle class UCC mold and rarely become members. These churches recognize the unique gift of their presence. A respondent explained that:

We also have a woman who is extremely obese, economically poor, and illiterate (she is now learning to read.) She feels happy to be at the church. It is a good sign that she feels comfortable. It speaks of the welcoming nature but also faithfulness to the spirit of Christ's welcome and openness to people who are marginalized.

Another participant remarked that:

To hear some of these differently abled people read about how God loves all of us and to say it just like that. It’s incredibly moving because there are many who would say there is no God, and here are these people saying there certainly is, and God cares about us all. It is incredible!

Participants often described their congregation in terms of supportive “family.”

One participant reported that “our congregation is an extremely important element in my life – a warm caring supportive, non-judgmental church family.” Another noted that, “It’s

been a second home to me and my family. We've been able to grow together spiritually. We're all in this together – that's encouraging. Makes you want to do your best, and see the best in others shine through." Many used the words *aunts and uncles* to characterize the kind of close loving relationships they felt in their church. One participant wrote that "we concentrate on being aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers to everyone." People from rural as well as city congregations expressed their delight and reliance on this broader and open sense of *family*. One described their congregations as:

...our community and extended family. We live outside of an urban area. The members of our congregation are like our neighbours. They are also like family. I feel like I have dozens of Aunts and Uncles looking out for me. I also have some brothers and sisters to share with. I could use more brothers and sisters.

The church, too, is a place where nuclear and extended families can worship and learn together, where rites of passage form special memories, and where life in the faith community becomes part of family routine. One Norval participant wrote that:

The church is a place of familiarity for me and my family. It is a big part of our faith and social life. My children are comfortable here. It is a place where extended family can come together. It is a safe place during happy times (baptisms and marriages) and sad times (funerals). It holds special memories and stories. It is a part of our weekly routine.

Another commented that "it is my church home as well as my family's. We go to be refreshed, re-energized and be spiritually fed while having fellowship with other members of the church family."

Congregational relationships for these participants embody practices of welcome, care, acceptance, and family-mindedness.

Meeting Challenges

Although named as faithful and lively, these congregations have experienced their

share of challenges. They reported experiencing a variety of difficulties in the last five years that, in one way or another, plague most congregations in Toronto Conference today. Many of these concerns mirror the markedly different demographic contexts in which these churches are set. Challenges related to buildings, finances, aging and declining congregations, growing congregations, the same-sex marriage issue, demographic shifts, and worship styles were the most commonly named. One congregation dealt with the decline and death of their minister to cancer in this period as well.

However, in their responses to these challenges, these congregations offer surprising insights into the nature of faithful change and transformation within a community. These are congregations that have survived conflict and difference and moved forward with common vision for the common good. Encouraging and hopeful patterns have emerged from this research. Consensus decision –making, visioning, and experimentation were three strategies congregations chose to help them deal with difficulties and challenges in their lives.

Consensus

Whether it had to do with designing and funding a new church building, considering amalgamation, or creating a new vision, these congregations all spoke highly of the slow, careful and inclusive process of building consensus. Meetings, retreats, worship and small group discussions became part of this extensive process of discernment. Some congregations in the end resolved to keep the status quo. Others had to battle their own impatience while they inched ahead with their plans.

Including people from all aspects of church life in the process is key. As one respondent noted, “Any member of the congregation who wishes to is welcome to attend the meetings.” One participant recommended the importance of welcoming “young people in decision making and participation.” It is surprising and eye-opening to hear the contributions of children and youth in these processes. Everyone needs, as one respondent wrote, to be “given the opportunity to share their concerns and questions.” Not only is the final decision more likely to be appropriate but, as another person commented, “everyone feels included in the changes.”

Many congregations acknowledge that their decision-making includes thinking about theology and trying to discern God's call. Care is taken so that “all options are being explored and there is time being taken to try to hear and understand God's will in the matter,” as one participant explained. Another respondent commented that their decision was “a big step and definitely required a leap of faith.” This prayerful attitude helps congregations meet challenges with a strong faith and open heartedness.

Consensus is not a quick and easy process, yet these congregations preferred this slow and steady route for several reasons: ownership of the decision; clarity of the vision; readiness for change; and strength of the community. One person immersed in a consensus process commented that:

We keep working at achieving consensus on our decisions. We keep meeting and talking and meeting and talking and this can be frustrating to those who would like to make a decision and get on with it; but I'm convinced that one of the reasons we have so little discord is that we take all the time we need, to talk things through and get everyone on board with our choices.

A respondent from Heritage United, in cottage country, felt that “after five years of visioning, fund-raising, and talking we don't have a facility, but the benefit is that I

know that the resolution we are achieving will produce results quite different from what we would have had if we'd just barreled ahead five years ago.” In another growing congregation planning expansion one person’s sentiment was that:

The benefit of this lengthy discernment time is that the people of Norval United are ready for a change. The cost is that it is a slow process... Hopefully in the end, the best decision possible will be made and people will be satisfied with the direction taken and feel positive about the change.

The heart of consensus building is good communication. Congregations discovered that this happens best through workshops, spiritual gatherings, and prayer. They affirm that what is needed is study, listening and good communication.

Visioning

Congregations in this study feel that having a vision keeps them faithful and lively, and helps them successfully meet challenges. They take comfort in being grounded in their vision and identity as a church. One participant noted that, “We could not exist for very long if we were not faithful to God, our sense of God’s call to us, as well as the Vision Statement and Core Values of the congregation.”

Defining a vision involves becoming clear not only about where the congregation wants to go as a community, but understanding its identity, and the fullness of God’s mission. Some felt this was a daunting process in itself. One participant said that “defining our vision for the future and its implementation, involved fear, but also trust.” Another respondent observed that “there is a verse of scripture that says where there is no vision the people will perish. And I don’t know that we are really able to look all that far ahead. Everything changes so rapidly it is sometimes hard to keep up with the present moment.” One person experienced this visioning task as “intense work that goes on in a variety of ways to vision what it means to be the church in the 21st century.” But, the

benefits for planning, decision-making and community engagement in mission are clear.

One participant described the process:

We have taken our time to listen to many different voices of vision with respect to moving or staying. We conducted a process whereby we created a vision statement for the congregation as well as a list of core values. This process was very helpful in helping to define the congregation so that people both within and outside the congregation are able to read on paper, what the congregation says about itself.

The visioning process reveals congregational priorities and desires. Another respondent explained that:

At a congregational visioning workshop last January, the participants identified several areas in which they wanted more focus: desire for more work/worship events; increased ministry to the youth; more involvement of outside artists and guest speakers. The participants also indicated a very high interest in participating in more of these events (on a Sunday morning and involving worship as well as working together and having lunch).

Visioning depends on a congregation's clear sense of identity which sometimes emerges as an outgrowth of challenge. One respondent admitted that "the cost of the same-sex marriage debate has been that some people left the church. The board was a bit tense. But it helped to define who we are as the church."

Some of these congregations have had a long history of visioning and re-visioning their future. One TSP member recalled that "vision has always been part of the ethos, yes. It is a meaningful place, this whole building. Before the Center was here, congregations were bigger and people were coming and going... always, certainly, being positive and full and forward thinking."

Congregational visioning and implementation need structure if they are to be effective. Some congregations accomplish this by creating an ongoing committee. One participant explained that "the Visioning Committee has been made a permanent committee of council and is now working on a new vision statement based on the results

of the visioning workshop.” Others make sure that goals and strategies are lived out through regular audits. As described by one respondent, “Visioning worked on by the congregation has been monitored and we have tried to be accountable to ourselves in this process, calling each other on the work that is still to be done while affirming the good things that have happened.”

Having a vision enables a congregation to focus and use its energies wisely in the midst of changing, and sometimes threatening, circumstances. One Ebenezer participant wrote that “the only way we can survive as a church is to focus. That is in part how the discipleship and the outreach focus came about. Some people with a small ministry find ways to be more faithful because we can’t be complacent any more.” What is most important is kept in view at all times. A TSP participant remarked that “TSP keeps faith and social justice issues from being completely buried under a pile of more immediate personal concerns.” Clarity of vision enables congregations to focus and chose the direction they feel is most faithful. One congregational participant recalled that:

This started us on the road of how we could be more relevant to the community that is around us. A door to door campaign was spoken about, hangers to put on door knobs, different kind of things. In the end we concluded that with finite resources and finite energy, what we might best do is focus our efforts. We identified two areas that we tried to create focus in. One was local outreach. The congregation decided that the focus would be on homelessness and HIV/AIDS because they had both a local and a global dimension. Second thing that we decided we could do was deepen our spiritual life and be followers of The Way - not just on Sunday mornings but seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. And again, through a long process of congregational development, we evolved guidelines that we would commit to follow with God as our helper.

Once a vision has been established, ministry follows. A TSP member felt that “defining our vision for the future as an inner city congregation leads to working on our mission and ministry in ways that move us toward this vision.”

Congregations name their vision statements as relevant and empowering tools for centering them in the life-giving presence of Christ. This conviction was shared by one participant who explained that:

It is vital to the congregation to be lively, if by lively we mean full of life. Christ gives us life. The Jesus story is all about life. Our Vision Statement is “Changing Lives Through God’s Love.” If we do not have life ourselves, if our faith and the living out of our faith is not lively, not full of life, then it will not be attractive to others and it will not sustain us.

Experiment and Risk

Sometimes, the only way to address the challenges of our times faithfully is to take risks. All these congregations reveal an openness to change and a willingness to experiment and try new things. One small church participant declared that, “We dare to do things larger congregations have not.” And in the discovery of the new, energy and creativity are released.

Openness to risk and change is named as being connected to the Spirit. One respondent described the Spirit working:

I think maybe one of the things that is happening here is that there is an openness to new things. And part of that openness is a trust that things could work out...A communication committee formed and this wonderful newsletter goes out four times a year. To me it is an openness to the Holy Spirit moving among us. People somehow are able to see the benefits and simply trust the people that present the ideas and decide to support that.

Some of these congregations have a history of re-inventing themselves and being ‘cutting edge’ by taking risks. A participant from Toronto Chinese United recalled that:

Starting with a few members of the Methodist Young Men Christian Association, a Chinese Mission was formed in downtown Toronto. It remained a mission in its first years. Now we have our own church building in Scarborough with a membership of about three hundred. Each Sunday we have two services - the Chinese Mandarin and the English language.

Taking the risk of hiring a woman minister in the 1980's had a long lasting effect on one congregation. One ministry person shared his discovery of a congregation's history of risk-taking:

This was a welcoming and open congregation but, when I started to do this work, I thought I needed to talk to somebody about what they thought. And what I heard was it had a lot to do with 20 years of female clergy in leadership here, starting with the first woman minister here ever. It was a tough time for the pastoral charge to accept their first woman in ministry. But she was a farm girl, she was down to earth and one of the first things she did here was buy a pair of rubber boots so that she could go through the mud to bring lunch to the ploughing match. She was just of the people.

One of the most hotly debated topics in the church in the last ten years has been the issue of changing worship styles in order to appeal to prospective younger members. Whether band over organ, informal versus formal, congregations have stepped into an area where change is often not appreciated. However, in these nine congregations, without slavishly mimicking the latest fads, there seems to be an openness to experimentation in worship. One participant said that "the people are willing to adapt to change. They like innovative worship and appreciate good music." Even older members seem happy to experiment. "Elderly participants are willing to try new things in the Sunday service," said one respondent.

Sarawak United, a small rural church in the north-western part of the Conference, is experimenting with spontaneous conversational sermons where congregational members speak out and dialogue with the preacher. One Sarawak member described how this works:

I don't think churches are completely safe places anymore but I think as churches go, they created and built it to be safe. And by testing - we'll try that, do that - it is okay if somebody wants to speak out. Then, if somebody needs some help, then somebody else will speak up and enable that along. We won't let each other fall. We've just become used to the fact that somebody can speak out at anytime.

These congregations encourage lay leadership in worship. One interviewee remarked that, “He’s led the service. I’ve led the service. Maureen loves to read. The young people get up there and do the opening. If you have an idea, you go for it.”

Some congregations have changed their use of physical sanctuary space to symbolize a change in the power dynamics between the congregation and the clergy. One respondent explained this change:

The other thing, liturgically, that this congregation decided a long time ago was that it wasn’t going to be clergy dominated. And so they brought the lectern and pulpit down to the level of the common sanctuary level with everybody. So there’s a sense of oneness together that makes for an aliveness and unity and oneness of the congregation that, I think, has something to do with the kind of worship here.

Others have introduced symbols and practices from other cultures. One interviewee said, “I like the way our minister sends his little Japanese ball around the groups and gives each person a chance to express what they are thinking. The Wellspring service has been quite uplifting and blessing.”

Connections with the Wider Community

In faithful and lively congregations, there is a strong emphasis on building and maintaining healthy relationships with the wider community, including other churches, faiths and community groups. Many describe their work in and with the community as *outreach* or *making a difference*. One participant said, “Our congregation can be described as faith in action.” For many, community outreach is the purpose of their existence and the reason for their joy. One Sarawak participant reported that:

The congregation went through a number of visioning exercises during the 1990's

leading to the development of a Mission Statement in 1993¹⁷⁶. In 2003, the Welcoming Committee was formed to address the lack of connection with the wider community and to prepare for the arrival of new neighbours in the development across the road at Cobble Beach. The Welcoming Committee has become the vehicle through which many of the lively social activities are organized.

This outreach takes the form of both service and social activities and is an integral part of the ministry of the church. These congregations display a great generosity of heart and material resources. Through supporting the wider community and the world, they build strong communities of faith. “We welcome and reach out to the greater community and participate in outreach projects to make a better world,” said one participant. A

Collier St. member commented that:

To me, the best image of our congregation is the biblical passage where you judge a tree by its fruit. You look at the fruit and say, ‘What’s going on here?’ You see all these sorts of programs where we are reaching out into the community. Jesus said, ‘Go feed the poor, take care of everyone regardless of their station in life and share with each other.’ and you see these programs and you go. ‘Wow!’ These are the fruits of a strong tree that is good. So I think I can see myself in there because that is a reflection of what I believe Jesus said for us to do. I want to join that because that is an expression of what I think the world should be like.

Service Relationships

These relationships of service and hospitality with the wider community involve everything from the free use of the church building by outside groups, to the active

¹⁷⁶Our October 31, 1993 Mission Statement says: “Sarawak United Church is a focus of the spiritual continuity of the Sarawak community, a Christian haven of grace, peace and renewal. We hope to be a celebrating, supportive and welcoming membership, expressive in words and music, and responsive to the needs of the local and global community.

Goals:

1. to support the spiritual growth of individuals in each generation.
2. to identify and respond to the material and spiritual needs of the local and global community.
3. to provide a setting in Sarawak for those wishing to meet for various purposes.

Our Vision Statement is:

“to be known for connecting our heritage with spiritual renewal.”

involvement of congregational members in community endeavors such as nursing homes, Habitat for Humanity projects, food banks, and Out of the Cold programs.

One participant named work with “the women’s shelter, Alzheimer’s Society, Kemble Mountain Roastery (fair trade coffee)...and the Beads of Hope Campaign” as common. This kind of community involvement helps congregations to become faithful and lively, participants said. One respondent wrote that:

It is the awareness of the congregation of the needs of people outside the church, and their role as participants in the distribution with the host community centres, that have helped our congregation to be faithful and lively. This is specifically seen in the outreach programs that take the shape of regular meetings in these centres in the form of leading Christian devotions and social gatherings.

Another echoed that sentiment:

Each week, when we have our offering, we also bring up bags of food that would go towards the food bank. It is a powerful reminder and symbol that this is what we do and who we are as we respond to God's word through our gifts - that we are connected to the outside world.

The range of activities includes work with women shelters; disaster /crisis relief; programs with mentally and physically challenged people; support for street people; funerals and weddings for people outside the congregation; as well as space for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Brownies, and Guides. Most congregations reported projects related to social service and charity work, raising funds or collecting food and material items for good causes locally and globally. Some of these groups are located in the congregation itself and meet the needs of the wider community. Collier St. United, a large church in Barrie, has several such programs that have grown out of the desires and imagination of congregational members and have become integrated into the worshipping life of the faith community. One Collier St. participant explained:

The Jesus Walk group is celebrating 30 years this year. It began when there were a couple of mums in the church who had older teenagers or early 20's daughters (who were developmentally delayed). They wanted them to become members of the church. So the ministers at the time met with them and had an appropriate time of study and learning, and they were confirmed. And then the mothers said, 'Now that they are confirmed, what about a program for them? So the moms were the ones who pushed the ministers and others at the time to have something for their children...And some of the people that we still think of as kids, and they think of themselves as kids, are in their 50's and 70's. Some have been involved in this program for thirty years. It's still here and the wonderful thing about it, I think, is to hear of people who for the most part are marginalized in all sorts of ways – because of government, by society, by everyone it seems, and here they are welcomed and they are there on a Sunday morning.

Some forms of outreach are more spontaneous emanating from particular and immediate cries for help. One interview participant recalled such an incident:

Remember the young fella just up from the Dalston church? The news came to us that he was living with autism and the family needed some support. The neighbourhood really pitched in. We used to do coffee houses last year at the Dalston church and one of those was dedicated to this family. The neighbourhood helped to raise money for a companion dog to help protect him so he didn't end up on the highway.

Toronto Chinese United has made a wonderful cross cultural contribution to their outreach ministry. One respondent wrote that:

Last year we gave a Lunar New Year's Eve Party for about twenty seniors at the nursing home. They were obviously glad to see us. We began with a devotion of prayers, reflection and singing followed by party games fit for seniors. There was real laughter fun and joy. For my part in doing the reflection, I prepared strips of red paper with words of Lunar New Year Blessings – in my own calligraphy. These were put up on the walls providing a warm and true Chinese festive atmosphere. My theme was based on the Five Chinese Blessings and I connected these with our Christian faith. Our presence must have touched their hearts for when we left, each came to shake hands with us. I could still remember the gleam of joy and happiness in their eyes and their hand shakes. I was totally touched.

Community building and social networking are other forms of outreach that enliven neighbourhoods as well as congregations. North Bramalea United, a suburban church in Brampton, Dalston-Crown Hill United, a rural church near Barrie and Sarawak

United a small church north of Owen Sound, still see the church acting as a social hub for the community. One North Bramalea participant noted:

We hold a free carnival for families in the community every July. Every year people are amazed that they get to spend family time without paying anything. We always end up with someone coming on Sunday to find out more and usually ending up joining us.

Rural Ways

Many congregations provide outreach services in co-operation with other churches and religious groups. This has the effect of multiplying their efforts and deepening the sense of being part of a larger social movement for good in the world. Some congregations, especially in smaller centres, are seen as part of the community support system in times of crisis and disaster. Norval United in a small but growing town on the edge of the Greater Toronto Area, takes its relationship with Peel Public Health Services seriously. One respondent explained:

We budget for 'outreach' each year and these funds are used to support those in need. Peel public health nurses identify needs of people when they visit homes and refer the requests to Norval United. One example--a high school aged mother needed a kitchen table and chairs so she could sit and eat with her child. A family donated the table. It was delivered with a bowl of shiny apples, words of encouragement, and time spent with the Mom and her child. These things are all done quietly and behind the scenes but these little things make a difference in the lives of others.

Congregations that are part of a multi-point pastoral charge have a built in opportunity or challenge, as the case may be, for co-operation on community service ventures, as well as joint worship and programming. A good relationship can provide mutual support and accountability. Sarawak United is part of a three point charge that enjoys healthy relationships with its sister churches, another sign of a faithful and lively congregation. A Sarawak interviewee reflected that:

The congregations are relaxing into who they are. I think they hold each other in a certain amount of creative tension.... And faithfulness – it is a deliberate act – is the choice people make to go to an event at another church. It's choice – I am choosing to put my best self out here today talking to the people at the other church, supporting your event.

Urban Ways

In larger communities, faithful and lively congregations often co-operate with neighbouring United Churches and other faith communities. Shared worship services, outreach programs, special events, and fundraisers are some typical activities that rely on mutual co-operation for outstanding results. One Ebenezer United participant noted that “co-operation with other churches in the neighborhood was at the root of affordable housing at Hagerman’s Corners.”

Sometimes ministry and administrative staff are shared as well, in order to lessen costs. Shared youth programming, for instance, allows for a critical mass of youth from two or three churches to gather with specialized leadership. One participant commented that “collaboration with two other United Churches in the area is helpful with some activities e.g. youth, outreach, music.”

Wider church

Some congregations appreciate the financial support from the UCC that have kept them going through tough times in the past. One respondent wrote that:

In the past, the church has been through financial difficulties and almost closed. The United Church has helped financially to keep it open. People remember and help out now when the church is in difficulties. The church is located in a new subdivision neighbourhood with young families. The children have grown and moved away – but the parents do hold fond memories and remain in the church.

One ministry person realized just how strong an affinity he had to the ethos and identity of the United Church of Canada when he returned from living overseas:

When my partner and I were living in Japan, we attended a Japanese church. We were able to learn the Japanese alphabet so we could sing the hymns but we could not really understand anything else that was going on during the service. But we still went. When we came, about one and a half years later for a visit and to have our son baptized, we went to a United Church because a friend of mine was the minister there. It was very familiar – the fellowship, the call to worship, the hymns. We were both in tears because we felt like we were back in our spiritual home – a place where we can be who we are and as God has created us to be. There was an incredible sense of comfort and joy that I didn't realize that I missed by not attending a United Church for that one and a half years.

Together for Justice

Some congregations are very conscious of the justice implications in their ministry and mission work. Heritage United reports practical ways that they take environmental justice issues seriously. One member wrote that:

We listen to Minutes for Mission. We hear from those who attend conferences (church and otherwise) to better understand our world. We raise awareness about fair trade products, especially coffee. We set a standard for reducing, reusing and recycling at a chicken bbq a couple of years ago that has now been taken up by other pastoral charges. We need to learn to be a greener faith community. There is a lot more we could do and will do.

At Sarawak United, the justice message is clear in worship and in activities, as one participant observed:

We join with other churches, of course, but also with politically active environmental groups, women's organizations, municipal activities (including elections and candidates who have similar values) gay and lesbian rights organizations, conferences and study on a Provincial and National level. One of our members hosted a bunch of us at her house to talk with our local candidate before the election. Totally spontaneous, out of the blue – we were a little charge putting questions to a potential candidate.

Ebenezer United Church's work on affordable housing is one initiative that speaks to the deeper problems of homelessness in the city.

Trinity-St. Paul's has had a long history of social activism where members are, as one participant noted, "strongly supportive of mission and social justice issues," and there is "the commitment to social justice by so many of the members." Another respondent

explained that members are “attempting to make a difference in the lives of the marginalized in the community, city or around the world through the initiatives many of the congregants participate in.” This involves relationships with an inner city First Nations community; with Muslim, Christian and Jewish community neighbours; work on Middle East peace; on restorative justice; on an anti-racism policy; and on living as an Affirming congregation that supports same-sex marriage. Immersion and education programs that help lift up national and global justice issues with youth are also an important part of this faith community’s life. The variety of justice initiatives is obvious. One respondent remarked that “one good example of the justice commitment is the number of announcements we have every Sunday where we hear about different social justice related projects and are invited to participate.”

Buildings as Haven and Hope

Despite the inevitable costs and maintenance dilemmas involved, one of the assets of these faithful and lively congregations is their building and the way that it facilitates relationships with the outside community. Some, like Trinity-St. Paul’s United, believed that their physical presence in the community could be understood as a haven of hope and justice and a centre of life-giving activity. One participant wrote that:

Since our building is so open to activities of the community, we are constantly aware of the needs around us as well as the issues that confront people in their daily living. Relationships with people from the street that we encounter daily in their struggles for life and living are probably most prominent for me. Cultural groups we interact with on a regular basis are diverse and varied and add vitality and energy as well. We have also had strong relationships with other faith groups in our community.

Relationships are negotiated with all kinds of groups and faith communities that rent and share space. A Heritage United member commented that:

All the groups who use our building have an impact on us (Rotary club, AA, Beavers, Women's Institute, Cancer Society, and Senior's Group etc.). We have to be considerate of their needs and thoughtful about accommodating them and in the process a reciprocal arrangements seem to have developed in which they support us and we support them. Many members of our congregation participate in these groups too, so we learn first hand what they are doing and can both celebrate and support their efforts.

Worship

Worship is understood as a pivotal community act central to the faithfulness and liveliness of these congregations. In worship, joy and laughter, tears and excitement are experienced. Sunday morning becomes the central gathering time that connects people, sustains them, and uplifts them for the week ahead. It is based around a liturgy that evokes meaning and inspiration. As one congregant expressed, "Worship continues to be a central gathering time for our members... by coming together in worship we restore our souls."

A variety of styles of worship are used in each congregation and from one congregation to the next. Worship form may generally stay the same from week to week, but there are surprises as congregations experiment. A respondent noted that "the people are willing to adapt to change. They like innovative worship and appreciate good music." Services are described as empowering, welcoming and engaging. One research participant observed that "new forms of worship and additions to the regular worship fare are met with a good sense of adventure and a 'Let's see if this works,' attitude. There is really an effort to have a diversity of types of services - musical, youth led, outside speakers ..."

Informality of worship is common in these congregations. Many ministry personnel and lay leaders use a conversational style in the service. Humor and laughter

are common and moments of spontaneity from the congregation add life. A balance of styles - drama, skits, videos and other media - is used to appeal to different senses and needs and to people of different ages and learning styles. Some participants report that it is hard to define a “normal Sunday,” and that new people need to attend several Sundays in a row to get to know the community through the variety of ways in which they worship.

Besides the church sanctuary, worship also occurs in many varied settings. Sometimes services are held in the basement of the church for accessibility. Services held outdoors connect people to the environment and the wider community. Services in nursing homes offer pastoral outreach. Small group worship provides intimacy. For some, there is a sense that worship and liturgy are broader than the Sunday morning service and encompass all experiences of meeting together as church. One participant wrote that:

Worship is where we meet, and because we have shared some incredible worshipful experiences together, times of emotion and meaning, we find other ways to be together. We offer worship experiences to our wider community in the garden, on the bay, the chicken barbecue, our irregular and irreverent “Loose Gardeners”, our games nights - times where whoever is visiting our home is welcome when they join us at whatever the church is hosting.

Another respondent felt that:

Worship is inclusive and challenging comforting and welcoming. Without the experience of worship, that both builds us up and pushes us out, I think our congregation would be a group, not a community. Worship has to be faithful to the rituals of the past that still have meaning, and faithful to the call to go forward in different ways

In this variety there is a blend of traditional and contemporary elements.

Contemporary language is used that helps make the connection, “between God and myself and myself and the world of people sitting next to me,” as one person described it. However, this contemporary language is rooted in our Christian heritage. One

participant noted that the congregation uses “modern words, but is faithful to the spirit of the Christian faith. We try to honour the past, such as our Methodist tradition.” There is also a caution, in trying new forms of worship. As one participant noted, it is important to “guard against turning worship into mere entertainment. Avoid the temptation to be trendy at the expense of the rich traditions and customs of the congregation.” Another respondent agreed:

Maintaining our faithfulness is more of a concern as it is easy for worship to lapse into entertainment that isn't spiritually nurturing. Our challenge is to be lively in a way that will affirm people in their faith and help them strengthen that faith.

Music

A critical element within worship for all the participants, is music. Many lively forms and styles - jazz, rock, country, celtic, choral, classical – are well performed and appreciated. Music enhances worship as it follows the themes of the services. Some participants especially noted gifted music leaders in the congregations such as innovative organists, choir directors and guest musicians.

Participants described music as upbeat and contemporary - making the church an exciting place to be. Some congregations have a live band, children's choir, or youth choir. Some participants even felt that music is the key to some peoples' attendance. Others praised their congregation's commitment to a good music program. People enjoy their participation in choirs and the opportunity to develop gifts and talents. New UCC hymn books are used and appreciated. One respondent noted that “there is high level of appreciation for many types of music in our worship life and people seem to respond very well to the livelier music that has been introduced in *Voices United* and the *More Voices* sampler.” Another participant explained that he feels the power of music “when our choir

director leads us in rounds or in music with parts. The sound is often spine tingling and the sense of community wonderful.”

Preaching

Although not always delivered every week, or in the same way, sermons are still held as very important. They are seen as relevant, touching, and offering ideas on which to reflect. This strong appreciation for preaching is balanced with the desire for a variety of means of communication in worship.

Sermons, in at least one small church, have become interactive. “I like listening to voices from the pews in the middle of our minister’s reflections and watching her careful validation of the wisdom of the people and then the way she weaves it into the worship,” one participant wrote.

In general, ministry personnel and lay leaders are praised for their ability to be relevant, touching, inspiring and challenging in their preaching. One respondent saw preaching as “continuing to help people learn about the word, teachings and work of God.” Another felt that “sermons are simple and straightforward, but certainly have a lot of impact on our daily lives.” Faithful preaching is recognized in patterns where, as one ministry person reflected, “the topics varied but themes like love, justice, and peace through Christ were continually addressed.” Participants described the effect that good preaching has on them. One congregational member gave high praise to her minister:

She has a fantastic way of explaining the Bible in lay terms. She skillfully uses real-life contemporary examples to illustrate biblical stories helping us grasp the good word and see that those readings are still relevant today.

One ministry person summed up his call to preach this way:

My preaching approach to ministry is based on one theme, with countless variations, drawn from a sentence by St. Paul. The only thing that counts is faith

expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6b). The challenge is to bring people to the place, where they not only possess such faith, but where such a faith possesses them. The call of my life is to live in such way that I truly practice what I preach.

Worship Leadership

In these congregations, leadership in worship is shared. “There is participation and leadership by the organist and readers, and Prayers of the People and sermons are led by lay people and ministry personnel,” said one respondent. Some congregations, like Trinity -St. Paul’s, have a worship planning group that works on developing services together and leans to high lay participation. Prayers of the People are written by different people who present different concerns in different voices. There are, as another participant appreciated, “lots of opportunities to sing, pray, read scripture, do dramas etc. It's not all up to the ministers. This offers an opportunity to hear other people share their personal faith stories.”

Although the ministry of the Word has been highly esteemed in the UCC through our Presbyterian roots, participants also noted that worship involves a variety of elements and that silence, not often practiced in the UCC, was one that they appreciated. One participant cherished “moments of silence to feel at peace with myself.” Another participant described worship as “life-filled while still providing spiritual nourishment and fostering reflection in contemplation.” One small group participant appreciated worship where “there is an enhanced opportunity to encounter God and that opportunity is even bigger in those small intimate services where God shows up in the face of somebody else around the circle.”

Spiritual and Faith Nurture

Like worship, the desire for, and attention to spiritual nurture and faith formation is important to these congregations. This nurture happens in many different formal and informal ways - through small groups, worship, outreach, and working together. Some describe this spiritual and faith nurture as “sharing and coping with all that concerns the smooth operation of a church - faith and stewardship,” as one person commented. Some have a wholistic view connecting faith nurture with worship, challenges, reaching out to others, and maintaining strong bonds of caring and affection. Others see spiritual and faith nurture connected with the identification and development of spiritual gifts, with bible and faith study, and with discipleship. One participant noted that “we need to be lively while encouraging and nurturing people’s faith in God.” Another shared that, “It’s the deep rooted spirituality of this congregation that motivates all that it does.”

Spiritual Nurture

Respondents feel they are on a search to discover what it means to live a meaningful life in this place and time. Spiritual nurture requires becoming aware, thinking deeply, and being informed about the world. In these congregations this spiritual hunger is being addressed. One participant spoke of the congregation’s ability to “feed my soul, nurture my spirit, make me think beyond my own life, hold me accountable, hold me period.” Another named the congregation as “an emotional and spiritual anchor for us, a source of joy, friendship and renewal.” A Sarawak member struggled to describe the spiritual effect the congregation had on her:

For me, connecting with this group here at Sarawak really did re-awaken and provide me with a sense of spiritual renewal that I hadn’t experienced anywhere else. I’m not exactly sure why, I have a sense of how, certainly, but where had it been those years in my 20’s early 30’s I’m not exactly sure. Whatever it was,

maybe I was ready, maybe it was the gestalt of everything here, small again, people connected to *ruralness*, me, I don't know, but somehow this place absolutely did it for me.

Faith formation

Faith formation deals more specifically with the teachings of the Bible, the church, learning about God and the person we call Jesus Christ. One respondent welcomed the “opportunities to explore faith issues; working to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Christian today.” Knowing how to be faithful is a challenge as Christians consider changing contexts and try to deepen their understanding of the liberating good news of the gospel. A participant wrote that:

Without our faith, there is no real reason to continue. It is faith that helps us overcome the human pettiness and narrow mindedness that creeps into church life. Faith is our “raison d’être”. I, for one, am not comfortable just sitting in a pew on Sunday. I feel that there are things to learn about and do. I want to learn and do them.

Congregations that attend to faith formation know more clearly what they are about and how they need to compose their community life together. One participant explained it this way:

Being with committed, capable people who want to explore and expand their faith and who want the church to make a difference in the community and to be a place where there are programs or activities at times other than just on Sunday morning, relates to what we believe and therefore how we live.

From another response form, a participant said:
Our faithfulness is expressed in our desire to bring people into a closer relationship with God through Jesus Christ and because of that relationship, into a closer loving relationship with others.

More formal methods used to nurture the spiritual and faith lives of congregational members, employ communal engagement. As one interviewee expressed it, “Relationships deepen our faith -we learn from each other. In fact seeing others' lives

changed strengthens our faith.” Programs, “appeal to our heads our hearts and our hands.” Spiritual and faith growth is nurtured through spiritual practices; wrestling with the challenging aspects of worship; and through discussion and questioning. Three specific methods of spiritual and faith nurture that these congregations use are: attention to discipleship; a focus on small groups; and the development of spiritual gifts.

Discipleship

Discipleship for these congregations means learning and living following the life of Jesus. One participant called it “learning to live by example”. Another described it as “finding calm.” Some congregations talk explicitly about *Discipleship Guidelines*. Some are concerned about the nurture of children and youth and about modeling an alternative way of living that is rooted in God, Jesus Christ, and Scripture. Discipleship is encouraged through worship, through prayer, through choices in daily lives, through commitments to service. Discipleship is seen as emulating Christ as one participant noted:

The life of the Christ continues here in over thirty ministries that our members carry on in the charge and in the community. It is important to me that we live out our call to minister to others by living the love of Christ.

One congregation, Ebenezer United, made a risky choice to focus on deepening its practices of discipleship rather than on using energy to *bring people in*. Despite recommendations from a Presbytery advisory group, to go out and bring new people into the congregation, the congregation decided on another route. One member said that “as we grappled with that, we said, ‘No, that is not the answer.’ The only answer that we can see is to be more fully the church and trust. . . It has made people more aware of Christian

discipleship, and how we react and how we live it.” Another Ebenezer member explains this choice further:

One thing we did was put the guidelines onto little folding cards so that each of us could carry them with us and give them away. One of the things that we wanted to do, in terms of making ourselves relevant to the community around us, was to answer a question - not ‘What do you believe?’ because we have the United Church creed to do that for us - but, ‘What difference does it make to you to be a Christian in this congregation?’ We thought it was important for us to answer that question. It was also important because in the neighbourhoods around us there are people who have little or no experience of going to church or being a Christian. It is one of those innocent questions. ‘So what difference does it make?’ That really got to the core of our life.

Members agree that these principles and practices developed by the congregation, “constantly remind us what we are called to be as Christians – in our church community itself and in our daily lives,” as expressed by one respondent. This has led to a stronger congregation that is centred on its mission and, through that, is often noticed in the community. The ministry person commented that:

We are also embarking on a journey to become the church God is calling us to be. The Discipleship Guidelines, though in its infancy stages, gives us a good start. Because we dared to put faith at the heart of who we see ourselves to be in a concrete way, it got noticed by others...It is also true, though, that we didn’t view the production of the (Discipleship Guidelines) document as the end of what we were about. It was a step along the way. The real work is bringing them to life in each of our lives and the weekly repetition is a step towards that. There is a lot more that we have to do.

As another member explained, through future plans for lay leadership in worship, the goal of living into these Discipleship Guidelines will be further realized:

But we have plans to try and build on what we have done up to now. Starting in January for ten weeks, we have an individual speak for five minutes on each item of the guidelines. Each person will speak about what they’ve learned, the resistance they’ve experienced, if they have any, what types of lessons they have found in living out those guidelines. We hope that will create some conversation, greater self-reflection, and motivation to live them out.

Study and Small Groups

Intentional study and reflection groups are other ways of nurturing spiritual growth and deepening faith formation. One person interviewed said, “There’s always room for spiritual growth through the many small groups that meet throughout the week. These mini groups offer time to get to know other church members better – bonding and making meaningful relationships with other Christians.” Some participants attributed their congregation’s growth in numbers to the opportunity for these kinds of learning experiences. “The fact that our numbers are growing, and more and more people are diving deeper into their faith, gives me reason to believe this church is going in the right direction,” one interviewee observed.

Some groups are planned around wrestling with the Bible and use a variety of media - videos/ DVD series, books. Some groups provide spiritual nurture and time for personal reflection. Others focus on the writings of contemporary theologians that challenge the church and our notions of faith. Trinity-St. Paul’s in Toronto has had a long history of these kinds of lay led groups. One ministry person described the challenging effect these groups have on his own ministry:

This is a congregation that prides itself on formation of spirit groups that meet different needs, whether it is the Personal Oasis group, which is now enlarging, or Lavender Conspiracy – the names themselves, for goodness sake! The women in the Monday Women’s group read all the latest writings of theology that challenge the living daylights out of clergy people. So you always have an informed congregation. We make sure we get a book ahead. It would be nice every once in awhile to have an ignorant congregation so you could just stand up and say you can’t do that here. So you’ve got to work your little duffer off and be sure you do your home work and proper research.

Congregations use retreats and book studies to deepen the faith lives of participants. Some groups combine faith formation with spiritual nurture. As one

participant noted, “We also have a monthly *Wellspring Service* where we delve deeper in faith and spiritual formation with meditations, reflections, story telling and prayers... There are also Bible Study series, book studies, as well as spiritual retreats.” Another described efforts to deepen faith and spirituality through “offering a wide variety of programming, activities and special events that provide a means for adults and children alike to explore their faith not only by learning, but also by doing. There are plenty of opportunities for the congregation to interact while building upon their knowledge.” A Toronto Chinese United participant shared her congregation’s efforts:

This summer we had had a successful retreat day. The theme was “A Blessed Growing church.” At the open forum at the end of the day, four new members through baptism gave testimony of their belief. From what they said or witnessed, I sensed their joy and feeling of blessedness to be part of the congregation. That is a sure sign of God’s presence with us.

When these groups are clergy led, ministry personnel recognize their role in empowering members to develop their own spiritual support. One ministry person explained that “We hoped to equip people to draw on their own spiritual depth and not be dependent on clergy to provide all of their spiritual sustenance.” There is also mutuality in the learning as another clergy person describes:

I lead a weekly interdenominational Bible study group that has been meeting for over 25 years. I really enjoy the level of trust and vulnerability shown by the members (all women) of the group, as well as their insight which often helps me in my sermon preparation. A lot of ministry goes on among the members of the group.

That mutuality in learning occurs too as Sunday School teachers prepare and then learn with the children in their classes. One Sunday School teacher and participant said, “I have been teaching Sunday school for several years and I love that. I love working with the kids and it is interesting. I like talking to the kids, interpreting every day lives.”

Bible Studies sometimes form part of other small group activities in the congregation or are offered as separate classes especially for newcomers. One respondent explained that “whereas the cell groups get together to meet and have bible study groups, we have bible classes to help new members to understand more about our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank God for keeping us together.” Another participant noted that there is “an ongoing bible study group. People are invited to join. It is always open.”

Many congregations talk about women’s bible study or spiritual growth groups. One participant explained that “the women’s bible study group meets for the sharing and exchange of experiences, ideas and suggestions.” Perhaps, this kind of small group learning and spiritual support appeals more to women than men. Certainly finding time for mid-week study and reflection is a challenge for many with busy lives. One ministry person seeking to initiate a new study group lamented that:

There also is an ongoing challenge with busy people to try to fit one more thing into their lives. An eight week commitment is a pretty hefty chunk - a lot of people feel that. So when we did *Living the Questions* last year, it turned out that everybody who was interested in doing it was retired. So we didn’t have to do it in the evening and could actually meet during the day.

Gifts

These faithful and lively congregations are attentive and intentional in recognizing and nurturing people’s gifts for the individual’s own self-fulfillment and for sake of the community. One participant said that “developing and sharing our gifts, nurtures the giver and all who receive.” Another recognized that “youth shine through their gifts. The warmth of reception of the community encourages the development of gifts.” Integrating gifts into the life of the congregation and its ministries is part of congregational mission. “The commitment to be a welcoming and nurturing community

for people of diverse backgrounds and to work at incorporating the gifts each person has to offer,” is very important as one interviewee noted.

Sometimes the nurturing of gifts requires offering a framework, or words of encouragement, especially as people exercise their gifts in new ways. One respondent remarked that “coaching and support help people participate in worship and offer themselves to the community which is often more important than what they say.”

People have discovered new gifts or developed interests into skills. One respondent described how that has happened in her congregation:

A lot of people know that the life of Jesus has to do with healing. I’ve often thought those little services we are conducting are a form of healing on behalf of the congregation -prayers for healing of the people who are there and for people who are not there. That’s one way. The other way I think in which those services have supported our life is that they have enabled a few amongst us to step out into a healing ministry outside of those monthly services in providing palliative care in a couple of places. And individuals have taken that further step.

Some have connected their vocations with their faith and now feel more fully able to live lives of faithfulness through their work. One interviewee remarked that:

Part of my community work involves the Toronto Food Policy Council where we are very much anchored to stewardship locally - stewardship of the land, stewardship of the farmer, stewardship of self and others, stewardship of immigrant populations who need connection with their food types. And the issues are very much the same as they are here. It is just a bigger context. but it allows me to animate who I am and our values here very much at that table and in the congregation. Because at church, we talk about the importance of local, of going to the Owen Sound Market here, knowing your farmer, shortening the distance, understanding the farm crisis not just, ‘Oh the poor farmers.’ I think that wherever we go we act as small disciples too.

One participant noted that her congregation’s liveliness “is also related to the changing demographics of the area, which is attracting early retirees, who have lots of gifts and who are looking for an interesting, stimulating place to use them.” Research participants recognize that through various methods and many opportunities, spiritual

nurture and faith formation are essential to their own Christian lives and to continued congregational faithfulness. One ministry person summed it up this way:

I guess what I am really hoping here is that people think deeper about who they are in their lives and connect their lives with the scripture or faith - and that they are living their life filled with faith and blessings and gratitude and struggle with God. And in that process, I am hoping that people are coming to awareness that their lives are faithful and lively.

Leadership

Leadership, whether lay or ministry personnel, is important to faithful and lively congregations. Many participants were very clear that leadership is the work of the whole congregation and not just the role of clergy. Congregational members, through their leadership, bring the many ministries of the congregation to life and find both meaning and joy in these endeavors. Ministry personnel are appreciated for their ability to empower and motivate others, for their skills, wisdom and integrity. Relationships between ministry personnel and members are strong and respectful.

Lay Leadership

Lay leadership is lived out in these congregations in all aspects of church life - in worship, on the Board, in Sunday School and small group ministry, as well as community service and outreach. "Members take part on a rotational basis to read scriptures, teach Sunday School or be hosts for the day," said one participant. Lay leaders are active within their own congregation as well as in the wider church. One respondent noted that, "I have been president of UCW for 10 years. Currently I am member of the National UCW representing ethnic ministries." Congregational involvement often includes leadership in long-standing women's groups like the UCW, on committees of the Board, as well as in many newer groups.

This understanding, that leadership is a form of ministry that is the responsibility of the whole congregation, is shared by many of these congregations. One rural participant affirmed that “this is a congregation that has a solid understanding that the ministry is the work of all the people not the ordained minister alone. As a result, people see things that need doing and do them.” A city church participant saw faithful and lively congregations as dependent on “the participation of the people. Much as we all believe and say we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we do have it in spades here at TSP.”

A large core group provides the backbone for the ministries of these churches, whether large or small. One interviewee observed that “in some respects we are not unlike other churches even though we have a lot of people. A smaller church will have fewer people. It is still a core of people that do most of the work. We have a larger core.” Another participant placed himself in that core group:

I find myself very much at home in this congregation. Apart from being a regular Sunday church goer, I take an active part in various functions, and join various groups and fellowships. I have been Clerk of Session, and have never stopped sitting on various church committees.

Participants are grateful for leaders who are seen as enthusiastic, gifted and suited to their roles. “We have excellent UCW involvement and an excellent mission committee,” said one respondent. Another gratefully acknowledged that there are “enthusiastic leaders and teachers for Sunday School programs and good people here in leadership positions.”

Glimpses were offered into how this strong congregational leadership has evolved. For some congregations, particular incidents or periods in their history

motivated lay leaders. One participant wrote that “the crisis around the illness of our minister led to more worship leadership and talents bloomed.” In another congregation, a different scenario unfolded as told by another respondent:

As a financially limited congregation, for a number of years, when the ministers took their vacations or study leave, worship services were prepared and led by congregational members. These services were/are well attended and performed well by those delivering them.

Leadership development and empowerment is seen as a key to sustaining ministries in the congregation, in the wider community and world. Some of this empowerment is initiated by ministry personnel in these congregations. One clergy person commented that:

From the point of view of ministry personnel, it is important to assess the capabilities of the congregation and use their gifts. There is a responsibility to develop leadership from the pews out into the world as a key path.

Leadership empowerment also arises from the permission-giving and nurturing ethos of the congregation itself. One congregation takes on this role quite deliberately, as one participant wrote:

We intentionally foster leadership. This keeps members excited and involved in projects, including all age levels of the community. There is enthusiasm and excitement about leadership. Participation and leadership go together. People are keen for wider participation. There is not only a willingness for leadership in the community but an expectation that people will be invited to participate in some way that they are comfortable. This could be quiet behind the scenes; could be public worship; could be some work with circles. People take ownership and responsibility for contributing to worship and this gives people great joy. There are also leadership opportunities for people who are involved in social activism to tell others about it.

An important part of leadership is the witness of people in their everyday lives that is grounded in their faith community. This practice of leadership is explained by a Norval United respondent:

At Norval United we all feel that we are called to ministry/leadership. I hope that we would never put the onus on the paid ministry staff. If we have a problem, we'd work together to find the answers. And it is our prayer that through their involvement with Norval United, people will come to know the awesome love that God has for them, that they will share that love with others, and that love will 'leak outside the tent'.

Ministry Personnel

In all these congregations, ministry personnel are appreciated as a strong and dynamic presence in the faith community. Most especially, participants commented on ministers' abilities to empower and motivate others, the fit they had with the congregations, their character, skills and involvement. Many named their minister/s as the reason they joined the congregation in the first place, or the reason they continue to belong. "The minister is the reason why many people join the church - who he is, his words and actions," one participant said. A city church participant observed that "the leadership team and their motivation is a strong part of the reason the people are so faithful and lively, and they are definitely why I am still there."

Ministry personnel are seen as empowering and encouraging others in the congregation to use their gifts and take on leadership. One respondent explained that this happens because "ministry personnel celebrate people experimenting with gifts." An ability to generate excitement was also a valued trait in ministers. One participant commented that her minister "encourages participation in the service and keeps members excited." Ministry personnel are also recognized as spiritual leaders and educators, helping members grow as Christians. "He is an interesting and engaging minister who speaks honestly from his heart and leads the congregation to seek and strengthen their understanding of and relationship with God," wrote one participant. Some of this empowerment occurs through the ministry role as model in the congregation, as well as

through preaching and worship leadership. It also happens through open and friendly relationships with the congregation. One observation by a participant was that “there is obvious love between the congregation and minister. I feel a sense of being loved and cared for.” Another respondent appreciated the informal and welcoming style of his minister:

It’s just so much easier to get into things. One of the ministers stands before his congregation wearing a short-sleeved shirt and casual pants. There’s a band in the corner with an electric guitar, drums and bass - all the players from the congregation. If you want to take part in helping with the service, just ask the minister and he’d probably encourage you. It’s all so easy.

These lively and enthusiastic ministers are good at initiating new programs and introducing new ideas for worship by discerning new possibilities. “Our minister is very supportive and encouraging of having lively, creative things happen here,” said one respondent. Clergy involvement in community activities and awareness of social and global issues also benefits the congregation. This was appreciated by one respondent who said that her “minister is very active in the community. He pulls in people from these community connections who add something different.” Helping people make critical theological and social connections is a gift these ministers have, as one respondent reported. He said, “We have a very *switched on* pastor. She is very aware of world happenings and, through her preaching, helps us to understand how we can make a difference in helping our fellow human beings.”

Ministers themselves see their core role as encouraging faithfulness and liveliness. One ministry person explained that “it’s enormously important. I feel that’s at the heart of my job – to lead and encourage and help them to be faithful and lively. If I saw this declining, I know it would be time to leave.”

Several ministry personnel, as well as lay participants, noted that fit in a pastoral relationship is a factor in developing faithful and lively congregations. It seems important for congregations to hire both a leader and the right person - the right leadership for the times. The ethos and character of the congregation, as well as its current situation in time, needs to be matched or complemented by the leadership style and character of the ministry person. One participant elaborated:

Maybe having the leadership that is key at appropriate times or appropriate leadership for certain times is important. I was hearing you refer to that period in your life when Paul was here and it was the right leadership for the right time. And it is not always possible to find those kinds of combinations. This congregation is in a discernment process now and I wonder how significant it is going to be as they go about that to say, 'What is the period of life we are moving into, and what is it we need now? What is that going to look like?'

Participants see deep faith in their ministers and, as one person wrote, feel they are "very supportive and dedicated - totally committed to why we are here, and to being available and creating opportunities." The character of the minister can have a powerful effect on the nature of the congregation and the wider community. It can inspire people to become their best selves, as another participant explained:

Some people felt that our minister was just so laid back and so strong - a woman of great strength - that they could just get through anything together. And I think that those two things working together have helped people to be warm and outgoing and inviting to whoever comes along.

Availability and approachability were prized. Ministers are seen as being able to talk about anything and are sensitive to others. One participant shared that "our leaders are approachable and as a leader, that is something I value."

Ministry personnel spoke about their own sense of calling and how their congregations inspire them. One clergy person said that, "being a minister in this

congregation, I am constantly struggling to be better than I thought I could be as a minister. It allows me to dig a bit deeper, pour out my heart and soul in love.”

These participants also recognize and highly value the skills these ministers possess. In worship especially, ministers bring their knowledge of the Bible, theology, the congregation, and the world into play. They are seen as excellent preachers and educators, speaking the language of the people and inspiring thought, action, and witness. They speak with relevance to people’s lives and are honest and engaging. One respondent felt her minister was “an energetic and dynamic speaker. He always helps me re-centre my life. I always find some value in his messages.”

In some larger congregations, participants valued their *happy* ministerial team. Collegial relationships bring out the best in each member and provide a supportive environment within which ministers can work. Satisfaction by ministry personnel was named by one as “good relationships with colleagues and other staff members.”

There is recognition and appreciation too, of ministers’ activities and leadership in the larger church. One participant wrote that “the pastor is active in Presbytery and there is active lay representation there too. The pastor and her husband (retired pastor) are also active in Conference.”

Heritage and History

Finally, through this study, I discovered that a congregation’s heritage and history contribute to their being faithful and lively. Heritage relates to the involvement and continuity of people within the congregation as well as to the traditions and character of the church itself. History encompasses periods of change and crisis and how they shaped

the congregations. Given their history and heritage, these congregations have a clearer sense of identity.

History of Congregational Involvement

Many participants talked about their own and others' history of church involvement. Being involved with the church is seen as a primary part of their existence and an extension of home life. The communion of local living and deceased *saints* is evident. Strength in continuity and hope for the future, because of this heritage, is important to participants. "There's a legacy and a real sense of commitment I think," one participant responded. Another noted that:

There is a commitment to heritage – "newcomers" perhaps realize more the value or honouring of the past and are interested in the stories the elders can tell.

Being steeped in congregational heritage roots congregations, as this participant explained:

There are some multigenerational families that have been attending and supporting the church for a long time. I find this very inspirational. Children raised in this church are now adults who are active members and have a real love of and trust in God and a desire to help the church continue and thrive. The church was built in 1827. ...Having congregational members that have been there 'forever' contributes in that they have the knowledge and experience of the community. To some of the long-standing members our Church is an extension of their home.

Traditions and Character

For rural congregations, tradition encourages reaching out to others. Participants talked about the *farmer influence* that manifests itself in neighbourliness and acts of love and support. Many continue to see the rural church as a family gathering place. A Norval United participant explained how the saints of the church are remembered:

Norval United was founded in 1898 by a group of local farmers. Their faithfulness and lively interest have made the Church a family gathering place... A

memorial Youth Fund has been established in the name of a significant member of the church who passed away in the last few years and it reminds the congregation of the spirit of this man. I had never met him but the existence of the fund and references to him and others who have been historically important to the church remind me of the enduring positive legacy people can impart. There is acknowledgment of very elderly members of the church which allows recognition that all are important to the life of the church from the very youngest to the very oldest and all those in between.

Dalston-Crown Hill built on its rural tradition of offering hospitality with a new tradition of welcoming women ministers. This, in turn, changed the way the pastoral charge viewed and exercised leadership. One participant explained:

In my opinion, these congregations have been more liberal in their thinking. They accepted and welcomed a female minister in 1981 and then two subsequent and one temporary women ministers after that. The rural atmosphere has always encouraged the reaching out to other ministry that is practiced. ... I believe that the relational style of ministry practiced by women has had a profound effect on the charge by placing more of the leadership in the hands of the members.

Heritage United, another rural congregation, also sees its heritage in strong women's leadership. "The church has always had a group of faithful, strong, intelligent women," commented one respondent.

A well established church, like Collier St. United, celebrates its tradition of faith, as one of its members reflects:

I think faith has been celebrated in a steady way through the years. So in the midst of all the change, and I know the church can be criticized for being slow to move sometimes, there has been a steadiness I think provided by Collier and other older congregations of other denominations perhaps in the city.

North Bramalea United, a younger congregation, sees its traditions based on its original purpose and location. One of their participants sees tradition even in the short term:

Our roots are still showing I think. We started twenty-three years ago to make a difference to the community and haven't stopped working to that end.... I guess,

since the church started out in a high school, the church was born with some sort of approachability with it.

Trinity-St. Paul's United, in downtown Toronto, names its traditions and character as arising from a strong social justice history. One long time member explained that:

Trinity-St. Paul's has a long and meaningful tradition of social action and support for the arts and inclusion of many community activities... Historically, there has been emphasis and leadership in outreach; strong influence of missionary activities, like the Women's Missionary Society; the active involvement of members in ecumenical and interfaith issues; participation in World Council of Churches.

Toronto Chinese United too, remains committed to its original purpose of Christian support and nurture to immigrant Chinese in Toronto, even though their location has changed and their members are now more and more Canadian born.

Financial woes, theological and moral dissension, the death of a minister, demographic changes, and amalgamations, form part of the historic fabric of these churches. This history and heritage continues to help them clarify their vision, meet challenges, and grow stronger. One participant observed that:

The threat of closure livened people up in the past - small but mighty "all hands on deck." Everyone is needed on the journey in a small group of people. Everybody is somebody... Yes .The church almost had to close its doors about ten years ago. But adversity sometimes creates community.

These congregations value their history but are not chained to it. They recognize the need for change and re-invention, but keep themselves grounded in the life-giving aspects of their historic traditions. The best qualities of their former selves are held as touchstones for the future.

Conclusion

These seven areas of ministry - *Relationships in the Faith Community; Meeting Challenges; Connections with the Wider Community; Worship; Spiritual and Faith*

Nurture; Leadership, and Heritage and History - provide an important foundation for these nine congregations. They describe practices, relationships, and qualities that have served to strengthen and focus these churches on Christian faith and discipleship. Between, across, and through these areas of ministry, larger themes and traits can now be discerned that point to the presence of Christ in their midst.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

Theme of Openness

In my reading and analysis of participants' comments from interviews and response forms, one all-pervading theme emerges. Whether it concerns worship or outreach, relationships or challenges, these congregations seem to embody an openness that is distinctive. Comments regarding the welcoming of newcomers, the introduction of new ideas, the reality of difference, and the changing ways of being church, often included the word "open" and hinged on this quality of openness. All nine of these congregations show a clear and palpable openness to the future, some with more confidence than others. They seem truly surprised and delighted by God's in-breaking and sometimes up-setting Spirit alive in the world, their communities, their churches and relationships.

Openness implies permeable boundaries as they relate to who uses the church building, who is invited to the communion table, who leads worship, or who receives pastoral care. Openness changes the dynamics of social action so that sometimes congregations are initiators and sometimes partners with others in bringing social change. Openness also affects congregational identity and congregational mission. For too many congregations, as Laurene Beth Bowers notes, the church is a private and closed system where it feels as though visitors are, "sitting in someone else's living room as an

uninvited guest.” She reminds us that churches are, “public spaces and not closed systems.”¹⁷⁷

The fruits of openness found in these congregations are excitement, joy, freshness, innovation, flexibility, transformation and energy - and these fairly bounced off the pages! A sense of confidence, softened with humility, pervaded the interviews. These congregations were optimistic, excited about the vision for their future, but open to critique.

As I read and listened, I pictured this openness like a set of wide spread doors with members of these faith communities, newcomers, and strangers mingling and moving across the threshold welcoming God’s Spirit blowing in, out and through the church.

Sometimes, openness can blur the lines between community and church with affiliations, loosely defined, and beliefs, loosely articulated. This can be experienced as liberating for some and debilitating for others. Conditions that limit openness in congregations such as fear, suspicion, misuse of power, and congregational myopia, dissipate the energy and the potential God offers congregations. Too much openness may threaten the identity, ethos and purpose of the church.

In my research on what makes congregations faithful and lively, I found that openness plays a key role in providing a framework for understanding. As an overarching theme, openness provides impetus for several key qualities that are evident in these congregations. These qualities are: *Radical Welcoming: Open to ‘the Other’*; *Risk-Taking: Open to Change and Transformation*; *Loving: Open to Journeying with Friends*,

¹⁷⁷ Laurene Beth Bowers, *Becoming a Multicultural Church* (Cleveland, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 38.

Neighbours, and Strangers; Empowering Leadership: Open to the Gifts of All; and Justice-Making: Open to the Wounded and the World.

Each of these five qualities is as dynamic and organic as church members themselves. Many factors affect the strength of these qualities and how they impact each other. An overemphasis on one may diminish another or unbalance the whole. However, openness is central to them all. Interestingly, these qualities also provide the conditions possible to develop a climate of openness in a congregation. Sometimes churches can act into a more open climate by focusing on living into these five qualities. Like wind catchers or kites, each quality stretches our capacity to modulate or change direction to harness the Spirit's power moving through us.

Radical Welcoming: Open to the "Other"

All these congregations spoke of and seemed to live out a strong sense of welcoming and hospitality. This welcome is broad and generous and includes a wide diversity of people. Congregations practice intentional inclusivity as part of this hospitality. In her book *Christianity For the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass recalls Henri Nouwen's definition of hospitality as "'creation of a free space' where strangers become friends. 'Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.'" However, she also adds that in our twenty-first century Western world, many people feel like nomads and tourists in relation to religion and spirituality and so hospitality is all the more important.¹⁷⁸

Radical welcoming means more than everyday hospitality. It refers to the deep acceptance and loving response to strangers, those outside our comfort zone. It means

¹⁷⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco, USA: Harper, 2006), 79, 80.

more than a smile and a greeting at the church door; it requires engagement, celebration of gifts, advocacy, and the building of right relationship. It means deliberately crossing social barriers that privilege or disadvantage one economic, social, or ethnic group on relation to another. It means changing the way these congregations worship, make decisions, build community and understand mission. It means following the path of Jesus into unknown territory for the sake of love. It means making a commitment to a just world. Through this commitment to radical welcoming, the presence or spirit of Christ is apparent in these faithful congregations. Radical welcoming is offered in the knowledge that somehow all will be changed for good in these encounters - those who offer welcome, those who accept it, the church and the community itself.

As Cheri DiNovo states in her book *Que(e)rying Evangelism*:

Hospitality, the ethical imperative that runs through Scripture, must be the imperative that runs through church life.... if anything, the biblical witness says that the marginalized are the necessary inheritors of the church and its rightful owners. If this is not reflected in our structures or our pews, if we're not allowed to be our queer selves, our church is in danger of being more club than church. Hospitality precludes "moralizing" as a function of the church, precludes judging.¹⁷⁹

The welcoming quality of these congregations evokes the story of the Great Banquet offered to all but attended by society's marginalized ones. This image of the kingdom of God as a place of eating and drinking with beggars, with women, with the sick and lame, with the ostracized and sinners, effectively describes the kind of radical welcoming to which the church at its best aspires. These congregations show evidence of this kind of radical hospitality and inclusivity and are being transformed by it. There is a liveliness and energy that flows from this rich mixing of differences.

¹⁷⁹ DiNovo, 193.

This same welcoming attitude toward diversity was noted by Diana Butler Bass in her study of American mainline congregations. She says:

All along my journey through emerging mainline congregations, I found people who cherished diversity of every kind – political, theological, cultural and racial. They appreciated, as Geoffrey Chaucer wrote of his medieval pilgrims, ‘sundry folk’ along the journey. For people on this way, diversity serves as a sign of God’s love for all humanity.¹⁸⁰

Authenticity in welcoming and caring permeates all of church life involving long-time members, as well as newcomers. Children and youth are welcomed, encouraged and appreciated as they bring energy, wisdom, laughter and questions. The integrity of the welcome though is most important. It involves truthful encounter and invites persons into a continuing open engagement both socially and theologically. One respondent described her experience of being welcomed as genuine, warm and loving:

There was no feeling of falseness in the kindness of these people. They were not pushy. They were real people with their own problems and challenges, successes and joys. I felt welcome and invited to carry on my discovery of God at my own pace.

A welcoming and inclusive environment was seen by participants as conducive to the development and integration of people’s gifts into the life of the faith community. One person valued his congregation specifically because of its, “commitment to being a welcoming and nurturing community for people of diverse backgrounds and to working at incorporating the gifts each person has to offer.” In the openness to the gifts of the new person, there is a sense in these congregations that people do not merely fill slots already established, but that they are permitted by the faith community to initiate new directions and practices. Welcoming, then, also involves empowering leadership.

¹⁸⁰ Bass, 148.

Some congregations make welcoming part of their congregational mission statement and offer hospitality consciously and corporately. Sarawak United states that, “We hope to be a celebrating, supportive and welcoming membership...” Some plan ways to involve the wider community in the life of the church and to involve the church in the activities and concerns of the wider community. This is the kind of hospitality that invites the neighbourhood into the church and the church into the neighbourhood.

This “inside-out” church grows on people and blurs the line between insiders and outsiders. As one participant stated, “We open our doors to couples seeking marriage, and parents seeking baptism for their children, and families seeking help and hope in time of bereavement, even if they are not associated with the congregation, believing that every good thing done in Christ’s name receives His blessing.” Community members who live near or use the church facilities feel that they somehow belong even though they don’t attend and aren’t members. One person described these people as “...neighbours in the bigger sense.”

There is a political dimension to hospitality when the activities of congregations impact on the social situations of their surrounding communities. Out of the Cold programs, classes for new immigrants, alliances with social service agencies, and community gatherings, all provide opportunities for healing, for relationship building, for developing gifts, for sharing stories. Many non-church folk who use the buildings feel a sense of familiarity, comfort and ownership – perhaps even a sharing of common purpose. Some TSP folk observe that many people on the streets, through the Out of the Cold Program, or just coming in or out of this building, “...think they own the place...They’ll holler to you across the street or wave on Bathurst Street. That’s part of

who we are too.” This radical hospitality helps people see the church as a neighbour and valued partner in working for the common good of the community.

These are open, transparent, and loving congregations who are not afraid to proclaim and live their good news in the wider community and to invite the wider community to share its blessings and struggles too. One woman from Dalston- Crown Hill United acknowledged that she was “always talking about the sense of community here because I think that is what a lot of people are looking for. That is certainly what I was looking for – a place that I could call home.”

Radical welcoming means inviting people into rituals by remembering that through God we are blessed by them and can be a blessing to them:

People actually like ritual if you can find meaningful and relevant ways to take ritual to where people are. Last week I saw a group of hunters at the side of the road. I stopped and talked with them ...just a few minutes to give blessings on the hunt.

Building relationships of welcome involves intentional open communication with the wider community through vehicles such as newsletters, advertising, signage, banners, public events, town hall meetings, and word of mouth. In many ways, these forms of communication declare the essential inclusive and welcoming identities of these congregations. One member of a small country church reflects:

Our mission statement talks about honouring our history while looking to the future and reaching out into the community. I think both these things are integral to being faithful. We look for practical ways to do that - in our choices of how we make changes to the building, in distributing fifteen hundred newsletters to homes in the neighbourhood, in hosting a “Cottage Country Reads” night before Advent begins to settle people’s hearts before the beginning of crazy-Christmas and Advent time

A city church participant remembered how the church first communicated its identity and welcomed his family, “A sign posted outside TSP that quoted the Hosea 12:6 verse, ‘... hold fast to love and justice ...’ piqued our interest.”

Just as welcoming is important to the life of the faith community, it is also extremely important for newcomers to our English speaking Euro-American culture. In some congregations, like Toronto Chinese United, welcoming means speaking the language of new immigrants and offering programs for their adjustment to Canadian life. For others, it means welcoming people from diverse cultures and life situations, gay and lesbian couples, people with different physical abilities or cognitive impairments. Welcoming involves holding an attitude of loving non-judgment. It means paying attention to special guests and building bridges of relationship. This was affirmed by one respondent who said:

New people are invited right away to “belong, be welcome”. We all greet new people on Sunday, but we also invite them to be part of the life of the church. We are fortunate because we always recognize a new face.

One member of Norval United wrote that radical welcoming means awareness, “..an ongoing sense of continually looking outward to others in the community. It could be those who will come to the church for worship, spiritual growth, spiritual development, service. It could be those outside the church who will never walk through the doors but will have been touched by the love of Christ through the service of Norval United folks.”

Welcoming diversity. Inclusivity is a specific form of radical welcoming that is evident when a congregation intentionally welcomes folk from socially marginalized groups into its life. The spirit of inclusivity involves an awareness of how power is given

to or taken from social groups depending upon how that society defines dominance. In Canadian society white, heterosexual males have the most power and are considered the dominant group. All others suffer from one form of oppression or another or from multiple oppressions. For congregations to be truly inclusive, they must acknowledge these differences of power and attempt to mitigate them through consciousness-raising, reflection, education and advocacy within the life of the congregation and action for justice in society.

DiNovo reminds the church that through an inclusive hospitality people of the church learn most naturally about issues of power through connecting with their own strangeness.¹⁸¹ This inclusive hospitality reminds people of their own sense of strangeness in the world and the strangeness of the Emmaus God in Jesus who continually meets us on our journeys and through these strangers. When strangers become friends and offer us support, hope, and new ways of looking at the world and ourselves, we come closer to God and God's intentions for our lives.

These congregations in the research study not only welcome diversity but practice a theology of inclusivity. One participant from Trinity-St. Paul's believes this congregation practices what it preaches by being an "affirming congregation that tries to include all - children, elderly, people with varying cultural backgrounds, sexualities, economic situations." And contrary to much church growth literature, congregations that celebrate and encourage inclusivity by deliberately raising issues of social justice, are growing. One of Trinity-St. Paul's ministry personnel commented:

This congregation shouldn't grow because it really has all the marks of poor church growth. The classical characteristics of church growth, identified by the church growth movement, are that there's sameness and homogeneity about things

¹⁸¹ DiNovo, 192.

and you don't enter into conflict about social issues and diversity. ... Stay away from that diversity, stay away from controversial issues, and don't talk about the poor.... And this congregation flies in the face of all that. So that is a risky business to try and sustain yourself when the experts are saying 'you are going against the marks.'

Radical hospitality and inclusivity require more than attitude change. They demand changes in exclusive structures and systems of the church. One congregation has changed its governance structure so that the participation of newcomers, who may not be part of the dominant group, can be more systematized. One member reflects on this new openness:

I think the new structure lends itself to a participatory church life and to welcoming the new voice along with the experienced voices in the congregation. There are a lot of wise voices here and they are not just in the core group.

The experience of working with a diversity of people, in these congregations stretches and strengthens the level of acceptance, broadening the sense of family, and deepening the understanding of core values. Diversity related to economic class, education, cultural and ethnic identities, sexual orientation, political and theological perspectives, physical and mental abilities, and age differences, adds to the richness, the liveliness, and the growth of these congregations. Laurene Beth Bowers in *Becoming a Multi-Cultural Church*, states that in fact this kind of radical hospitality is the basis of becoming an intercultural church that, in its experience of living and working together, offers a model to society:

The goal of multiculturalism is that, as congregations become more racially and ethnically diverse, they will transfer what they have learned in church into the community. The Christian church has the opportunity to be a leader in the multicultural movement by teaching diverse people how to live together.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Bowers, 16.

Efforts to be so broadly welcoming and inclusive seem to both hinge on and facilitate the release and celebration of members' gifts. Through these engagements and relationships, participants feel they are learning more about themselves and the world and are growing spiritually. Some characterized their diverse congregations through colourful metaphors:

Jim Manley has written lots of beautiful, sing-able songs - one of his older songs is called 'The Raggedy Band' and describes the people of God as a raggedy-collection of people who are misfits together, not necessarily misfits in society, although they may be... They don't look alike, or sound alike but they belong together...and here we are.

Asked how they hold various differences together in a life-giving way, despite inevitable conflicts and clashes, participants described a creative tension based on faith and friendship. The tent pegs are widened and room is made for the "other." One member of Collier St. United felt this was done because of a basic interest folk have in each other especially as people come from a variety of different work and home environments:

I think it's about honouring all the differences so that you appreciate them, understand them. You are interested in people. Sometimes all of us live in a pretty closed environment – go to the same job, go to the same school, same neighbours. It is an opportunity then. It is also lifted up as one of the blessings that this congregation has and it is appreciated.

In these faithful and lively congregations, there is a respect for the Christ in all kinds of strangers that seems to allow the members to focus more on the transformation of the whole community rather than assimilation into the community. In its intentional commitment to right relationship and welcoming inclusion, the community of faith then becomes more than a sum of its parts and takes on a spirited persona. Sometimes the model and ethos for doing this "widening" comes from the actions and attitudes of a core group of older members:

I think it comes down to the very question of friendships and caring. I do think there is a real genuine caring and there are a lot of friendships. It is harder to get upset with people and to form cliques when there is that kind of genuine feeling for another person. So people really make room for each other I would say. The older crowd of the Sarawak group have done that particularly – they've been here more than 20 years. It is really quite phenomenal – they really need to be credited with forbearance.

Radical welcome for some multi-ethnic congregations means openness to people of colour not always accepted in society as a whole. In the opinion of one ministry person, “The presence of ethnic diversity in the congregation is an indication to me that it is a welcoming and safe place for everyone to be.” Another participant expressed her symbol of hope for harmony across differences:

The horizontal line of the cross indicates the East meeting the West - ethnic Chinese working with mainline Canadians in harmony. The vertical line emphasizes that we stand firm on Earth looking up towards eternal life. This vertical line symbolizes the tree which is the basis of our faith. Therefore, we are growing up and up.

This desire to live as committed inclusive community extends to accepting people who are gay and lesbian, even as ministry personnel - what may have seemed impossible years before:

This past fall I came out to the congregation as their minister who is gay and that has gone very well. With the exception of one couple who is not attending, neither our attendance nor our givings have suffered as a result of this. The pastoral relationship seems to have been strengthened by this increased openness and trust.

Faithful and lively congregations close to Toronto, because of demographic realities, are more ethnically diverse and aware of ethno/cultural differences. Others though, hold up a commitment to inclusivity of all kinds as a core principle. The UCC's denominational emphasis on inclusivity has influenced these churches. One person noted that, “I like the United Church of Canada's liberal philosophy and inclusiveness.” Others remarked that inclusivity was a goal for which all churches should strive:

I think that the United Church as a whole... is a very inclusive, non judgmental group of people. And I think that our leadership is that way too. We see the Jesus Walk people and maybe the people in Alcoholics Anonymous and we live that – there is just that warm welcoming feeling...The programs in the church are inclusive of so many different diverse groups and there's a good cross section of our society that it makes me feel like this is the way a church should be run.

Differences of thinking and theology are accepted and even celebrated. Some participants feel free to believe as they wish while others seek out opportunities for conversation and discussion. Participants find places of communion across difference. Donna Sinclair, in *Jacob's Blessings* remarks that hearing the stranger takes a special kind of ability:

This capacity to listen to strangers, and allow them to touch and change our faith, is a sign of maturity in any church. It's an ability not easily acquired, because it requires humility.¹⁸³

One participant thought her congregation was, “the kind of home where people may not be the same in very many ways but it is where they share enough common ground and enough common questions that everyone is welcome.” Another respondent felt that her congregation gave her lots of latitude in believing:

The very thing that draws me to this church is the fact that I don't have to be a certain way or that I don't have to believe a certain thing. Sometimes I think the things I believe or perhaps am questioning around are heretical, but I don't know. If I state them out loud I may get a few shocked faces but I also don't feel that I have to discuss them....I feel like I'm allowed to question and believe what I believe.

That freedom and openness to differences in thinking and believing feels liberating and Christ-like to many:

The welcoming attitude of the church helps. You are hearing everybody's opinions and thoughts and there is definitely growth in the community....Also the fact that with different backgrounds we have learned in different ways, or have experienced different traditions that allow us to also be lively and faithful. Having to work to keep both lively and faithful is related to the words and work of Christ

¹⁸³ Sinclair and White, 106.

– the acceptance by Christ. Christ was with tax collectors and sinners and he was with everyone whether they were regarded as high society or the bottom, and in between. Doesn't matter your background – accepting everybody is living out Christian tradition. That's what we are supposed to do. That's a big part of this place. It's not exclusive, and that's why it's life giving.

Coming from churches with more rigid belief systems and membership requirements, many feel a sense of relief in these congregations:

I don't feel pressured or pushed by anyone in the church to "KNOW JESUS". It is just a loving acceptance of who and what I am. It is very evident to me. So in that I can relax and ask myself what do I believe and what do I want to know and how do I want to learn. That freedom to me is so important.

Welcoming worship. Worship is a central place in church life where the inclusive and welcoming ethos of the congregation is lived out. For some churches, there is a real effort to put people, who are socially marginalized, up at the front of the church to speak about their lives and give testimony to unjust social and global situations. In the interview, one participant stated that, "If there is a woman or someone who is homosexual, there is clearly a conscious effort to put that diversity forward and include them as part of our congregation. They lead us in worship too."

Occasionally moving worship into public spaces is another way that churches can be welcoming to the wider community while grounding worship in nature and drawing attention to environmental concerns. Sometimes there are surprising results for everyone! The Easter morning sunrise service down at the edge of the Bay was a new idea for the small Sarawak congregation. The location was chosen as a way for the congregation to honour the importance and beauty of the environment around them. The three congregations in the pastoral charge had spread the word amongst themselves and the newsletter had announced the service to the community, but no-one expected what happened. The response was dramatic. Eighty people, including many non-church people

from the wider community joined in the sacred time on the dock. Refreshment time afterwards turned into a scene of loaves and fishes as leaders scrambled to greet and feed everyone.

Welcoming Spaces. Church buildings express hospitality in many ways too. The way congregations relate to tenants and other users of their building is an indication of the kind of hospitality they are willing to offer and accept back. Considering their building as a tool of ministry, these congregations exhibit an attitude of generosity, mutuality, and care. “Renters” and “users” become more like colleagues, friends and partners. One Trinity-St. Paul’s participant noted that the congregation is “...working on how to be partners with those who share our building rather than have them here more as tenants.” Through the hospitality represented by an open building, the congregation becomes a valued and integrated part of the larger community. A member of Heritage United commented that “we have many cultural and social activities in the church building that are run by outside groups. Interaction such as this keeps our church as part of the community (as opposed to being a segregated entity).”

The church building is also a place to extend welcome through special programs and social activities initiated by the congregation. Meeting some of needs of the community and providing social time for community cohesion are very important aspects of congregational welcoming. One member explained that “we open the church to children of non-Christian members to attend our day care center and Chinese school. We offer Chinese language and mathematics knowledge to parents who want their children to learn.”

Dalston-Crown Hill lives out its welcoming ministry through the social events it hosts. This church is still “very much a community institution, welcoming people from the area to our famous church suppers and the annual corn roast, BBQ and auction. These events offer folks a valuable time of connection and catching up with others in the area.”

Hospitality extends to welcoming the work and partnering with folk outside the faith community for church events. One person recalled that “we just had our Fall Dinner and many of the people who helped and attended were neighbours and family and friends of our members and the same with our recent Garage Sale. I think people are drawn to us because of the spirit of faith and joy.”

While use of building space proclaims “living-room hospitality,” the outside of church buildings themselves offer the hospitable “spirit face” of the local church and the UCC to the community. Many spoke about the public nature of their building, its open doors to the neighbourhood, and its role in the ministry of wider spiritual hospitality in the community:

There is a sense that community people “own” the building. The building is seen as a public face/spirit face of United Church of Canada and the congregation is the immediate physical presence of hope, care, affirmation and support. Whether people belong to the congregation or not they look to the churches as places where they might meet for social activities, celebrate an anniversary, hold a funeral, or ask for support in times of grief and trouble. One participant observed:

I would say that even beyond the United Church of Canada, it is a spirit face where people find a common ground to be together in multiple ways. Whether it is Tafelmusik or Toronto Consort or Out of the Cold, it is a spirit face that people find is life giving. We are not unique in that, but it is part of our identity. A lot of people don’t even have religious persuasion. But it is a place where they are seeking to enhance their own skills or their own life or contribute to society.

Welcoming Heritage. When looking at the role of history and heritage on radical welcoming, it is clear that many of these congregations have benefited from a legacy of congregational traditions of hospitality and inclusivity. People feel rooted in their particular congregation, and in the United Church of Canada. The traditions of welcome and hospitality are integrated into the ongoing life and ministry of the congregation. One newer member reflected that, “It is kind of interesting because you have that kind of tradition walking into the church but it also welcomes you with open arms – kind of a nice contrast...”

Some traditions of hospitality have arisen out of memories of lean times. Ebenezer United has experienced many demographic changes over the years and many transformations in its identity. One member recalled an earlier period where the life of the congregation was at stake:

I can think back to when we first came in 1978 and the congregation was just beginning to grow- very, very lean times – fifteen or twenty people...the founding families had left. The decision was whether to close or not. They decided to hang on and wait for the growth from Toronto to overtake this little country church and be here for the people who arrived. So that caused the fifteen or twenty people to welcome the newcomers because that was what was going to keep the congregation alive. So I think that may be a part of what created the welcome that people experienced.

Finally, some see their congregation’s heritage and identity formed around radical welcoming itself so much so that hospitality has become paradigmatic of their whole existence and purpose as church. One participant used this metaphor:

I pulled out a teacup and saucer from my cupboard. It’s one from my mom’s downsizing exercise when she and my dad moved to their retirement home. It is a symbol of our congregation for many reasons- it’s a symbol of hospitality, of welcoming others with the attitude that we’ll throw another teabag in the pot and there is room for more. It’s a symbol of a congregation that knows how important it is to share more than worship, more than fundraisers together- but time spent

getting to know one another over a cup of tea or coffee. And it's a symbol of a congregation that knows we don't use cups and saucers anymore...that there is more than one way to show hospitality...We use mugs now....and offer hospitality in many ways beyond this cup and saucer...It doesn't negate what or how hospitality was shown in the past. Rather, we take the best of the past, the commitment to and understanding of hospitality, and find new ways in our time to show it.

One of the challenges of living as an open and inclusive community, is the tension between accepting all people, all practices and all theologies and grounding the community in a common purpose and vision. Sometimes in the church's attempts to be wide open in thinking and living together, the reason for being church, God's mission, gets lost. Certainly, as Phyllis Airhart points out in her article "A 'Review' of the United Church of Canada's 75 Years" the paradox of "oneness" and diversity in the UCC continues to challenge the church especially as we try to make statements of faith and live ethically in our world.

In its 1925 union of three Protestant denominations, the United Church of Canada sought to minimize differences and stress unity and oneness for the sake of a common mission to the large country of Canada. She notes that, "The importance of building on what was held in common, rather than preservation of differences and 'peculiarities,' was at the forefront of discussion from the outset."¹⁸⁴ This was partly out of the understanding that the church had a public role and "responsibility to shape the future of Canada."¹⁸⁵ The need to transcend differences was the attitude of progressives at the time.

However, with decentralization, divisions within denominations, a declining membership and greater appreciation for differences, the identity of the denomination has been jeopardized. As Airhart points out too, the latest scandals associated with the Indian

¹⁸⁴ Airhart: 21.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.: 22.

residential schools issue tear at the very notion of the UCC as the public conscience of the nation. “This dream of a common faith and the Christianization of society now seem to be assimilationist and paternalistic.”¹⁸⁶ She points out that this is not just secularization but something that has changed in the way people regard religion and public life. Airhart contends that, “we may need a more radical inclusivity, one that is more deeply rooted in the centre of our faith, drawing people into a wider conversation about what kind of lives we live, what kind of communities we want to create, what kind of church sustains us in these endeavours.”¹⁸⁷

In the midst of difference and diversity, core values and a focus on God deepen relationships, as one participant from Sarawak United noted:

I like that we are an eclectic crowd - we aren't the same. We represent wide open spaces across the political, social, economic, educational continua...and yet, there is a sense that we share enough of what is important...core values and a deep sense of faith and hope in a God that I know we don't describe the same way...and that's enough for me...this group of people have affirmed what I have always believed - that being together is about building relationships, with each other, with our community, with God.

Nancy T. Ammerman in her research on congregations facing changing contexts uses the welcoming metaphor of the table to explain her findings. Congregations that adapt well, she says, follow practices of sharing kitchen tables; sharing tables, chairs and schedules; sharing boardroom tables; and sharing sacred tables.¹⁸⁸ This sharing of ‘welcome tables’ is very similar to the welcoming practices of the faithful and lively congregations in my research study. Welcoming becomes the key to building community,

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.: 27.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.: 31.

¹⁸⁸ Carl S. Dudley and Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition : A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 157-174.

to the use of the building, to dealing with conflict and making decisions, to worshiping in new ways.

These faithful and lively congregations hold well the tension between diversity and common purpose. Many seem to offer and accept hospitality to and from those in their communities for the sake of a shared vision. Openness to the Spirit of God is manifested through acts and attitudes of radical hospitality and welcome in these faithful and lively congregations. This theme of openness also appears in the other key qualities - loving relationships, empowering leadership, risk-taking, and justice making. It is the dynamic interplay of all the qualities with each other that strengthens each and gives evidence of the Spirit at work.

Risk-Taking: Open to Change and Transformation

As I read their stories and listened to their comments, it became evident that these faithful and lively congregations all exhibited the quality of risk-taking, an openness to the future through change and transformation. This involved both a freedom to experiment with new ideas and a willingness to struggle and fail in the process. This risking behaviour could be seen most clearly in willingness to vision anew, to change structures, to experiment in worship, and through creativity in programs and activities. Attitudes of spontaneity, curiosity, surprise and delight were evidence of this openness and freedom.

Risk-taking can be empowering and revealing for congregations. But the risking needs to be owned by the congregation, not imposed by clergy or by one or two within the congregation. The desire for change, in these congregations I studied, appears to be organic and arises from grassroots members with discussion.

History and tradition seem to have shaped these congregations into permission-giving communities, thereby enabling renewal with each new challenge and possibility.

Carl S. Dudley in *Congregations in Transition*, observes that:

Congregations that undergo deep changes find the strength and imagination for those changes only when they have faced all the possibilities – including death. Only when they feel the dark tangled uncertainty of transitional moments do they develop the faith resources essential for their transformation. Only when congregations can really imagine letting everything go can a new life be born in them. But facing these possibilities is frightening and risky. It is venturing into a wilderness that takes us far from the safety and predictability of home.¹⁸⁹

Visioning. Being open to the future requires a strong grasp of the past, yet a willingness to risk moving into the unknown. The sense of living in the ‘now and the not yet’ of vision is essential to church life and to following God’s call of building the kingdom on earth. One participant saw this creative tension, of being on the threshold between present and future, in this image of new church doors:

About fifteen years ago, a woman in the congregation died and her family gave money for new doors. Her husband, a contractor, was to build them. He has since died but currently there are three to four people - stewards plus two architects in the church, who have had the doors built by the Mennonites in the area. Antique hinges have been especially made and the doors will soon be installed. Faith in the present – new doors to open for the future. New life for the church.

An open attitude to the future by core members seems to help make visioning the future possible for these congregations. If the core group expresses and models a confidence in the future and a comfort with change, these congregations are more free to take risks and try new things. This means that the investment by these people in what was is less than their hope for what could be.

As one Trinity-St. Paul’s participant observed, that new life comes from “energy and enthusiasm in a congregation that is willing to take risks and envision new ways to be

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 111.

the church in our city and our world.” An enthusiastic Dalston-Crown Hill participant remarked, “We’re always inventing - and the groups, the choices of four or five study groups – fantastic!”

Visioning itself is a form of risking that engages the imagination and creativity of the congregation. By setting out into the unknown, the whole congregation gets a chance to reflect on and dream about possibilities for living more faithfully in their context. One ministry person noted that in the visioning process, “The benefits are enormous because the exercise expands our thinking, builds community, develops an atmosphere of excitement, pushes us into taking risks, opens us to the community and city around us, and helps us define who we are as the people of God and what it is we are being called to and from at this time.”

History and context. Sometimes a congregation’s social context is the primary source of inspiration or catalyst for risk-taking. In the amalgamation of Trinity United and St. Paul’s United churches in the 1960’s, the surrounding social climate affected the ministry of the new congregation:

It might be fair to say, that St. Paul’s from reading the history, gave the impetus around the justice work and Trinity had a very strong music background. .. Trinity had justice work in a very different sort of way – traditional – very strong M & S, very strong missionary component, very fine missionaries. There were struggles with youth here but not as active, controversial and important as happened at St. Paul’s....They were cutting edge because of all that hippie movement. And then we had all these re-visioning meetings. We were reviewing everything. It took off and it continues. They were certainly very active, but because of the impetus and leadership the congregation took a direction that has turned out to be faithful and lively.

In the 1980’s the changing social climate that was moving toward gender equity in the workplace meant that more women were entering ministry and were available as

congregational ministers. Dalston-Crown Hill decided to take the risk of hiring one of these women, a decision they repeated twice afterwards.

Permission-giving. In *Studying Congregations*, the authors note that historic patterns play a large role in continually helping congregations to experiment and re-imagine themselves in dynamic and healthy ways:

A congregation's culture is shaped by its own history...the culture we see today is but a chapter in a much longer story that has both a past and future dimension.... each congregation is then a unique culture, but it is a culture constructed out of many different kinds of materials. And it is never static. Each time a new person joins, each time a new pastor or priest or rabbi arrives, each time something changes in the neighborhood, and each time the members themselves change, (have children, grow older, lose their jobs, and the like), the life experiences out of which the congregation's culture is made have been altered. The congregation exists in the tension between long entrenched patterns and new contingencies. In fact, there is often active negotiation going on over what sort of place the congregation will be. In some places the weight of history and continuity is much stronger than in others.¹⁹⁰

As well as taking risks in visioning new ways of corporately being church in their contexts, these congregations foster individual experimentation and creativity within the faith community. A climate of permission-giving, that welcomes the participation and leadership of all, seems to pervade each of these congregations. By seeing everyone as a potential leader, spiritual gifts are nurtured, and the congregation is strengthened. Participants see this permission-giving climate as revolutionary and liberative. One woman expressed her frustration at another church when there was no openness to meeting her own as well as others' needs:

I had just had my daughter and was a single parent from the get go. I was very lonely and very scared and looking for community. What I found was when the doors of the church opened and everybody was leaving and talking about what homes they were going to, my daughter and I walked out alone. And so I saw that there were other singles doing the same thing. I went to the pastor and asked if we

¹⁹⁰ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Congregations : A New Handbook* (Nashville, USA: Abingdon Press, 1998), 81.

could maybe have an afternoon worship and a dinner that we cooked together and then we'd be there for the evening service. He said that when I'd been there longer they might entertain the suggestion but that it would take some contemplation and prayer. I don't think I was there too much longer. I don't want to be waiting for opportunities that are supposed to be right there now.

This woman continues the story with her experience in this new permission-giving congregation where even the possibility of creating something new is exciting and affirming for her:

I told the minister about this book that I loved that has this sort of creed that I follow. And so he asked if that could become a new small group ministry? I'm sitting at home writing stuff that I would love to share. I may get the chance and I may not. But what it has carved inside of me is wonderful.

Permission-giving does not imply throwing out all tradition, but it does mean following the Spirit into new territory. Trinity-St. Paul's, in downtown Toronto, has a long history of ministry in the city and a long tradition as a permission-giving congregation:

I think 'faithful' has an aspect of adhering to a pattern. I think TSP tries to honour tradition. I mean whether it's Methodist or whatever it is, we don't want to throw out everything from the past. I keep hearing that. But there is permission to experiment, to move with the Spirit in other ways, to break boundaries, to just try something different. Not in a gimmicky way. It needs to lead with the Spirit. What I keep hearing is that in a lot of congregations that permission is not there. The people in the congregation give that.

Some congregations, like Sarawak United, have only recently become more open to the leadership of the laity, which has been a bit of a cultural shift. Permission is being negotiated on both sides as traditional clerical roles change and power is shifted. This has come about because of the desire for more lay involvement and the willingness of the clergy person to share ministry roles and see herself in an empowering, as well as a doing, function. The Reformation doctrines of the "ministry of the laity" and "the

priesthood of all believers” may finally be reaching fruition as ministry personnel seek to “equip the saints” rather than be the saints themselves.

It is my sense that in the past, it was up to the minister to determine and deliver the ministry of the congregation. ...Over the past couple of years, as a number of lay people have expressed the desire to assume some of the responsibility for certain events/activities, there has started to be more lay involvement in the planning and implementation of what is done in and through the church. This is taking some adjustment as the minister learns to step back and let lay people exercise their gifts and as the lay people learn to step forward and share in the leadership of the congregation.

Congregations that are open to change encourage the participation of new members in all aspects of their ministry and governance. Norval United takes the risk of involving new people right from the start. In fact, opening leadership to new people deepens their sense of belonging and the understanding of faith and ministry in the congregation. Expecting change, and being open to it, are aspects of the quality of risk-taking that characterize these faithful and lively congregations. As one Norval United member wrote, “I think the concept of change is an ongoing thing. We get new people joining all the time. We get new people coming on to the board and new people volunteering. In any given year there would be all kinds of things that need to come up that involve change.”

Sometimes the ability to risk and the climate of permission-giving grow from experiences of crisis. In a recent amalgamation, of the Dalston and Crown Hill churches, a shared crisis, the death of their minister, brought new vision for change and co-operation between two churches on a rural pastoral charge. One member noted:

I feel that the events that initiated the changes - also brought us together in “reason”. Without this element of “crisis,” we might perhaps not take our need to be together so seriously. We came together as two churches that had gone through the sad loss of a minister and the new welcome of another. In a lull, we might forget our connections.

However, it is important to note that relationships in these congregations are carefully nurtured when new ideas are being implemented. One Sarawak member described the changes affecting his congregation and the challenges that poses:

Sarawak is becoming increasingly an upper middle class congregation because of the changing demographics of the area. Our challenge will be to remain a place where all will feel comfortable and spiritually nourished, regardless of their economic situation, education or background. Most of the new initiatives in the congregation have been initiated and organized by members who have been part of the congregation for 5 years or less. Their challenge is to introduce change in a way that doesn't make the long-standing members feel as though their church has been taken over by the newcomers and turned into a place where the older members no longer feel at home. We also must be careful to not over-tax our people by undertaking too much.... There is a danger that some of the older members could feel that they are being "used" to serve the interests and agendas of the newcomers.

The balance between tradition and innovation though is healthy for most. There is sincere gratefulness expressed that longer term members are gracious in their willingness to be open to change. This was expressed by one respondent who explained that:

The thing that I notice as a relative newcomer is that those who are the longstanding members are, for the most part, people who have lived through lots of changes and who seem able to roll with the punches. They don't seem to claim their identity in how things were but rather in how things are and can be. I think they are the measure of faithfulness in many ways. That's a tremendous gift of possibility that they offer to those of us who are new and bring different ideas and different experiences to the congregation. Without the open-ness of those who have been here longest, this congregation couldn't be what it is.

Creativity. One of the interesting aspects of going through times of struggle and challenge in these congregations is that these circumstances often provoke creative responses and innovative ideas. One Sarawak member reflected that, "The struggles also allowed us to dig deeper into who we are and venture forth on a new ministry." Although, there are no guarantees that more challenges won't keep coming she felt that, "I always thought part of our openness was from surviving near bankruptcy ...Because I think

sometimes that desperate times call for desperate measures at some level.” The people of Sarawak decided to take some chances and try new things which contributed to the opening of the congregation in the long run.

In all these responses to challenge that congregations are facing in Toronto Conference, there is strong evidence that their commitment to a vision, and their willingness to take risks in the Spirit, will serve them well. As one participant noted, faithfulness and liveliness are shown, “in the openness of this congregation to discuss, struggle and search for ways to be a faithful witness that is creative and transforming.”

Experimenting with worship. In worship, the gifts of some people may lead them to experiment with new music or liturgical forms. In these faithful and lively congregations, new ways and innovative forms of worship leadership are greatly appreciated. They are experienced as deepening the faithfulness and liveliness in the congregation. As one participant said, “We are privileged and blessed to have many musicians in our midst and a choir that is diverse in age and ability but that tries anything and as a result, gives the congregation courage to try anything too!”

Experimentation with new music and a variety of musical styles is well received by these congregations. Comments from response forms showed overwhelming enthusiasm and grateful appreciation for music leadership in these congregations. One participant said “the choir and music director are willing to try anything and this gives the congregation the courage to try anything too.” Another observed that “the music is fantastic every week.”

New worship experiences heighten the sense of expectation and curiosity, generate energy, and offer new ways of proclaiming the Good News for our time. One

participant commented that, “In my limited experience of this congregation, I have seen some pretty unusual methods of worship that keep me coming back to see what will come next.” These congregations aren’t afraid to try out new ideas. One member noted that “new forms of worship and additions to the regular worship fare are met with a good sense of adventure and a ‘let’s see if this works’ attitude.” These permission-giving congregations offer support, trust, freedom and openness to experiment.

Creativity is at the root of innovative and varied worship experiences that build faithfulness in the congregation. Worship leaders in permission-giving congregations feel free to experiment, not in a gimmicky way, but by being led by the Spirit. However, creativity requires time. One worship leader noted that, “For creative juices to flow, you need to allow space and time and give permission for that. Part of the challenge is that it’s easier to be traditional or use a rigid formula Sunday after Sunday.”

Carl Dudley observes that in congregations that experience difficulty with change and with being creative, it is often the ministry leaders who:

...fail to see new possibilities for the congregation because of an inadequate grasp of the situation, or they find that their dreams for the congregation do not fit the realities of the situation. They are blocked by "mental models" -- images or assumptions, often untested, about the way things are -- that do not fit the situation.¹⁹¹

Creativity itself is a form of spirited-ness – a place where Christ’s life-giving presence is felt and lived. This creativity often involves the participation of the whole congregation and is part of their faith formation as described by one respondent:

Worship helps me maintain my own sense of faithfulness and liveliness. It's being in a place where we can give feedback to our minister on something she said that provoked or inspired us - where we can ask for hymns to be sung - where we know that, although the general form of worship will remain the same, there will always be surprises.

¹⁹¹ Dudley and Ammerman, 174.

Many congregations have experimented with different ways of proclaiming the gospel in worship. The worship leader's task is to balance faithfulness to the content of the gospel with a sense of liveliness from experiencing the gospel. This helps to attend to people with differing learning styles. One ministry person explained that:

Not all people respond to the message of the gospel or faith and love and challenge.... Not any one way relates to every person so the very fact that this congregation is open to different ways of expressing that gospel message is great. You have to have a congregation that is open to that possibility because some people receive information by different senses – for some it is rhythm and music and for others it is visual. For others it is heady, others its contemplative others, it's emotional or heart stuff. So I think for me that's "lively" – I think it means "alive" - not tapping your toes to lively music but something that makes you feel alive.

Risking for justice. A few churches take risks and experiment when it comes to living out their mission in the areas of social justice and public witness, although this is an area where most congregations admit they could do more. Sometimes this involves re-working congregational principles and policies, or boldly declaring a position for justice. This can involve hurt feelings and broken relationships when moving into new territory such as learning how to be an intercultural and anti-racist church. Coming to consciousness about our unintentionally racist attitudes and practices can be painful but necessary if congregations are to learn from and change colonial ways.

Since every congregation is both threatened and empowered as it tries to live justly, it is even more important to consult widely and educate the congregation along the way. Ebenezer United finally asked the question of why visible minority people were not involved in leadership in the congregation. Then they had to work out ways to change their practices, all the while learning, sometimes painfully, from people of colour in their

midst. Trinity-St. Paul's took several years to work out the practices of its policy on anti-racism. Creating the policy was one thing but as one respondent noted:

... when we get to putting it on paper and consider how we are going to live our lives to be conscious of that, it becomes a difficult exercise. What policies and procedures would we put in place in our community, in our church, right here to prevent anyone from being discriminated against? That was a risk. They had the conversation once before – we heard about it – it did not go well – it was either the process or the way it was dealt with. This last time around there was a lot of great care and consultation... That is one new way – it was a risk –even though it doesn't sound like a risk.

Congregations that have intentionally decided to use inclusive language or become Affirming congregations, to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and trans-gendered people (GLBT), have also taken risks - the risk of learning and growing theologically as a congregation and the risk of welcoming the stranger.

In the last few years, Trinity-St. Paul's has started to proclaim its commitment to peace and justice through mounting, on the outside of the building, a series of large banners containing prophetic biblical verses. When a congregation puts their hopes and views out in a public place, there is bound to be a reaction. This risking is part of the prophetic call of the Gospel of Christ and is deeply part of what it means to be Christian. As one ministry person explained:

Another risk, that I think the congregation didn't realize was a risk, was when we started putting out banners – different banners with different messages. ... There was great tension around the war in Iraq and the congregation made a decision to condemn the decision to go into Iraq. People walked by the banner who didn't know or didn't care. They were not impressed. But one person came in and said 'I suppose that means you are against Bush's war in Iraq.' I said, 'You're damn right!'

Risking for the gospel. Taking risks, experimenting with worship, ministry, witness, involves these congregations in change. In her studies with congregations, Diana Butler Bass observed that:

Following the Spirit means change. And it means that God has distinctive calls for each congregation, each unique, each responsive to the breath of new life. ...Together, they point to an emerging form of Christian gathering, the pilgrim church. There is no one-size-fits-all kind of pilgrim congregation. One of their few shared qualities is their ability to change, their recognition that pilgrim communities are communities engaged in near-continual spiritual transformation.¹⁹²

Risk-taking, openness to the future through change and transformation, are both integral to the life of these congregations and necessary to their living the Gospel in their contexts. But this kind of risking must always be grounded in mission. The danger may be that experiment, especially in worship, may lead to novelty for its own sake that can easily deteriorate into spectacle and performance. Rooted in the gospel, risk and experimentation can lead to new life. Employed for their own sake, they can alienate and uproot churches from their nurturing Christian, denominational, and congregational heritage. Continually discerning how the church can be faithful in situations of change and crisis, through the use of visioning, worship, and social action, keep congregations open to the Spirit's lively calling.

Loving: Open to Journeying with Friends, Neighbours, and Strangers

Loving relationships form the core of these faith communities and therefore represent another quality of faithful and lively congregations. These relationships are built on an openness to journeying with friends, neighbours, and strangers where loving means liberation, self-actualization, support, affirmation, and care. Many participants named these relationships in terms of "family", and "friendship." These loving relationships create a community spirit that is strong enough to deal with challenges, open enough to speak the truth, and grateful enough to celebrate everyday joys. One

¹⁹² Bass, 242.

respondent felt that faithful and lively congregations, “seem to hinge strongly on gathering for worship, meeting challenges, reaching out to others and maintaining strong bonds of caring and affection among the members.”

Compassion and support. Participants all described the compassion and support they could count on in their faith community. One rural respondent wrote, “There is support whether you need a bale of straw or someone to talk to.” Caring and warmth are part of the identity of the congregation. The faithfulness of the church is shown through its loving and caring. One woman noted that faithfulness is seen:

in unobtrusive “random” acts of kindness to one another, necessities given, appearing without explanation but with a preservation of individual dignity - the caring FOR and caring ABOUT each other in so many situations. When a difficulty is known among us, a touch of a hand, and ‘I’ll remember you in my prayers’ is a truly comforting lift from which to take comfort. I personally have experienced this.

There is a sense that loving relationships help members to become better people, more authentically themselves and more clear about being part of a larger whole. The dynamics of these relationships were described by one person:

We suspend all of our irritations and negativity. We could get growly with each other about things, but we decide not to.... There is a feeling too about being part of something bigger and I want to say this about worship too. I think there is always a sense that our worship points us to something bigger than we are. And so does the communal aspect of this place - almost like it calls forth your best self somehow. The people around us call out of each other their best selves.

Some recognize God’s blessings and liberating energy through the support offered. Caring translates into embodying Christ’s hands and feet. This is experienced by sisters and brothers in the faith community as this participant explains:

I have been blessed throughout my life to be surrounded by people who I know care deeply for me. This congregation is another experience of that. Some won’t always agree with me. Some may find my theology difficult. But there is no doubt in my mind that if I was sick, they would be there for me...if I needed a car,

or money, or a prayer...they would be there for me, as they are for others. That sense of care, of being held by a community, creates part of my experience of God. And when you feel “held” by invisible hands, you are able to share your skills, talents and energies with the wider world...it enables me to be more authentically, me.

Good relationships in the congregation are prized by participants. One congregant noted that, “people are really hungry for opportunities to get together” and that, “coming to church for a lot of people is as much about community as it is about worship.”

In ethnic minority and intercultural congregations, members build relationships with new immigrants that are crucial to their socialization into the community of faith as well as the larger society. A Toronto Chinese United Church member reported that at family retreats, “...some people from the Chinese language ministry were able to form fellowship with members from the English language ministry. Having met for the first time they naturally have a lot to talk about to each other.”

Other respondents valued the gathering of very different people with a common purpose. One noted that, “All the attendees from this church are from all walks of life with a common goal; that is to keep our hearts open to God and at the same time form fellowship with one another.” Across differences, there is a desire to reach out in love and to build friendships.

For younger families, in a post-Christian world, these relationships are important as their children have little chance for Christian community at school or through other social activities. One Collier St mother shared that:

Personally, the congregation gives me opportunity to gel with people outside of my immediate neighborhood. This is refreshing. My family is getting to know a few people on a personal level. This is good for them too. So few of my kids’ friends at school are Christians.

Between clergy and lay members there is also a feeling of loving relationship. One

ministry personnel described her church as “a ‘congregation from heaven’ as far as I’m concerned. They are supportive, enthusiastic, enter easily into new ways of doing things, generally conflict-free, strongly supportive of mission and social justice issues, and we have fun together.”

Loving across differences. Loving relationships depend on openness to differences of age and personality as well. An ability to hold these differences in love, despite the inevitable irritations, makes for a lively community. One respondent observed:

The after service coffee hour is well attended and loud, as folks visit with one another and meet new members. While the majority of the congregation is 50+, there are a lot of younger families with small children, and the noise, activity and restlessness of the toddlers and babies in worship are accepted with smiles and no apparent annoyance.

Relationship building in these congregations flows from both interest in, and commitment to working together. As one participant noted, “There seems to be in the Sarawak group a genuine interest in one another – a genuine curiosity in what is going on in your life.” In the Dalston-Crown Hill congregation, another respondent described the tensions, disagreements, yet overall willingness to find communion in the congregation. She observed that, “We speak up - we disagree - we come back together - we laugh and try again.”

In their living these congregations show that they are embracing a vision of loving community. In *Studying Congregations*, the authors found that although congregations don’t always write down their vision of ministry, they hold their vision by how they act:

For example, members understand themselves to be a family of care and support, and express this vision both in their life together and by reaching out to needy

folk within their community. They *do* their vision rather than write it out in a vision statement.¹⁹³

Meeting challenges in love. Loving relationships that can withstand challenges and uncertainty spring from a sense of trust and commitment to each other and to the church. This grounding in trust provides these congregations with an ability to take risks. As one TSP ministry personnel noted, "...when charting new courses and wading in unknown waters, there is some fear and uncertainty but, for the most part, there is a high sense of trust." He continued to say that:

A very important point for any faithful and lively congregation is a deep rootedness and conviction on the part of a substantial number of people that come hell or high water, whatever the change may be, they are going to be there...They are committed to being the church in the city.

Faithful and lively congregations are not immune to crisis and change. In looking back on their history, participants noted that these times of challenge in the past often helped shape and strengthen them in significant ways. Meeting challenges has taught these congregations how to love more deeply, to maintain relationships across difference, and to hold onto the essential purpose of their being church together. One member of Collier Street United Church reflected that:

This year, Collier Street celebrates its 170th anniversary. Our presence in the community is undeniable. Our church is physically and spiritually visible. That Collier Street was able to survive a major split in 1990 and in many respects renew itself is evidence of the strength of those who stayed and those who have become a part of the congregation since. We have moved on.

Transparency and openness to the opinions and concerns of each person in decision-making processes help these congregations to maintain loving relationships. Feelings need to be expressed in a climate of respect. As one church member put it, "we are not incapable of expressing discomfort. We suspend, again, judgment until we've had

¹⁹³ Ammerman, 180.

a look at things. People are thoughtful and careful and constructive, I think.” When dealing with difficult social issues, focusing on ideas and opinions challenges people to keep loving despite disagreements. Another party in a controversial debate said, “the conclusion I came to is that it is not for me to judge a person, whether they believe that should be so or whether that shouldn't be so.”

Loving relationships and respectful processes help to empower leadership. In dealing with controversial issues like same-sex marriage one staff member of Collier St. United concluded that:

Having to move slowly means that we discover that patience often is a virtue. It is easier and more productive to build consensus from faithfulness to the essentials and friendship with one another. ‘In things essential to the faith, unity; in things not essential, diversity; and in all things, charity.’

It appears that loving relationships undergird the ability of congregations to take risks, endure crises, and persevere even as their foundations are shaken from time to time. The danger of becoming insular in these loving communities is offset by the commitment to radical hospitality where fresh voices and new perspectives shake up and renew the vision. The openness exhibited in learning to love across differences of theology, culture, sexuality and age, grows from an apprehension of Christ’s Spirit living amongst and within each of them. When this loving extends to the week day lives of members and also blossoms into corporate social and political action in the larger community, then the loving experiment that is church, serves its purpose.

Empowering Leadership: Open to the Gifts of All

Another quality of these faithful and lively congregations is empowering leadership that is open to the gifts of all and is evidenced in both ministry personnel,

members, and the faith community as a whole. By empowering leadership, I mean leadership that makes way and gives permission for others to use their abilities – a radical openness to “the least”. As I spoke earlier under risk-taking, there is a climate of permission -giving that pervades the whole congregation, not just certain individuals. This climate extends to leaders who empower the faith community to act lovingly and justly in its own relationships and also in the larger community. Leadership implies pushing against obstacles at times to change the status quo and sharing power to affect political change.

When congregations are truly faithful and lively their influence on the wider community seems to work like the Great Commission, where *disciples* are made of all nations. By making disciples these congregations seem to understand it is not about converting *heathens* or *non-believers* into Christians but influencing others to bring about the *kingdom*, the kind of world that God calls us to in scripture and in the life of Jesus. This is a political call to build up God’s kingdom on earth, not to build up the church.

Through mentoring relationships. Empowering leadership happens through mentoring and learning together. It happens through worship and work, through study and action. It happens because there is an openness to Wisdom/ God’s Spirit acting in these communities and an awareness that anyone may be carrying that Spirit. So, people have learned to pay attention to the wisdom of the young, elders and in-betweens, to new and long-time members, to people of colour, to the differently abled, to gays and lesbians, women and men, to the economically stable and those living on the edge, to the eloquent in speech and those who labour to communicate.

The interplay of loving relationships, risk-taking and radical hospitality are signs of and means to this empowering leadership. It is modeled after Jesus, the servant leader, who reminded the disciples over and over again that he and they were to serve others, not lord it over them. When he washed their feet, Jesus showed, in poignant ritual, this relationship so difficult for many to grasp. The church continues to have difficulty grasping this form of empowering leadership preferring to set apart and lift up certain forms of leaders over others – clergy over laity, ordained over diaconal. It even fails to grasp the role of the church as the servant to the world and instead often makes an idol of the church focusing on its growth rather than the realization of a new heaven and earth. So clarity of vision is important when considering empowering leadership in these congregations.

Through learning opportunities. Leadership is empowered when youth groups return from global exposure trips and social awareness events to teach the congregation about the world. Leadership is empowered as children speak out, serve communion, sit on committees and bless the congregation with their questions and active wonder.

Empowering leadership is made possible when ministry personnel get out of the way so that others can create prayers of the people, theologically reflect, tell their stories, offer pastoral care and teach. When ministry personnel see their role as equipping the saints for ministry and empowering the ministry of the laity in the community of faith and in the outside world, there is energy, joy and a strong sense of mission and purpose in these congregations.

When the congregation understands its role in the community, it can also be empowering of others outside the church who through their work in “mending the world”

are partners with us on our journey to justice and love in the world. Public witness is one form of empowering leadership that happens when congregations learn about an issue then take a stand for justice or advocate for just causes. These congregations empower others to take leadership through their modeling of leadership in and outside their faith communities.

In relationship, the community mentors one another in the faith. As one research participant put it, “I appreciate opportunities to learn from experienced, knowledgeable ‘saints’ from our own congregation who have loved the Saviour and learned of Him for a long time.” Building relationships in the congregation is also seen as bound up with worshiping and working together. One respondent noted that:

It challenges us to realize that we often grow as we work together – reminds me of that hymn, ‘worship and work must be one.’ Work in the service of others and service of the church with good humour is a profoundly spiritual experience. We enjoy being together, worshipping, volunteering our time joyfully.

Healthy relationships connect people with a sense of mission, as well offering them the chance to grow and to lead by helping others. One respondent summed up the essence of her congregation as, “Good people, sense of mission, sense of excitement about spiritual growth and making a difference in the world.”

Involving all. These congregations found that listening, waiting, and discerning the Spirit together through efforts to come to consensus, empowered leaders to live out their ministries. Consensus-seeking requires that all are heard and that through careful listening and attention to the concerns and ideas of all, the mind and will of the community can eventually be discerned. Many respondents felt that the benefits of a consensus process go well beyond the immediate concern being addressed, such as the same sex marriage issue. One said, “I believe that people have an opportunity to bond

when they struggle together and feel they have done good work together.” Others saw long term blessings resulting from this kind of careful decision-making in the past regarding amalgamation:

Because of the attitude and process around the amalgamation, it worked exceptionally well. But it has so increased the faithfulness and liveliness of this congregation. Lifting that up may help people to feel a little bit more hopeful when they have those discussions today. It was not just being swallowed up by some big whale ... It was a coming together to make a new thing.

Congregations that are open to change and transformation encourage the participation of new members in all aspects of their ministry and governance. This is an empowering stance for the congregations and for individuals testing their gifts and experimenting with using their power. These congregations intentionally seek to involve newer members of their congregations believing that their contributions are critical to the life of the church. One Trinity-St. Paul’s participant reflected that:

... there is intentionality in fostering leadership and I think this community is not loath to welcome new people. Lots of congregations are. You can be there for 10 years before you stand up. Here, you almost have to watch the opposite. People are so keen for wider participation that they can become overextended and that’s more the caution. But the invitation is extended and I think that is important. People can say, ‘No not just now, I’ll do something later.’ or whatever. But I think there is not only a willingness from the community, but an expectation that people will be invited to participate in some way that they are comfortable - could be quiet, behind the scenes; could be public worship, could be some work with the circles.

Empowering the leadership of newer members sometimes leads to tensions and frustrations as fresh visions vie with older traditions. These congregations are aware that it takes time to move the congregation to a common but evolving vision. By nurturing respect for all members and for the congregation’s heritage as well as its emerging vision, energy and commitment are sustained. One research participant described a situation of

some tension in his congregation but also noted a process for deepening understanding and consensus as well:

We have gained some new members, who, having come to us because of their impression of our 'simple country church' and they now seemingly want to bring us into the 21st century and replicate the city churches they left. Rural people are slow to change, and if things have always worked well, why change? However, plans are discussed, but I fear fruition is all too slow. So faithfulness is there, but liveliness in that respect needs work.

Worship that empowers. Worship, as the central weekly community act, is one locus for this shared and empowering leadership. Members of these congregations share in worship leadership, musical leadership, and in the creation of the liturgy itself. Some dialogue together in theological reflections. New voices and new perspectives including the voices of children, youth, those differently-abled, gay, and ethnic minority speak in these congregations where learning is an ongoing pursuit.

All the ministries in the life of the church are woven together through this time of word, music, and ritual - teaching and learning, proclamation, pastoral care, spiritual connection, community strengthening, outreach and justice-making. People are empowered to live faithfully through ritual where they have, as one participant phrased it, "an enhanced opportunity to encounter God." In worship, children, youth and adults experience the inclusive and welcoming culture of the congregation.

J. Denny Weaver in *Vital Christianity*, in discussing the role of community in developing a spiritual life and empowering leaders notes that:

...the primary means and place for individuals to experience God should be in the Church and through the Church's corporate worship...This worship of God includes the doing of justice and living as disciples of Jesus. If that dimension of the experience of God is lacking, then it is not really Christian

experience. Indeed, it is not Christian faith.¹⁹⁴

One ministry person interviewed, tries to empower leadership by making the service “inclusive and meaningful, informative and transformative” so that it will nurture and sustain people. Many congregations use lay readers, encourage music leadership by choirs and instrumentalists, engage children in talking about the good news, and make space for news of the life of the community and the church. Worship is a lively mélange of participants from all aspects of church life and with a variety of abilities. Professional leadership is balanced with the leadership of the community as a whole.

For many, music is spiritually empowering. Choirs and music groups invite the congregation to widen its repertoire and take chances with new global rhythms and harmonies – often found in *Voices United* and the more recent UCC publication *More Voices*. Drumming groups, classical ensembles, and back up bands are added to the more traditional piano and organ fare. Musicians and choir members gain confidence in their abilities and begin to see the importance of their roles in worship leadership as critical to the spiritual and faith formation of the congregation. As one young person explained, “Sharing my musical talents with the congregation has given me confidence in myself and has played a role in developing who I am today.”

The spirituality of music is evident. As one participant noted, music conveys a “sense of mystery and community.” Through words and music in worship, congregations are inspired and emboldened to go out into the world again with hope.

Leadership in the congregation is also empowered through worship that, as one respondent said, “calls forth our best selves and offers a sense of belonging and being

¹⁹⁴J. Denny Weaver, "Justice, Spirituality and the Church: The Atonement Connection," in *Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice and Christian Practice*, ed. William H. Willimon David L. Weaver-Zercher (New York, USA: T & T Clark, 2005), 57, 58.

part of something bigger.” Another participant declared that worship “strengthens my faith; makes me feel alive.” Through caring support, encouragement of gifts and openness to the contributions of all, these congregations nurture and empower new and existing leaders. Worship in these congregations, is a significant Christian ritual that has a transformative effect on individuals and on the faithfulness and liveliness of the faith community as a whole.

Participants appreciated the variety of worship experiences available in their congregations. One person commented that they, “felt spiritually renewed because worship is fresh” and that “new types of services, like interfaith, create energy.” A participant from Sarawak United reflected that:

You are not getting quite what you expected at worship and that can be a renewing thing for people. I’ve heard people say, ‘I feel renewed here because it is not the same old same old.’ Something about the mix of these people feels really new, spiritually renewed.

Leaders are empowered and inspired through the use of new elements in a worship service, from the mix of participants, from lively and engaging music, and from dynamic sermons. Good preaching was highly valued and was cited as both engaging, challenging, and life-changing. Sermons that include biblical interpretation and theological reflection, that are contextual and relevant to the community, can be a powerful medium for faith formation. Faith formation that strengthens the ethical, theological and relational lives of congregants deepens Christian discipleship and leadership. Preaching by a professional minister or by lay people can be empowering for those who hear and those who preach.

Faith formation that empowers. Other means of faith formation through study groups, women’s groups, prayer and discussion groups, justice and advocacy groups help

to deepen the connection between the congregation's rootedness in faith and its mission and ministries. Not only does this ensure that Christian disciples are nurtured but that the congregation as a whole remembers its mission and identity. As one participant observed, "Rooting our lives in the gospel of Jesus Christ ensures that we will never become a social club masquerading as a church."

Leadership is empowered as people deepen their understanding of Jesus' message of love and justice and as they feel God's Spirit moving them to awareness and action in their own context. Leadership is also empowered as individuals realize more loving relationships and more healthy choices for their lives. For one woman, faithfulness meant "a deepening of our spiritual maturity. Our life together is a journey of deepening faith and increasing joy as we leave behind some of the unhealthy beliefs and guilt of earlier times."

The cycle of nurture and leadership was explained by one participant who said that congregations are "people, committed to Christ, coming together in community, to be nurtured and challenged in our faith, that we might live that faith in meaningful and helpful ways everywhere." One member of Norval United also expressed the connection between faith nurture and faithful Christian living:

Everything hinges on our faith. Our core value of 'spiritual growth' says: 'We are not a social club or a service organization, even though fellowship and service are important to us. More important is our desire to grow spiritually. Through worship, prayer, study, service and action we experience transformed lives by the renewing power of God's Spirit. This enriches our lives and leads us to be an example to others. We believe everyone is on a spiritual journey and our hope is that wherever someone is on their journey Norval United will be a place where spiritual growth happens.'

Leaders are empowered as people are encouraged to seek connections between their lives and the issues of the world. Comments from one participant revealed a hunger

for “deepening our sense of connection to the larger whole and finding our place within it.” People seemed to feel a sense of purpose aligned with God’s purpose or mission. Participants felt empowered in the knowledge that their ministries were part of a larger whole, mending the world, in partnership with God and others. The church then serves to respond to people’s yearning for integrity and wholeness in living their lives sustainably and in living respectfully as part of creation. One participant noted:

Whether it’s big or small, I think you’ve got to feel that in your church you are doing what God is calling you to do. The church is moving toward what you feel you should be doing. ...There is enormous pressure on everybody and I feel it because we are in such a consumerist society.

Using gifts. Sharing leadership, by helping people use their spiritual gifts, arises from a sense of hospitality that recognizes the Spirit eagerly waiting to be manifested in all. As expressed by one respondent, “Trust and safety in the faith community allows us to be more authentically ourselves.” Youth participants agreed that, “opportunities for leadership help us grow,” and that:

The warm reception of my talent by the congregation further inspired me to develop as a musician. I suppose you could consider the friendliness and warmth of the congregation to be a catalyst for my developing talents.

Some of these congregations are very conscious of inviting people into leadership who might be marginalized. They are intentional about examining their own practices for signs of discrimination or bias. An Ebenezer United participant remembered a key incident in that congregation’s growing awareness of racism as a block to leadership. He remembered “... sitting around the board table when it was all white – trying to figure out what it was that we were doing which was discouraging visible minorities from stepping forward.”

As members participate and use their gifts in the life of the church, everyone benefits and the community is transformed. One congregation, who encouraged a resident artist to design their bulletins, believes they are “learning to think visually and symbolically.” Another participant agreed that when members speak and share their lives in small groups and in worship “you are hearing everybody’s opinions and thoughts and there is definitely growth in the community. The welcoming attitude of the church helps.” Being welcomed to participate, to offer gifts and serve, all help to empower leaders and strengthen the ministries of congregations.

For newcomers, a sense of belonging in the congregations is connected to their sense of opportunity for and empowerment for ministry. Laurene Beth Bowers observes that belonging has several stages:

The third phase (relates to)...a visitor who continues to attend and wants to become an active church member. This phase has almost nothing to do with how much they like the minister, enjoy the church service, or come to experience the Trinity. It has everything to do with whether there is a space for them within the church. If the perception is that there is nothing to do, no opportunities for ministry and mission, and that the power is held by few individuals and not shared evenly, the visitor will not likely continue attending the church.¹⁹⁵

People in some of these congregations have had to take risks and experiment with their untried leadership gifts when challenges arose. The combination of need and encouragement, permission-giving practices and faith, empowered leaders to rise up and claim their gifts for the sake of the community. Through the nurture of spiritual gifts, these congregations named themselves as stronger, faithful, and more alive. The maturity and sustainability of Christian community depends upon people using their gifts and welcoming the gifts of others. One research participant from DCH reflected on members’ attitudes after the death of their minister. She thought that the congregation “pulls

¹⁹⁵ Bowers, 40.

together and sees the gifts in each other. I think we see the strength that is in the whole rather than in the sum of the individuals. We grieved the loss of that minister, but we also knew that as a congregation we would go forward.”

Congregations empower leadership through a combination of loving relationships, taking risks, and radical hospitality. When this leadership is activated, wondrous, varied and surprising expressions of ministry unfold. As one Sarawak participant explained:

It’s Marg’s weekly sharing of art - her artistic expression of the lectionary passages on the front of our bulletin cover. It’s Sue’s attention to detail, and Wendy’s gentle reaching out. It’s Brian’s concern and passion for human rights, and due process, and civil engagement, and his invitation to support a transgendered person who needs financial help to complete his physical transition now that the surgery has been de-listed from the Ontario Health Insurance Plan. It’s Mary, seventy-five years young in our congregation, standing on a ladder as part of our Good Friday service...

Although not noted in these researched congregations, sometimes churches have a hard time releasing the gifts of their members. In *Jacob’s Blessing*, Donna Sinclair responds to the accusation that churches don’t demand enough of their people. She goes on to observe that:

... too often we beg their time and energy simply to maintain the institution. But we don’t offer them mission... if they have a sense of mission, people will no longer experience committees and board work as time wasted – rather, they will welcome meetings as a means of developing strategies to carry out that mission.¹⁹⁶

Ministry personnel. Ministry personnel in these congregations play a key role in modeling and nurturing an empowering leadership style. Relationships between ministry personnel and members are loving and strong and it is often through a sense of friendship that they can encourage members to take risks, to develop their gifts, and use them for ministry. Commitment to ministry and faithful living by ministry personnel often inspires

¹⁹⁶ Sinclair and White, 40.

others to follow. Their willingness to “share the spotlight” and understand their own ministry role as “equipping the saints for leadership” empowers others. It also opens the church up to a greater variety and depth of leadership overall. A Collier St. United participant, speaking about one of their ministers asking for volunteers, explained that “you say ‘Yes’ because you really respect those people and what they are doing and saying.” One clergy person reflected that:

I think the way you get things done initially is to establish friendship. The minister is a good friend, good friends with lots of people. So you establish friendship, you don’t come in with an agenda that I’m going to change this and I’m going to shake the world...So I think you establish your friendships, you lead by example and then when you make the approach, or talk about the possibilities, you have people who are not only friends with you, but who care about the church. They are more likely to say ‘Yes’ because they know they are going to be working with you and that is undeniable.

Comments from participants on the character and personalities of ministry personnel were highly complimentary. These ministers are not afraid to take chances and try new things. They feel empowered within their congregations and are empowering of others. They seem, thankfully, without large ego needs, and are artful at managing people and dealing with conflict. As one clergy person responded, “You know you have to try new things and go with the beat too and not be too personal about it.”

Participants are grateful that their ministry personnel are highly competent, hard-working, approachable and committed to the Christian life. This seems to make working and learning with them a joy and a privilege. One Heritage United respondent wrote that, “We have a pastor that can relate to the congregation and works hard to keep all parties interested in the many facets of Christian life.”

Respondents appreciated their ministers’ dynamism and creativity that, as one participant noted, “inject lots of energy and liveliness into worship services.” Ministry

personnel are valued as enthusiastic and diligent *worker/leaders* encouraging and helping congregations to be faithful and lively. Often the qualities of the minister rub off on the congregation. One respondent observed that “we have a younger, high energy minister who, herself, has become known as “lively” hence, I believe that same label attaches to our congregation.”

These faithful and lively congregations empower the leadership of new members, of people of all ages, stages and situations through their radical welcoming, their loving and encouraging relationships, through their open attitude of permission-giving, through faith and spiritual nurture, and their willingness to risk. Ministry personnel play a key role in modeling and nurturing these open attitudes in the congregation. Their leadership in study groups, in worship, decision-making processes, and in building healthy community relationships, helps to reinforce the ethos of openness already present in these congregations.

Empowered for mission. Catechesis, the passing on of the story of God’s liberating actions in history and in our own lives, needs to be central to empowering Christian leaders. Leadership then moves from a focus on management of the structures and systems of the church to an emphasis on using those structures and systems for liberative purposes in society. The gospel perspective may then inform and compel members to see the church’s mission as about being ethically involved in the world. Empowering leadership involves challenging Christians to not only encourage and equip each other for their own sakes, or for the sake of the viability of the church, but for the sake of the world so desperately in need of mending.

Justice-Making: Open to the Wounded and the World

The final defining trait of these faithful and lively congregations is their openness to the wounded and the world which I call *justice-making*. In these congregations this entails openness to other's realities whether personal, social or political for the sake of right relationships, reconciliation, environmental sustainability and peace. It involves activities that range from organizing food banks, and Out of the Cold programs for homeless people, to leading programs for differently-abled adults and children, to supporting local families in need, visiting the elderly, frail, and bereaved, to participating in global immersion experiences, creating anti-racism policies and supporting the Mission and Service Fund and its work in Canada and around the world.

From charity to justice. Across a spectrum these actions and commitments move from service, to outreach, to advocacy and action for social and global justice. Some congregations participate quite intentionally in all the areas named. Some only participate in actions I would term as *outreach* and *pastoral care* – activities that bind up the broken-hearted but that don't examine or seek to redress or transform the systems and structures that break people in the first place.

As a church we know we are called by the Hebrew prophets to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Jesus spells it out that God wants us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and free the oppressed (Matt. 25). He tells many parables that describe the kingdom we are to be building with God. How seriously we understand this mandate affects our mission as church and our view of the purpose of the church.

In her research, Bass found that thriving congregations had “started with a theological vision of God’s reign, found their strength in spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship, and embarked on public involvement from a distinctly Christian sense of identity.”¹⁹⁷

One of our growing edges as UCC congregations has to do with using the language and understanding the meaning of *justice*. These churches have no trouble with the language of *outreach* and *compassion* but sometimes lack a deeper commitment to changing root causes. For some congregations, this can result in a concentration on charity work which, while filling an immediate need, fails to address these root causes. Sometimes the church in failing to ask deeper questions perpetuates unjust systems unknowingly. Sometimes people lack faith reasons to take this kind of action.

However, all these congregations exhibit practices and programs that, at some level, do challenge social systems, including those of the church, that have led to injustice for groups of people. One of the most obvious ways these congregations work for justice is in their commitment to inclusivity within their congregations. This radical welcoming, that I have discussed earlier, itself a commitment to justice, also acts as a leavening in the congregation and a way that, intentionally or not, ethnic majority privileged members encounter people whose lives may be very different from their own. In welcoming the stranger, we open the door, even unaware, for Jesus to enter. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in her chapter, “Being Church in the 21st Century: A Mujerista Perspective,” sends a strong message that the church must re-conceptualize differences as rich diversity. When we can celebrate our differences, we are doing justice, she says.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Bass, 259.

¹⁹⁸ Isasi-Diaz, 39.

Stories from congregations like Ebenezer United, and Trinity-St. Paul's point to God's Spirit surprising them with wisdom, once they opened their doors, their structures, and relationships to those who were *other* in some way. Sometimes those others come from different ethnic groups, from different denominations and faiths.

Congregations like Sarawak United slowly discovered that their rural background and members' gifts and love for the beauty of nature, developed into more intentional work and commitments to environmental sustainability and health.

Norval participants recalled being part of a much wider co-operative venture with other United churches across Canada several years ago when a drought hit the prairies.

One participant told this story:

A 'big' project that comes to mind was our co-ordination of Hay West. Everyone in our congregation got involved. United Church members from across Canada sent letters of support/donations...lives *were* changed through God's love. The lives of those at Norval United who worked on this project were changed. The lives of farmers in the West were changed. The lives of those who helped with financial assistance were changed. We were able to show that God's abundant love for us is shared with others.

Reaching beyond themselves changed and is changing all these congregations.

These stories form the bones of their identity as faithful and lively congregations.

Justice and power. Another area where justice-making has emerged in our congregations is in the area of decision-making and leadership. No longer does a select group make the critical decisions of a congregation when all voices need to be heard. Even with Board and committee leadership, consultations and consensus-making are the norm. I did not find small groups of powerful gate-keepers, or founding families blocking full and open discussion and visioning in these congregations. Power, and how it is

shared, is at the heart of justice-making. When congregations practise sharing power, then justice is served.

Similarly there was strong evidence that the participation of women was accepted and celebrated at all levels of participation and decision-making. Women ministry personnel were well loved, appreciated and integrated into the life of the congregation as were men. Gays and lesbians too, in the group of congregations I interviewed, were evident in all these congregations and in some as ministry personnel. The movement for some of these congregations over the last twenty years has been enormous. Struggles around same-sex marriage are in still in process or have been resolved with equanimity. These are major celebrations.

Congregations that have intentionally decided to use inclusive language or become Affirming (to GLBT people) congregations have also taken risks. These decisions required congregational education and theological reflection over several months and years. These actions for justice grow out of progressive and ongoing engagement in faith formation. Theological and biblical reflection, social analysis and education, and accountability structures for congregational discipleship serve to lay the groundwork. Congregations like Ebenezer United, who have intentionally looked at ways their structures have impeded or encouraged the leadership of ethnic minority peoples in the congregation, have had to struggle for their awakenings.

Through partnerships in their local communities, congregations are sharing their expertise, their time and energy with others groups and individuals to build safer, healthier and more sustainable communities. They are also learning from these

partnerships that humility is a trait the church must learn if it is to be effective in working with others for change.

Global immersion and local action. Some congregations learn from their own members, or visiting overseas personnel, who are involved in justice-making projects or who visit or work in two-third world countries. These people then help the congregation raise its consciousness about the realities of power and resource imbalances around the world. They also remind congregations about injustice and oppression in our own country.

Youth groups such as Ebenezer's researched and promoted initiatives to overcome HIV/AIDS in Africa helping to raise money and consciousness in the congregation and community. Trinity-St. Paul's youth group traveled to Chiapas, Mexico to learn and bring back hope in the long struggle for justice. Their visit and its follow-up are acts of solidarity with a struggling people. In the process those youth and the congregation itself are changed, energized, converted more deeply to the gospel of love. One minister at Trinity-St. Paul's commented:

Some of the greatest liveliness in the congregation in the last few years has been the youth focus of preparing for their learning and exposure to different kinds of international experiences. That has drawn in the congregation in very, very significant ways in terms of participation, contribution, and then to hear those stories when they come back. .. Three congregations (will be) brought together by the youth here to listen to the stories of an amazing experience in a very struggling Indigenous context in another part of the world. That's liveliness; it's also faithfulness – it's trying to live out the gospel in terms of solidarity and I think the youth are great.

A few churches take risks and experiment when it comes to living out their mission in the areas of social justice and public witness, although this is an area where most congregations admit they could do more. Sometimes this involves re-working

congregational policies against racism for instance, or boldly declaring a position for justice. In the last few years, Trinity-St. Paul's has started to proclaim its commitment to peace and justice through mounting, on the outside of the building, a series of large banners containing prophetic biblical verses. Heritage United has developed a policy and practice of recycling at their church events that has been taken up by the community.

Denominational commitments. Through the United Church of Canada and its support of the Mission and Service Fund, all these congregations indirectly support justice-making coalitions, ministries and partnerships around the world that promote the rights of women, justice for First Nations peoples, HIV/AIDS action, environmental justice and the end to war and violence. Some parallel this work with education and advocacy work in their own congregations.

Often, the impetus for prophetic and political action comes from the national UCC. Educational resources and action campaigns initiated by the national church motivate congregations to study current issues and to take local and global action in solidarity with oppressed groups. As one participant noted, "I also think the UCC itself, as much as it is criticized, has pushed congregations just because of the kind of issues that they take on and then it comes down to a local congregation. If you want to be part of it, you get involved." So, the denomination itself encourages risk taking for the sake of justice in society and tries to motivate congregations through research and tools for consciousness raising and advocacy.

The national church clearly names God's work in the world as a priority for our congregations as stated in the UCC document, "Mending the World". This report urges the churches to join with people of goodwill, whether they are Christian, religious, or not,

to work for justice. It warns that “the chief ecumenical scandal of our time is not the disunity of the church. Rather it is the institutional preoccupation of the church in the face of the suffering of the world.”¹⁹⁹

Notable in all the congregations studied is the fact that they have strong relationships with the denomination – through the work of its national office, through the Mission and Service Fund (M&S Fund), and other fund-raising projects, such as the Beads of Hope campaign, and through Presbytery and Conference. These congregations are strong supporters of the Mission and Service Fund and are among the most generous givers in the Conference. They seem to have developed an intentional and positive connection, understanding, and commitment to the larger church and the work that it does nationally and internationally. Congregations reported being active in their presbyteries and Conference. Some noted and appreciated the General Council of the UCC as it has played a prophetic role by being a catalyst for social change in congregations.

By being good contributors to the M&S Fund, these congregations appear to assent to the justice commitments of the UCC on social and global issues in relation to such issues as Middle East peace, fair trade, Indian residential schools, global partnerships, and environmental action. One participant observed that, “Our outreach projects are always well supported and we always go over our M & S target (even though we raise that target every year).” Participants named this desire and ability to help out in the community and around the world as important to their living out their ministry and mission faithfully. Many congregations see the work of the M&S Fund as an extension of their own work of outreach and justice-making in their community. Another respondent

¹⁹⁹ UCC, "Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation," (Toronto, Canada: The United Church of Canada, 1997), 198.

said, “Our congregation contributes to the community and the world through the Mission and Service fund, working with partners around the world to provide programs to those in need.”

Social justice. Despite the plethora of outreach activities reported on the response forms, and the long history of UCC involvement and advocacy for social and global justice, only four congregations reported social justice work and named it as such. Those who named justice-making as integral to their ministry mentioned such activities as consciousness raising, lobbying and activism around native issues, homelessness and poverty, women's issues, HIV/AIDS, anti-racism, same sex marriage and others.

Some congregations did not use the term *social justice* or *justice*, yet noted projects such as ventures to increase affordable housing in the community, that show actions of a justice nature. The language of *outreach*, *faith in action*, or *making a difference*, was much preferred to that of *justice-making*.

Many participants seem unaware of the structural and systemic roots of the outreach work in which they're engaged. Critical social analysis seems lacking. However, efforts to be diverse communities of welcome, compassion and love, can be seen as the practical building blocks of justice and love in all these congregations.

A sense of living out the intention of the UCC's “Mending the World” document is evident as congregations partner with all those who seek to bind up the brokenhearted, clothe the naked, and free the oppressed. One ministry personnel put it this way:

We are not only the church here present on this corner for ourselves. We are very much present being a church in the city that cares about the well being of this Big Community not just our own community. That's why we are on the street about homelessness or some of these justice issues. I mean we don't go and do that for the good of our health in the dead of winter. That solid commitment is for both the community in here and out there.

A call to discipleship. These congregations offer models of engagement, outreach, and justice-making that not only affect the quality of life in the wider community, but sustain, nurture and challenge the faithfulness and liveliness of these congregations themselves. The sense of flow in and out from community of faith to wider community keeps congregations accountable to God’s mission and enlivens their spirits. One member of North Bramalea United said that “by being a welcoming, involved church we remain as a faithful and lively congregation. It is how we do that which is important to me. Without being faithful and lively, we reduce in number and involvement.”

As these congregations vision their futures, they consider the call to be just and loving within their communities, but they also struggle with the tension between growth and faithfulness. Always the dilemma is posed. Is the mission of the church to grow and become a visible sign of the kin-dom or to help build the kin-dom in the world? Perhaps the answer is “both” and therefore requires vigilance and discernment in holding this important tension in place.

J. Denny Weaver summarizes the call to discipleship, and justice-making as part of Christian mission:

Being a disciple of Jesus thus means living in relationship - a relationship with Jesus as well as relationships with others who are also disciples of Jesus. Jesus’ teaching - which dealt with the treatment of poor people, sick people, Samaritans, and women – involved both social issues and personal relationships. Moreover it supplied resistance strategies by means of which people without power could turn the tables nonviolently on military occupiers and oppressors. In Jesus’ life and teaching, we see the beginning of a social movement that received specific visibility when Jesus called his disciples to follow him. Later, Jesus sent these same disciples into the world to invite others into a community whose primary function was to make visible the rule of God on earth.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Weaver, 50, 51.

Talking Back to Tradition

As discussed above, five traits have emerged as key to the faithfulness and liveliness of nine Toronto Conference congregations; Radical Welcoming; Risk-taking; Empowering Leadership; Loving; and Justice-making. These traits arise from seven important areas of ministry named by participants: Relationships in the Faith Community; Meeting Challenges; Connections with the Wider Community; Worship; Spiritual and Faith Growth; History and Heritage; and Leadership. Like the early church, Toronto Conference congregations seek to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus in a variety of ways. How do these areas relate to the church's traditional understanding of ministry functions?

The Classic Functions of Ministry

Working with the tradition of the Christian church and the book of Acts, Maria Harris explains that the early church sought to live by the gospel and make a difference in the world understanding itself as a people with a mission.²⁰¹ Members of the early church felt that God's mission called them, like Jesus, into service in the world. Harris defines the pastoral vocation generally as caring for ourselves, each other, and the earth. In more specific form that service was realized in ministries meant to reveal God's caring presence in the world and to continue the priestly, prophetic and political aspects of Jesus' vocation.²⁰²

Harris names five functions of ministry - *koinonia*, *leiturgia*, *didache*, *kerygma* and *diakonia* – that appear in the roots of Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. She

²⁰¹ Harris, 24.

²⁰² Ibid., 25.

calls the subject matter and processes involved in living out these ministries the *curriculum* of the church. *Education* comprises the shaping and re-shaping of these elements over the years.²⁰³

The seven areas of ministry named as important by faithful and lively congregations in the research correspond strongly with early church ministries. *Koinonia*, or the ministry of community, is described as a communion based in love healing divisions, overcoming brokenness, and achieving wholeness. The church is meant to be a community of people, rooted and grounded in the love of Jesus.²⁰⁴ In my research, the area of *Relationships in the Faith Community* seemed to express many of the ministries of caring, compassion, welcoming and healing that is understood as *koinonia*. This fulfills the pastoral role of service imitating Jesus as healer, binder of the broken, and community builder.

Leiturgia, with its emphasis on worship and prayer both personal as well as corporate, corresponds with the *Worship* area of ministry named as one of the most important aspects of ministry in Toronto Conference congregations. Here the focus is on blessing and developing the spiritual life of the people and their relationship with God.

The area of *Spiritual and Faith Nurture* parallels the early church function of *didache* – teaching, catechesis, preaching and raising questions.²⁰⁵ Bible Study groups, reflection and discussion groups, and prayer and healing groups in congregations encourage members to reflect on their lives, on scripture and on the world to discover the good news of Christ emerging. Preaching can also serve this teaching function as well. There is political power in this area of faith nurture when the issues of the world meet the

²⁰³ Ibid., 64.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 77.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 110.

lessons of scripture. Faith nurture is not neutral. It involves questioning and discussion not just for the sake of intellectual development but in order to seek the gospel for our time and motivate communities to act for justice.

Kerygma involves proclaiming the saving story of Jesus - his life, death and resurrection and the saving/liberating word of God for all people. This is the prophetic word of justice that comes through preaching, advocacy and theology.²⁰⁶ *Worship* with its strong emphasis on preaching and *Connections with the Wider Community* are the two areas touched by this function. When congregations work intentionally to bring about justice, this kind of prophetic word and public witness motivate and give passion to the cause. In my research, good preaching was evident in all congregations that proclaimed the good news of Jesus at a personal and interpersonal level. However, only in some congregations was there evidence that this message was one of social liberation and the need for public advocacy. The lack of faith and justice language in participants' responses may indicate a lack of rootedness in the social or political gospel.

In *Connections with the Wider Community*, *diakonia*, or loving service to our neighbours, is lived out through many congregational activities and community work. This is a ministry of compassion and certainly these congregations are very well involved in offering support, kindness, and practical help to many in their communities and beyond. According to Harris this function of *diakonia* involves both compassionate ministry to individuals but also structural responses to oppression through the

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 127.

transformation of unjust systems.²⁰⁷ Outreach and service activities mostly focused on charity vastly outnumbered what I would call *justice-making initiatives*.

The area of *Leadership* acknowledges the role of educators, preachers and lay leaders in motivating and helping sustain the congregation's commitment to these five functions of ministry. For leaders to be effective and liberating in their methods and intent, they must have a clear sense of the gospel experienced in community, blessed in prayer, discussed and questioned, proclaimed as liberative, and acted on through service to the world.

Other important areas named in the research such as *History and Heritage*, and *Meeting Challenges* reveal the living out of these five historic functions of ministry over time in congregational life and through difficult periods of stress and change. Congregational identity and ethos have been formed around memories of the past - stories of faithfulness throughout denominational and Christian history. Members re-member themselves to Christ in baptism and communion.

Perhaps re-membering needs also to be added as another critical function of the church. Attention to knowing the gospel story of Jesus is critical. Re-membering is like knowing the members and history of our families and therefore having an idea of who we are, what is expected, how things are done, and why they have changed over the years. Remembering the heritage of a congregation can serve to iterate and re-iterate values, commitments, and ongoing struggles for justice that serve to orient newcomers, as well as long time members, to the ethos of the church. Through *re-membering* and *remembering* we learn how challenges were met in the past and gain courage and conviction for living

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 148.

out our faith in the present.

History often serves as a good grounding for these congregations but what inspires them to keep learning, growing and critiquing themselves? I believe that the gospel experienced and God's mission embraced through the five historic functions of the church pull congregations forward. Education for Harris is the key to constantly transforming how the church adjusts, adapts and sharpens its message, its ministry, its service to the context within which it finds itself. Learning can occur through relationships, through service and action, through study, prayer and worship and through meeting challenges. The motivation for spirit-led learning arises from problems and challenges in the congregation, the presence of 'strangers,' the threat to survival, or the awareness of our limited apprehension of God's justice/love in our context.

The Classic Marks of the Church

As the seven important areas of ministry named in the research resonate with the classic functions of the church, the overall theme of openness also speaks to the classic marks or signs of the church. As Jurgen Moltmann explained them, these marks are more about offering the possibilities and hopes for the church than describing its reality at any given moment. These are the qualities to which the church should aspire if it is to embody the presence of Christ within itself and its ministries. Both Harris and Moltmann are careful to remind Christian readers that in looking for marks, signs or essential functions, we must not mistake the church for the kingdom.

In the classic marks, *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic* are the terms used to describe the activity of Christ on the church. Moltmann reminds the reader that these are

not meant to be viewed as qualities of members or rituals of the church. He says they are statements of faith and hope that lead to statements of action.²⁰⁸

For each of the marks there is an action or task that Moltmann pairs with it that describes the dynamic nature and purpose of the church's existence. Under *one*, Moltmann suggests *uniting* as the verb. He describes this in relation to uniting different people held together in love allowing for diversity and differences of gifts, economic situation, culture, strengths and weaknesses.²⁰⁹ The essential symbol of this mark is Christ's table of communion and welcome. This uniting task is also evident in works for peace and justice.

In my research, this uniting task shows through in the inclusivity and radical hospitality of congregations. In as much as congregations seek to be uniting in their wider communities and in the world, through actions of justice-making, this task is also lived out. Christ motivates the people of the church to be inclusive in their love for all. Christ's presence is experienced in the diversity of our communities. The joy, appreciation and celebration evident in these diverse congregations is largely due to intentional efforts to be loving, accepting and non-judgmental across differences. For the congregations researched, that practice of radical hospitality results in excitement, growth and spiritual maturity.

To be *catholic* is to be comprehensive, Moltmann says, with a universal mission and hope for all people.²¹⁰ Catholicity involves *mission* – bringing about God's kingdom, and *salvation* - liberation for all. This realized eschatology is directed to the whole of

²⁰⁸ Moltmann, 340.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 342,3.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 350.

God's people and the earth itself. It is not about bringing everyone to Christ or having everyone join the church. It is about building a place where those who plant will reap what they sow; where the lion will lie down with the lamb. The centrality of God's mission of justice and peace is outwardly focused. This mission is the *raison d'être* of the church's existence and salvation/liberation for all is the way to achieve it.

This is the justice-making work of our congregations committed to local and global partnerships that bring both hope and help. It is outreach in communities that involves social service and justice activities. Sharing God's love then, for congregations, is not so much signing people up for church, but living with equity, with compassion, and for justice. These justice-making congregations are engaged in mending the world and operate with flexible boundaries and identities. There is a tension here with some in the wider church who may interpret the universal mission as a colonizing practice of proselytism. Certainly some churches today still enter two-third world countries with a *mission* to convert peoples there to Christianity or tie aid to *saving souls*. This mark of the church has been misinterpreted over the years to favour the building up of religion and the church.

From my research, faithful and lively congregations are outward looking and see God's mission as directed toward the common good of all the earth's peoples, creatures and the earth itself. Living into this large vision and mission is sometimes difficult as it can appear overwhelming. Discerning the Spirit's movement in the church helps people to work locally while thinking globally.

Sanctifying is the action Moltmann names as corresponding to the mark of

holiness. In Toronto Conference congregations, an openness to journeying with friends, neighbours, and strangers brings people of faith into contact with the flawed and sinful aspects of their living together. The church is blessed in its devotion to the humble ones through outreach and political action. Through binding up the broken in ministries with the elderly, with the differently abled, with homeless people, with the sick and lonely, with new immigrants, gays and lesbians, and First Nations peoples, our congregations are blessed.

Education about racism, sexism and colonialism, and advocacy on behalf of those that are subjects of colonialism are aspects of this mark which force white ethnic majority peoples and a predominantly white ethnic majority church to rethink *evangelism, mission* and *gospel*. For Moltmann, sanctifying imitates Christ's devotion to the humble ones in society and his liberating actions on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.²¹¹

Acknowledging our sin in relation to First Nations peoples, and to colonized peoples everywhere, the church today struggles to repent in a deep and meaningful way. Humility and self-critique are at the heart of this mark and also undergird both the loving relationships and the justice-making activities of present congregations who trust in God to forgive them and teach them the way forward.

The final mark, *apostolic*, signifies the action of *commissioning* according to Moltmann. It is important to note, says Moltmann, that commissioning is not a characteristic of God's *eschaton* but it is a route to arriving there. He says:

We can therefore say that the historical church will be the one, holy, catholic church through the apostolic witness of Christ, and in carrying out that witness; whereas the church glorified in the kingdom of God is the one, holy and catholic

²¹¹ Ibid., 353.

church, through fulfillment of its apostolate.²¹²

Empowering leaders who are rooted in the gospel is the route to the church fulfilling God's mission of building the kingdom on earth. Gifts are nurtured and celebrated, and people are willing to risk experimenting with new forms of worship, education and outreach.

The apostolic task is to educate and form Christians so passionate about the gospel and so clear about the broken yet hopeful reality of the world and the church, that they are motivated to listen, to heal, to confront powers, and to seek justice everywhere. Like true missionaries who know their purpose is God's mission, they seek a world where life is abundant for all. The church then does not seek to replicate its own form but to bring about a new heaven and earth with partners of common vision everywhere. The form of these ventures will vary. Moltmann notes that "Something new, individual and independent is always springing up,"²¹³ and we are wise to let the Spirit lead us in this. The openness of the churches I researched is a sign of the flexibility and willingness to risk as ministries evolve and die, flourish and thrive. The church, then, through a continuous process of commissioning and empowering its people, "actualizes its eschatological hope and becomes assured of its own messianic mission."²¹⁴

Key traits found in faithful and lively Toronto Conference congregations correspond well with the traditional marks of the church. *One, holy, and catholic* are the ultimate signs of Christ's presence which we seek in the church through the actions that are uniting, sanctifying, and comprehensive. *Radical Welcoming, Loving, and Justice-making* are the newer words that echo similar meanings. Like the ancient church,

²¹² Ibid., 358.

²¹³ Ibid., 360.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 359.

congregations today still seek to live out God's mission through including all; through loving enough to repent and forgive; through trying to make a difference for justice and peace in the world.

To be apostolic is to continually seek to empower each other to live into God's mission through education and action that is focused on the promise of the coming kingdom. Risk-taking rooted in the gospel falls within the mark of apostolicity. It is a sign that the Spirit is informing the church and challenging it to do new things that promote a uniting, comprehensive and sanctifying vision.

Openness as an overarching pattern in these Toronto Conference congregations is consistent, I think, with the breadth and responsiveness implied in the classical marks. The church open to the world in love and justice, is the church that best emulates the life of Jesus in our time. The tension in that openness is to be grounded in God's mission and clear about what the gospel means in our day.

Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Ecclesiology

What is the gospel and how is it lived? The good news of abundant life for all shifts radically with the discovery of the church's complicity in oppression and persecution. It shifts as people of faith discover their power and privilege or lack of it, and are able to investigate the social, economic and political causes of poverty, racism, hetero-sexism, empire. It shifts as people mature as Christians and are able to choose new ways of living with integrity.

Like other postcolonial feminists, I find that defining what the gospel means in an era of empire is much more complex than *taking Jesus as our Saviour*. To be *faithful* to

the gospel of Jesus implies much more than personal piety or a general benevolence in our communities. It has always meant social concern and advocacy for the poor and marginalized. But what does it mean in the multi-cultural, multi-faith world of empire?

Do these classical marks of the church and the key traits of faithful and lively Toronto Conference congregations sufficiently offer congregations hope to overcome oppressive attitudes and practices such as racism, sexism and colonialism from their patriarchal and imperializing past and present? How can right relations be established with First Nations peoples, other colonized peoples, and with the earth itself? What else is needed to create a postcolonial feminist ecclesiology in relation to the marks of the church?

One might ask who defines the marks of the church? From whose point of view are they determined? What would these marks look like defined by women, by marginalized peoples in our society, by colonized people and their descendants? How could the church participate in liberation/salvation from the point of view of the earth? How can the church learn to be less of a collaborator with patriarchy and empire and more of a resistor to death dealing systems and structures?

Postcolonial feminist theologians use a contextual approach to help sharpen the church's understanding of the marks of the church. They express their hopes for the church through new perspectives and critique. Letty Russell in *The Church With AIDS*, declares that what is most important about the marks of the church is not how they define the church, but how they are used and practiced.²¹⁵ The distinguishing traits discovered in my research are expressed in 'doing' words - risk-taking, radical welcoming, loving, empowering leadership, and justice-making. Perhaps this is because the UCC tends to be

²¹⁵ Russell, ed., *The Church with Aids: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, 142.

a *doing* church. How well this doing is related to mission and gospel is part of the critique that postcolonial feminists bring.

As Letty Russell reviews the classical marks of the church, she stresses that, for feminists, “Unity includes action for justice. Holiness includes the experience of shared suffering... Catholicity includes connection to the world as well as orthopraxy in service. Apostolicity includes, ‘constancy in advocacy for justice.’”²¹⁶ Her emphasis on justice is unmistakable. Although justice-making is one trait of the faithful and lively congregations I studied, it does not take the prominence in church life that Russell advocates.

Robert J. Shreiter, examining the role of the Church in the AIDS crisis, also asks questions that change the perspective of the marks of the church to focus on the challenges and struggles to bring justice, peace, healing for those who are alienated and marginalized in our society and world. How, he asks, can the marks of the church help point the church to its critical saving and prophetic role in our world today? He points out that the mark of *unity* needs to be understood “along the boundaries that are redrawn in situations of struggle and to see how that redrawing of boundaries changes the experience and understanding of the church.”²¹⁷

Unity then becomes determined from the point of view of those on the margins. This change of perspective makes more obvious the challenges for Toronto Conference congregations in really living into unity that is accountable to the socially alienated and oppressed. For many of these congregations studied, though, identity is flexible and

²¹⁶ Ibid., 132.

²¹⁷ Robert J. Schreiter, "Marks of the Church in Times of Transformation," in *The Church with Aids: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Louisville, USA: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 128.

strongly influenced by those on the edge. Unity includes those in the neighbourhood, the differently-abled, the homeless, people of colour, the widowed and the immigrant. There is a sense that these congregations include and are changed by their relationships with people on the margins of society and on the margins of the church. *Church* takes on multiple meanings that encircle the ongoing challenge of being open to the hurts and injustices of society. As Letty Russell says, “the test of how well the church lives out its witness to unity in Christ is how well it breaks down barriers at points where people are being excluded.”²¹⁸ Intentionality is needed to see radical welcoming as the focus of mission.

For Toronto Conference congregations in the research study, openness to the other, what I have named as radical welcoming and inclusivity, is one distinguishing trait. Congregations understood their breadth of welcome as including the marginalized and engaging with them in leadership. It seemed that even though these congregations struggled with difference at times, they could understand the basic call to be welcoming. In fact, hospitality was a concept that many understood from years of church teas, neighbourliness, and work in the community. Radical welcoming is connected with inclusivity and justice-making, traits these congregations exhibited but may not proactively engage in their communities. They may prefer to seek to welcome from a place of familiarity and safety rather than from the margins. Welcoming those who have already decided to come in to the church building is quite different from welcoming those on the streets to be church where they are. Interestingly, in one church, members warmly welcomed a lesbian couple into community despite that same congregation’s ongoing conflicted response to gay marriage. Their actions spoke louder than words and perhaps

²¹⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 133.

even louder than their theological concepts could frame.

As an action for justice and love, these congregations are acting themselves into new realities. My hope is that their theologies will eventually catch up. Without reflection and self-examination on their actions and the gospel, however, conflicts may continue. At the base of many ethical issues in the church are beliefs and doctrines rooted in people's minds from Sunday School days and popular culture. Until these theologies are re-examined, old theological messages will inform actions and lead to moral and intellectual disputes.

The reality of our multi-cultural and multi-faith society in Canada is already pressing at our church doors with people seeking multi-faith marriages, looking for multiple experiences of faith, joining as partners in justice work in communities. It is changing the way we understand ourselves as *church*, and as *members*. It is stretching our hospitality and our ability to speak and explain ourselves as Christians.

Justice-making for many congregations is part of the welcoming and inclusivity already discussed, but it also involves an openness and compassion for the marginalized in the world with actions ranging from service and outreach in communities to political advocacy and solidarity around the world. The mark of catholicity, according to Schreiter, challenges churches to live in solidarity with those on the margins of society not merely to speak about the wideness of geographic extent or membership.²¹⁹ Again, keeping our eyes on the purpose of the church – of building the kin-dom, not the church – is paramount. So much emphasis is placed on life in the congregation and often justice work

is seen as the interest of a few stalwart souls, not central to the mission and life of the

²¹⁹ Schreiter, 131.

church.

A Canadian postcolonial feminist theologian, Denise Nadeau, hopes that the church can move beyond its traditional role as white helper and examine the meaning of its own “whiteness” if the church is ever to act in real solidarity with native women, women of colour and immigrant women.²²⁰ She notes that for those who are the colonizer, there is much to be learned and changed if white supremacy is to be dismantled.²²¹ For many of these congregations, this kind of self-examination and critique is limited. Operating in a charity mode and continuing the colonial benevolence of our founding denominations, many of these congregations do not grasp the underlying colonizing practices that still govern much of the ministry and ‘mission’ in which the church is engaged. Deeply rooted practices of charity and help at a distance prevent congregations from liberating themselves.

Russell agrees with Nadeau and concludes that “the dualism between church and world...is so much a way of thought and life of the contemporary, white middle-class church in the United States that it is very difficult to learn to be a community of struggle, a community of love and justice.”²²² I think her critique applies to the Canadian church as well as many congregations neither understand nor practice an alternative Christian life way in the midst of a consumerist and globalizing society.

Some of our UCC congregations seem anachronistic in their all white membership in a multi-cultural society, and their sometimes tenacious grip on the past in terms of their

²²⁰ Nadeau, 69.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Russell, ed., *The Church with Aids: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, 144.

attitudes to sexuality, to other faiths, to the poor, to First Nations peoples, and to ethnic minority peoples. Without an openness to *the stranger* and a commitment to justice-making, the church easily becomes another source of oppression. Russell protests that many congregations collaborate with empire and patriarchy because “their lives, structures, class divisions, sexual orientation, and prejudices all reflect the culture of which they are a part rather than the new creation. All the while they refuse to be involved in social, economic, and political advocacy for justice.”²²³ Countering this, hospitality and justice-making then show potential as marks of the twenty-first century church. When they are intentionally and consciously rooted in the gospel, these Toronto Conference congregations are on the right track. However, most need to understand gospel in a more profound way.

Post-colonial feminists suggest that in an age of globalization the church must examine its patriarchal and imperialistic tendencies and learn from women who seek justice and peace across religious, ideological and racial differences. Kwok Pui-lan notes that in the fundamentalist movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, a dualistic and hierarchical relation exists between God and the world, and between men and women.”²²⁴ She goes on to say that, even so, many women join these movements. Women and men are attracted to the fundamentalist version of Christianity because it upholds traditional family values, a traditional patriarchal religion and a traditional patriarchal God in a secular age.²²⁵ However, she notes that women’s movements, such as Women in Black in Israel/Palestine, and Sri Lankan women have formed alliances for peace despite their

²²³ Russell, ed., *The Church with Aids: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*.

²²⁴ Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 208.

²²⁵ Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan, eds., *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York, USA: Routledge, 2002).

many differences. Kwok urges the church to see religion as part of culture and society “which cannot be construed as concerned only with the sacred and not with the mundane.”²²⁶

The tendency to separate spirituality from justice-making is also part of the destructive dualisms that affect the church. This tends to *domesticate* the gospel and keeps churches within the *safe* realm of offering charity without justice. Most of these congregations studied, preferred acts of charity to acts of advocacy and solidarity with socially oppressed peoples. Those few who are clearly committed to justice make no separation and preach a prophetic and radical gospel that challenges as well as sustains their efforts at building the kin-dom.

In forming communities of struggle across differences, new hope and justice can be found. As recommended in the “Mending the World” document,²²⁷ new coalitions and networks for justice can be created at the local as well as national levels of the church. In many ways that is what our ethnic minority congregations, like Toronto Chinese United, were formed to be.

Risk-taking as a trait of these faithful and lively congregations has resulted from struggles, from nurturing the gifts of all, and from an openness to the Spirit amongst them. Through experiments in worship practice, in musical styles, in church governance, and in responses of ministry in the community, these congregations are opening themselves to be changed and are welcoming the eruption of the Spirit’s new life in their midst. Grounding this risk-taking in God’s mission of justice and love allows them to use their Christian history and local heritage as springboards for inventing new forms of life-

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ UCC, “Mending the World.”

giving ministry. For postcolonial feminists, churches need to do more risking for the sake of justice – stirring up the waters and asking questions in the public arena. Only a few of these churches took the kinds of political risks that boldly proclaimed the gospel in their context. Taking stands for justice on banners, advocating for low-rental housing, marching in peace demonstrations, and publicly witnessing to our faith and gospel hope is rare in these congregations. Finding the reason and passion for this kind of risking is a challenge.

Church participants described themselves as loving and open to journeying with each other and with strangers. In many cases this was done at an individual level within the church community. But loving was also seen in the compassionate responses to neighbours in need, or to groups of people like immigrants, homeless people or differently-abled folk. For most, these situations of loving, at a social level, took the form of setting up programs, using church space, or integrating these people into the life of the congregation. Although worthy, these efforts do not change systems or counter the rule of empire.

According to Schreiter, holiness, which somewhat corresponds to the trait of loving, is assessed from the edges and not from the centre. He says that “how well the church acts at the periphery, not at its center”²²⁸ is a sign of its holiness. Schreiter also notes that the church is “recognized as holy where the spirit of prophecy is alive within it.”²²⁹ To be truly loving, congregations need to understand the social and political factors that negatively affect whole groups of people in their communities. Out of this reading of society and scripture, gospel can be imagined, prophecy spoken, and actions for justice

²²⁸ Schreiter, 129.

²²⁹ Ibid.

undertaken. However, most of the congregations studied seemed limited in their ability to undertake social and political analysis that might lead to significant strategies for justice within their communities.

For instance, churches could be more loving if they focused on the plight of aboriginal peoples in their area. First Nations women in Canada have been used and abused by empire - the empire built by white settler society and religion. White Canadians have confiscated aboriginal land, taken away aboriginal children, and denigrated aboriginal spirituality and culture. The UCC has asked congregations to speak our apology repeatedly to First Nations peoples. However, before apology, many of our congregations need to find their way back to lament, to understand the woes that led to the apology in the first place. Repentance begins by telling the truth and by recognizing that, as white Euro-Canadians, we represent the destructive colonial empire of the past and contribute to continued practices of empire.

Even though aboriginal UCC members did not accept the 1986 UCC apology, they responded through Edith Memnook:

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.²³⁰

“Partnership” and “walking hand in hand” imply right relationship, respect and love. How church members read and interpret the Bible makes a difference to this partnership. In the face of upheavals and crises, the church can find hope and salvation in God's compassion. As white Christians, claiming the role of the just victim, or

²³⁰UCC, "1988 Response to the 1986 Apology by Edith Memnook on Behalf of the A.N.C.C.," in *Residential Schools: A Vision for Reconciliation* (The United Church of Canada, 1988), 6.

personalizing the biblical message distorts faithful readings of the Bible. In this globalized world, Euro-Canadians are part of the empire. Like the prodigal son, ethnic majority people are still off having a great time, unaware of the damage of profligate ways done to themselves, to the human family, and to the earth itself. Point of view is important as scripture is approached for preaching and teaching. The question is, what will bring the privileged to the point of *metanoia*, turning around, and coming home to loving relationship with God and with the rest of the human family.

The trait of empowering leadership expresses congregational openness to the gifts of all and a belief that somehow God speaks through all voices. Many of these congregations go out of their way to include new people in worship and program leadership, and to invite them into study groups to develop their faith. Some deliberately invite those more marginalized in society into the role of theological reflector within the community. Ministry personnel are seen as friends and co-workers in building the kingdom. Attention to visioning and careful processes of decision making are also welcomed as forms of community and leadership building.

Empowering others to lead requires groundedness in the Christian tradition but an openness to the Spirit leading the church through the lives, voices and experiences of those on the edge. Continuity with tradition, implied by the mark of apostolicity, Schreiter says, must be held in tension with the liberating and renewing engagement of the church with the Spirit. The church's constancy must be to justice. Schreiter notes that "by always being at the point of discontinuity – that is, of being with those who are excluded or ignored – can the church hope to maintain fidelity to the cross and to

Christ.”²³¹

Letty Russell in her work with women and marginalized peoples sees the need for an additional mark of the church, that of ‘justice’. She feels that the church has lost touch with Christ’s promise to always be with the poor and to bring about the reign of God.²³² She says that, “The sinfulness of the church is such that a constant and equal reminder of its nature as a community of justice is crucial for its identity. This reminder needs to push all churches to constant self-critique and expansion of their understanding of justice.”²³³ As predominantly middle class and white, UCC congregations also need to critique their vision of ‘justice’ to examine the true breadth and depth of its meaning in their contexts.

Supporting the actions of loving, risk-taking, justice-making, welcoming, and empowering leadership, must be clarity of understanding about the church’s identity and purpose. Language of the faith such as *mission*, *gospel*, and *salvation* must be clearly understood within the context of a patriarchal and neo-colonial world. Rebecca Todd Peters stresses that the North American church needs to rethink the identity and meaning of the church. She says that when the church does this our images for God and our language will change. Peters believes that “justice and right relation with our neighbor are central to the Christian identity and they require a transformed ecclesiology rooted in a recognition of and respect for the "other" that transforms our understanding of mission and our understanding of the telos of the church.”²³⁴ In a time of pressure for church

²³¹ Schreiter, 132.

²³² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 135.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

²³⁴ Peters, 94.

growth, the congregations studied are at a crossroads. Some feel that to survive they must *grow the church* and use entrepreneurial methods to *get people in*. Most that have confidence in their identity and purpose keep these fears at bay. Ironically, those who are clear about mission and vision are also growing.

Like Denise Nadeau, Peters names the postcolonial challenges for the church as “making a conscious effort to identify with the oppressed” and beginning, as colonizers, “to examine and unravel the ways in which colonization has deformed our lives and the lives of the ‘other’.”²³⁵ Peters says it is easy to “ignore the voices and cries of the postcolonial subject. This is largely due to the ways we have structured our lives, our attitudes and our churches so that most people never even hear their voices.”²³⁶ She suggests this not to induce guilt, but to help churches live God's vision of right relation and justice in the world.

Peters challenges the church to move beyond its colonial heritage where personal piety and conversion are uppermost goals. Like other postcolonial feminists and liberation theologians, she calls the church “to a vision of itself as a community of believers called to promote God’s justice on earth.”²³⁷ She, like others, stresses the need to help churches understand what good news is for our day and to rethink the meaning of the Great Commission especially in the midst of empire and a multi-faith world. Some of the congregations researched still focus on personal piety and spirituality and do not hold a broader social justice vision of their mission. I suspect too that echoes of the Great Commission which include colonizing notions of evangelism, may still inform their understanding of mission. Both Peters and Marilyn Legge urge the church to rethink its

²³⁵ Ibid., 96-97.

²³⁶ Ibid., 97.

²³⁷ Ibid., 106-107.

traditional concepts of mission so that a liberative purpose undergirds all that the church does. Peters emphasizes that there is a need for:

...a new theological vision for our society ...attentive to the horrors perpetuated by our ancestors in the name of Christianity. One step toward this vision is the naming of the two important ideological/theological assumptions held by Christian colonizers: 1) that they were intellectually, morally, and culturally superior to all people not of European descent, and 2) that the primary purpose of the Christian church is "the Great Commission" (to go and make disciples of all nations). It is these two assumptions that must be excised from our worldview, if we are going to begin the process of decolonizing our minds.²³⁸

For Legge, partnership missiology, following the character of Jesus, should aim to develop long-term relationships rather than impose a dominant theology or way of living. According to Legge, this requires remaining in respectful and neutral relationship over the long haul.²³⁹ Mission then means loving and seeking God's justice with others, aiming to empower and bring life for all, rather than subduing and forming others in our own likeness. This kind of partnership requires mature self-critical dialogue if mission is to break free of patterns of domination.²⁴⁰ God's mission for the world, Legge concludes, can bring about the healing of colonizer as well as colonized through solidarity with others and the building of interdependent community based on justice/love. This goal is a challenge for churches who see themselves as assimilating newcomers. For many in these nine Toronto Conference congregations, meeting the stranger is an opportunity to be changed by the Christ in them. However, most congregations lack a postcolonial consciousness.

Douglas Hall too, in *Bound and Free*, urges us to re-examine our faith and language so that the church is operating out of a theology of the cross that recognizes the

²³⁸ Ibid., 99.

²³⁹ Legge, "Negotiating Mission," 128.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.: 129.

end of Christendom. He urges the church to empower the laity through Christian education and faith formation, and to enliven congregations by focusing on the mission of the church and living out public witness.²⁴¹

How much do the traits of Toronto Conference congregations support postcolonial feminist hopes for the church? The general attitude of openness in our congregations is surely a gift to us in this age of complexity. Radical welcoming, justice-making, loving, risk-taking, empowering leaders, as traits are all consistent with the focus on justice named by postcolonial critics. However, it is unclear how much the language of mission, and salvation is influenced by colonial theologies, which now limit our ability to live gospel with integrity. Intercultural and inter-faith realities push us in ways we have never before experienced as a church. Yet, these congregations seem to offer a radical hospitality that embraces a wide understanding of the people of God. The past sins and myopia of the church regarding First Nations people and their spirituality weigh heavily, yet some of these congregations are attempting to offer solidarity and raise consciousness in their members. Many more could.

The dilemma of living on one hand with a very vocal Christian right and on the other with generations that have no Christian memory sometimes astound the church. Yet, these congregations are offering the word in preaching and in small groups and lived experiences of community that deepen faith and invite questioning. Whether these strategies are enough to counteract destructive religious mass media messaging is an open question.

Openness however is not the perfect good. As I have mentioned in my interpretation of these key traits of the church, there are shadow sides to these marks and

²⁴¹ Hall, 121.

tensions that must be upheld. Being open needs to be combined with knowing who we are, and understanding our purpose as church. Our identity and ethos as Christian and UCC congregations is all the more critical as we engage with those who don't carry our history and self-understanding, not because we seek to proselytize, but as a way to encounter others with integrity, honesty and authenticity. Even as we seek to know our identity, it is changing. We are coming to the awareness that all is not as it has been - that our privilege and power as an institution are now suspect. The very foundations of our faith are changing as we discover again that Christ is calling us to humility and encounter - not conversion and assimilation. Even our understanding of good news is on shaky ground if we do not engage in continuous self-critique, theological reflection, and social analysis.

One area that may weaken the strength of empowering leadership in these faithful and lively congregations is a perceived lack of members' deep rootedness in the gospel and in the Christian story. Remembering and re-membering the gospel story, that shapes and forms us as church, is a critical part of helping us find passion and courage for the journey ahead. Attention to this area of Christian education and faith formation would further empower Christian disciples and leaders. By developing familiarity and fluency regarding the life of Jesus and postcolonial understandings of mission, salvation, gospel and justice, members can become disciples, evangelists, and justice-makers for the twenty-first century.

In order to create a postcolonial feminist ecclesiology of the church, I would propose that the church aspire to the mark of humility as a sign of the presence of Christ. With faith and hope the church must engage in actions of self-examination and critique,

listening carefully especially to those who are marginalized and oppressed in our society and world. We must work to excavate and hopefully liberate our colonial attitudes, theologies, and practices. It is this humility, combined with other strengths, that may deepen our commitment to becoming partners with others in bringing about justice for all.

Curiously, I am calling for greater confidence on one hand and signs of humility on the other. Perhaps both relate to people becoming more intentional learners in our churches, individually and as communities, continuously engaging with scripture, social analysis, with the strangers in our midst, and with the Spirit of Jesus. God is beckoning us to risk throwing off old and dated understandings of mission and practices that domesticate the gospel and limit the faithfulness and liveliness of our congregations. God is calling the church to open itself to new birth.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

I am discovering Christ's presence in the church today through the openness of Toronto Conference congregations that practice radical welcoming, risk-taking, loving, empowering leadership, and justice-making for the sake of the gospel of Jesus. This overarching attitude and quality of openness shows that these congregations are responsive to the Spirit at work. The Spirit of God is continually reforming and transforming them in the midst of a complex and changing Canadian context.

Christ's presence can be seen when the church lives into its purpose of feeding the hungry and freeing the oppressed. It can be seen when we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We can grasp our vocation as Christians when we begin to understand the Great Commandment as calling the church to inspire and be inspired by all those who seek justice and peace in our world.

In this chapter, I want to speak to two different audiences about the implications and applications of what I have learned from my research and study of nine United Church congregations. First, I will address the whole church, and particularly those responsible for congregational life, about the five traits I have discovered and what congregations might learn from them. Secondly, I will speak more directly to these nine faithful and lively congregations sharing affirmations as well as some suggestions for their consideration.

To the Church as a Whole and Those Responsible for Congregational Life

The quality of openness is the distinctive determiner of these faithful and lively congregations. Openness includes welcoming the gifts of people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. It also means the engagement with new ideas, new practices, and new ways of thinking about God. It is characterized by permeable boundaries that affect who uses the building, who makes decisions, who leads worship, and who belongs. Openness encourages collaboration and partnership across traditional institutional borders for the sake of justice-making. The increasingly private and closed world of the church is made more public and welcoming through this quality of openness.

On one hand, openness seems deeply embedded in all that these congregations do and in the way they think of themselves and their ministries. Yet, how does this openness come about? Is it something they are born with or can it be learned? Is it because of heredity (history and heritage) or environment (challenges and crisis)? How can congregations, that may not be as open, learn to become more open?

As I have explained earlier, the openness of these congregations is especially exhibited through five distinctive traits – radical welcoming, risk-taking, loving, empowering leadership, and justice-making. These qualities are inter-related, dynamic and organic, affecting and strengthening each other as they are practiced. In fact, when a congregation decides to put special emphasis on one trait (radical welcoming), this often leads to the deepening appreciation of another (loving), and that leads to others (justice-making). Wherever the congregation puts its initial or primary emphasis, the other traits are engaged as a way to reach their goal.

One congregation whose primary emphasis was on justice-making, could see that strategies of radical welcoming, loving, empowering leadership, and risk-taking were necessary to achieve their goals. Another church, committed to being a loving presence in the community, realized that they needed to take some risks to offer a radical welcome. In the process they empowered their own people to take leadership and connected their vision to justice-making in the community.

These congregations did not set out to become more open. Simply through their faithful interpretation of God's mission, in relation to their history and context over the years, they developed attitudes, relationships, and practices that displayed these five traits of openness that have emerged in this research. It is important to remember too, that initially these nine congregations seemed very unlike each other in many ways – rural, urban, suburban, large, small, with male and female ministry personnel, well established and newly formed, ethnic minority and ethnic majority, and in far flung locations of Toronto Conference. What unifies them however, are these five traits, and the perception, by their colleagues, that they are faithful and lively congregations.

Looking at a process more intentionally can make a difference in how a congregation nurtures its ability to become more open. I think that just as openness in a congregation leads to the five traits being lived out, living into the five traits can also develop more openness in a congregation. The five traits are both clues and building blocks to a greater openness to which congregations can aspire. Intentionally focusing on the development or strengthening of each of these five traits, can help to nurture faithful and lively congregations that reveal the spirit of Christ active in our time.

Through a brief description of each trait followed by some suggestions for “acting into openness,” I want to offer congregations food for thought and ideas for action. These ideas, though, are meant to be neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Each congregation will need to tailor its response to its own character and context.

Radical Welcoming: Open to the ‘Other’

I discovered that *Radical Welcoming* is a trait that seems to encompass all aspects of church life. It is also a trait that builds from and results in a strong commitment to inclusivity. It affects how congregations offer worship, make decisions, build community, and understand mission. It is expressed through hospitality in greeting, in the use of church space, in offering worship in a native language, in programs, advocacy, and outreach. It encompasses people of all ages, sexual orientations, cultures, socio-economic situations, genders, theological perspectives, faith and no faith backgrounds.

Radical welcoming is expressed in willingness to share power with newcomers, to learn from strangers, and to invite the larger community into the life of the church. It is also expressed in being out in the community as a loving and caring presence offering Christ’s love, compassion, and justice to all who are marginalized by social systems.

There is a transparency, open communication, and flexibility in these congregations as they engage with neighbours, with members, and with those in need. Heightened awareness to the needs of their communities helps these congregations to be responsive and to focus their ministries toward God’s mission in their contexts.

Members of these congregations say that they see the face of Christ in the stranger. They bring a curiosity and compassion to all their new encounters. No matter

what their background, newer people to these congregations feel free to develop their theology and faith in their own time, without judgment. New people are invited into ministries in the congregation and are encouraged to develop their own talents and ideas there too.

Even though these congregations may appear very diverse, there is a sense that people share common values, a common purpose and commitment to each other. Welcoming also includes partnering with outside organizations and people who work together for the common good of the larger community. These congregations hold the openness of radical welcoming with a unifying common vision in a healthy tension.

Radical welcoming - acting into openness. Congregations can live out radical welcoming by including newer people into worship leadership and inviting them to contribute to the ministries and governance of the congregation. This brings new ideas and voices into the mix and raises the energy level and excitement of the congregation.

Communion is a sign of radical welcoming lived out on the streets. Congregations can live out the *radical* side of hospitality by actively engaging in resisting the social marginalization of gays and lesbians, of people of colour, of differently-abled people, and of First Nations peoples in the faith community and in their larger social context. Building relationships with those who seem most other in their neighbourhoods is one form of kingdom building. Making the connection between developing practices of inclusivity in the congregation and justice-making in the world is spiritually empowering for many.

As congregational members engage with people across the diversity of culture, gender, theology, ability, faith or sexual orientation, it is important that the encounter be

free of any attempts at assimilation. Affirming who people are, and exploring relationships as conversation partners, are key routes to the openness of radical welcoming and congregational transformation.

Risk-Taking: Open to Change and Transformation

Congregations that take risks in the way they lead worship, offer hospitality, engage with children and youth, structure their governance, and engage with the wider community, open themselves to change and transformation. The ability to welcome new ideas, new people and new ways of being comes from a confidence that God's Spirit is alive and emerging in all kinds of ways through people, places and situations.

Sometimes out of desperation, congregations try anything to break out of old and deadening patterns. Sometimes it is the strengths of members and newcomers that drive new programs and community initiatives. In a post-Christendom era, congregations can shake off old habits that assume God's mission is known to our community and our members. Each congregation then, needs to re-define its purpose, renew its commitment to God's mission for this age, and act into it with vigour. This is both an act of faith and an invitation to the Spirit's re-creating power.

Permission-giving congregations are generous and wide in their ability to roll with new ideas and different ways of being church. Congregations where there are strong and loving relationships across generations, across differences, seem to be able both to honour the heritage of the past and be open to the future. This is a creative tension that frees the imagination but grounds it in Good News.

An attitude of suspended judgment, acceptance, and tolerance for mistakes and failure, encourage experimentation, the development of gifts, and shared leadership. These are congregations that value sincerity and faith over performance. They value the participation of all over the leadership of a few.

Risk-taking also implies the living out of our mission in our communities and the world. These kinds of risks often involve public witness and collaboration for justice. Ongoing faith development and the prophetic proclamation for justice in worship build the kind of strength and courage required to take these risks.

Although daunting to some, experimentation and risk-taking for the sake of the gospel, often kindle new energy, joy, and life in congregations. This energy then fuels the faithfulness and liveliness that is so apparent and attractive to those looking for meaning and community in their lives. Faye Wakeling, in her work with women of low income at St. Columba House in Montreal, says “passion-energy comes out of connections with people who are looking for ways to transform society – working for more just conditions. If you want to use religious language, I guess we’d call it ‘kindom building’. There’s real energy in that engagement.”²⁴²

Risk-taking: acting into openness. To encourage risk-taking in a variety of areas, congregations may want to start with one area that is relatively safe. Encourage longer time members to share why they joined this congregation and what it means to them. Invite new members to do the same. Make it possible for those who may be socially marginalized to tell/ show/sing/draw their story as well. Let the children lead. Listen and take seriously the ideas and concerns of children and youth.

²⁴² Marion Best, *Will Our Church Disappear?: Strategies for Renewal of the United Church of Canada* (Naramata, Canada: Wood Lake Books, 1994), 15.

Get out of the meeting box by using creative media (art, music, writing) to help people brainstorm ways to engage with the wider community in the common task of building God's kin-dom. Clarify and declare the values you hold as Christian community and share those with others seeking to change oppressive systems and structures.

Take your worship into the community to remind your own members of God's mission of justice and peace to the world and to offer a public presence of the church in the world. Connect your worship theme to environmental or social concerns that your community is facing.

In worship, make sermon time more interactive. Encourage theological reflection as a community by offering questions for discussion in groups of two or three. Experiment with different kinds of music and invite a variety of musically gifted people to lead.

Loving: Open to Journeying with Friends, Neighbours and Strangers

Nurturing strong bonds of caring and affection between people in a congregation is vital to their ability to meet challenges, make decisions, and reach out to their community in love. Loving relationships help members to become better people and grow into more authentic Christians. During times of personal stress or loss, the compassion of church 'family' members for one another is often experienced as healing and liberative.

Loving relationships depend on openness to differences and willingness to learn about others without imposing ideas, ways, theologies, personalities. Nurturing these relationships involves working, sharing and worshiping together over time. Open

communication and honesty in the careful sharing of feelings create a healthy environment where controversial issues and concerns may be aired. Trust and commitment to each other and the church provide the grounds for risk-taking and experimentation.

Loving that is shown in an openness to friends, neighbours and strangers prevents insularity and reminds the church of its outward looking mission of loving all God's people and the earth itself. This mission ultimately must involve acts of loving/justice in our world that are at once both challenging and life-giving for our churches.

Loving – acting into openness. Provide opportunities for people to get to know each other and share their faith in informal settings like “living room groups” throughout the year. Offer a time for sharing joys and sorrows before worship begins or in the Prayers of the People.

Make a personal check-in part of every meeting agenda and study group session. Sharing about the stresses and celebrations of our lives deepens relationships and helps people to focus more on the topic at hand while holding others in compassionate prayer.

Encourage people to share news about their week day vocational, volunteer and personal ministries in worship, in small group settings, or before and after worship services. Bring food, and make it an occasion.

Have fun, play together and invite others in the community to join you. Vacation Bible Schools, picnics in the park, and community festivals offer a chance for members to work together, get to know the wider community, and for community people to become acquainted with the church.

Empowering Leadership: Open to the Gifts of All

Leadership that makes way and gives permission for others to use their gifts and abilities is based on an understanding of shared power and the necessity of all church members, as well as non-members, to live out of God's mission in the world.

Leaders are empowered as they are steeped in the faith and knowledgeable about the world. All members are empowered as they come to see their Christian journey as one of discipleship and ministry lived out through mending God's world.

Empowering leadership goes hand in hand with radical welcoming as all people regardless of ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, religious or no religious background, or socio-economic situation, are seen as leaders of the congregation, leaders in their outside personal and professional circles of influence, and leaders together with the whole church community. God speaks through all and needs all to build the kin-dom of peace and love.

When ministry personnel see their role as empowering and equipping others for ministry, then possibilities for ministry multiply. Sometimes this involves helping others discern and affirm their gifts and helping them find the resources to live them out. Power sharing by ministry personnel means that the community has more say in how worship is designed and led and how the programs and mission of the church are lived out. This process may seem messy and out of control, but it is the very tack that allows the Spirit to blow through tired systems and structures and revive the church and its purpose. Careful attention to spiritual and faith nurture, to mentoring relationships, and to engagement

with our communities, help empower leaders. Ministry personnel have a key role to play in seeing that the “curriculum” of the church is lived out for the sake of equipping the saints for mending the world.

Empowering leadership means working with community leaders, as well, to listen to and strengthen people from marginalized groups for their future. As we in the church are empowered, our ministry is to empower others in the church, in the community and world. Sometimes this means offering material resources, creating programs, or advocating on behalf or with particular groups. In order to fuel long term empowerment for our communities, the church provides the nurture, support and inspiration for leaders through loving relationships, worship, and the prophetic proclamation of God’s word.

Building consensus is a critical method for empowering the congregation to take leadership on challenging issues. Consensus is based on the premise that all people have something to add to a discussion and that only when all have been heard and understood can solutions and decisions begin to be formulated. Consensus requires that feelings as well as thoughts are considered and that no one is forced into any position. Consensus takes time but builds relationships, trust and commitment to the final decision.

Worship is a central means of empowering leaders as elements of word, music and ritual combine to inspire, challenge and support members in their faith journeys. As more people are included in sharing worship design and leadership, God’s voice is heard more clearly in the many inflections of children, the aged, the alienated, the differently-abled, the immigrant. In worship too, the inclusive and welcoming nature of the congregation is modeled and lived out for children and all who seek to take this model into the world.

Music in its ability to move the emotions and unearth deep yearnings, is another means of empowering leaders to seek to be part of something bigger than themselves. Whole bodies of music-classical, jazz, gospel-express the inexpressible mystical delights of the universe, of human relationships, of struggle and suffering, that remind us of our deep humanity and our connection with God.

Empowering leadership - acting into openness. Consider everyone a leader and invest in discerning and developing their gifts for ministry. Keep faith nurture central to helping folk find a sense of belonging and discover practices for discipleship.

Use consensus as a decision-making process especially on important congregational issues. Take the time to inform and educate the community and then listen to and hear people into agreement.

As ministry personnel, consider sharing the power of your priestly, prophetic, and pastoral roles with others in the congregation. Take informal as well as formal steps to bring this about, nurture and evaluate these ministries.

Set up Christian mentoring relationships for newcomers and small accountability and discipleship groups to help members ground their discipleship in practices of prayer, study and worship. Encourage efforts to live out their faith.

Encourage global and local immersion experiences and relationships so that the congregation understands the context within which it is placed and called to do ministry.

Justice-Making: Open to the Wounded and the World

Faithful and lively congregations are oriented outwards into their communities and the world. To live God's mission is to be concerned not with the building up of the

church but with the liberation and healing of the world. Outreach efforts help to ameliorate social problems but don't address them at their root. Congregations can work to be involved and more aware of both, and know how their faith informs their actions. The image of the church as the benevolent, paternalistic host is transformed when the church becomes receiver as well as giver, guest as well as host.

Members become receivers when they live out the radical idea of welcoming diversity in their midst. Christ becomes present in these acts. This is one step toward living justice. Hospitality that embraces an inclusive vision of community helps congregations to live and learn from difference.

An intercultural vision of congregational life begins with recognizing that even as white people there is much about our cultural background and identity that is taken for granted and needs to be viewed through a postcolonial lens. Not only in personal relationships but also structurally, congregations need to audit their practices regarding inclusive leadership in positions of power, worship and decision-making. Is there sensitivity and active preference for "the least" in relation to gender, class, culture, age, ability, and sexual orientation in the congregation?

Worship, too, needs to be examined through the lens of feminist, intercultural understandings so that inclusive language for God and people is used and that our theology and scripture do not betray a colonial, sexist or anti-Semitic bias.

Knowing the context in which congregations are placed helps members envision the work they need to do to live out God's mission of building a new heaven and earth. Church members can discover who the poor and marginalized are in their community and ask why. Congregations can research the work already being done by social agencies and

non-governmental organizations. This will allow them to collaborate on social policy responses and initiate new work for justice.

The gospel of Jesus calls congregations to publicly witness for the kind of community and world God dreams about. The resources of scripture and faith can be used to embolden their efforts. UCC resources can help congregations interpret our faith in relation to this time of empire; clarify our purpose as Christians in a multi-faith world; and explore the tenets of our faith in the context of racism, sexism, homophobia, and neo-colonialism. Justice-making is the mandate of the whole congregation not just the Outreach committee. It must be embraced as the central reason for the church's existence - its *raison d'être*.

Justice-making – acting into openness. Ensure that the congregation participates in practices of radical welcoming by inviting and engaging people of various backgrounds into your church and into positions of power.

Know your larger community and immerse yourself in their social situation through local immersion trips. Encourage visits from community groups, and learn about efforts to bring hope, healing and peace with others.

Engage youth in learning activities that heighten their awareness of the world and develop their skills in critical social analysis from a Christian perspective. Let them engage with the congregation about what they have experienced and what they are learning.

Use UCC justice resources in worship, study groups, prayer times. Learn about why the UCC promotes the use of inclusive language for God and people and what this means about justice-making and the authority of scripture in our denomination.

Discover the intercultural roots of scripture. Jesus engaged with people from different cultures, religions and no religion. The church has a history of mission across cultures. Distinguishing between the desire for Christian assimilation and the desire to learn from the God-filled other, whether Christian or not, prevents us from perpetuating colonizing practices.

Look at your outreach work and determine how much is based on a charity model and how much is focused on consciousness-raising, advocacy, solidarity and justice-making. How much does the congregation collaborate with unjust systems, such as materialism, individualism, racism? How much does it actively resist these systems? What are your dreams/God's dreams for your community? How can the congregation help them to come about?

To the Nine Participating Congregations

I am so grateful for your hospitality and openness in letting me look inside the doors of your church life. Since you were named as *faithful and lively*' congregations by your colleagues in Toronto Conference Presbyteries, I have had the pleasure of getting to know you and coming to understand what it is that makes you so faithful and lively. In so many ways, I admire your spirit, your constancy, your sense of adventure as you navigate the unknown waters of the future in such a changing church context. It is not easy being church today, being Christian today, yet your congregations give me hope and confidence that God's Spirit is alive and working in new ways through this ancient institution of ours.

As you can read in the previous section addressed to the whole church, I found that the overarching theme of life in these congregations was openness, specifically as it related to radical welcoming, risk-taking, loving, empowering leadership, and justice-making. I hope all of you will be able to affirm these qualities as you reflect on your own experiences of congregational life. My perspective is one particular and personal image in time. There are many other ways that your lives together might be interpreted.

You all seem to have grappled with issues of your own identity and purpose over these last few years and many of you have struggled with crises of one sort or another. Your clarity of purpose and commitment to being true disciples of Christ in loving community speaks clearly through the interviews and research material. I admire the openness with which you seem to welcome newcomers, hold theological discussions, engage in faith study, meet challenges, and take social action. The genuine love, caring and joy found in your congregations goes a long way to soften some of the sharper edges of change.

Many of you have a strong sense of commitment to your larger communities and care deeply about the welfare of people there. In the service of your mission you have also empowered skilled and committed leaders. Within all the congregations, I sensed strong, creative and imaginative leadership both by ministry personnel and lay people. As you continue to evolve and transform, I know that you will use your strengths to meet new challenges and to listen to God's ever surprising Spirit. I also hope that through this research study, other congregations will benefit from your wisdom and the witness of your lives together.

Because I am using a postcolonial and feminist lens to look at the church as we know it in the early twenty-first century lived out in Toronto Conference UCC congregations, I bring a critical perspective to this study. From that perspective, what it means to be faithful and lively is influenced by our living in a post-Christendom time of empire and patriarchy, and by both feminist and postcolonial theology and practice. So even though as congregations you are already known as faithful and lively, you know that the call for continuous transformation is ever present. Changes in our contexts continue to challenge congregations to interpret and re-interpret their ways of being church in light of their understanding of the world and the gospel.

Jesus lived his life trying to make life better for people who were considered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. His efforts to heal, to love, and to liberate, eventually led to his confrontation with the powers of the Roman Empire and to his crucifixion. In the Christian church, we take the life and ministry of Jesus as our model or paradigm for being church and so, in every age, we ask ourselves how our life together as church reflects Christ's presence in our time. To truly follow Jesus is neither comfortable nor safe, so we must guard against our own tendency to domesticate the gospel. Because this is an ever-evolving task, we inevitably develop blind spots, become complacent, and sometimes get into real trouble as church when we lose our way, as we have done periodically over the years.

There will always be a need to examine our own practices, beliefs and vision as a church, and in that process we come ever closer to God and to living out God's mission in our world. In the spirit of self-critique then I offer several "growing edges" that I have discovered as I studied and ruminated over your responses. They concern the need for

both greater confidence and greater humility, in several areas. Because openness was the overarching theme of the findings, I felt that openness was also a key to working on these growing edges.

I have named four areas for special attention: being open to re-thinking our theologies in a multi-cultural, multi-faith and neo-colonial world; being open to articulate our faith and hope based on the gospel for our time; being open to processes of self-examination and self-critique as a community; and being open to risking more boldly for justice. I will explain what I mean in each area and offer ways that you might engage in this greater openness as congregations.

Open to Re-thinking our Theologies – A Call for Humility

As I have mentioned, the traits of the church depend on the clarity of the congregation's understanding of God's mission and the person of Jesus himself. Without conscious intent, the church has distorted God's mission into Christianizing the world using the Great Commission as its mandate. Without conscious intent, the colonizing practices of the Christian church have supported global capitalism and US imperialism. Without conscious intent, substitutionary atonement theology, concerning Jesus' death and resurrection, has removed the church from responsibility and partnership for the world we are creating.

In a time when the church's sins are staring us down in the Indian residential schools debacle, it is more than timely to re-examine our colonial past, and our neo-colonial present as a church. In a multi-faith and multi-cultural context in Canada, we must look at our theologies of religions to avoid repeating past mistakes of Christian

triumphalism and persecution. In a time of environmental crisis, what word of hope do our theologies offer? Given this context, we must re-examine our understandings of faith and re-think what we mean by the purpose and identity of the church.

At the heart of this re-examination is the need to name for our time what we mean by *gospel* and *mission*. Without a rootedness in the gospel and a clear perspective on God's mission, the church loses its way. Re-thinking in every age what we mean by gospel with the help of biblical and theological tools, helps to counter self-referencing tendencies which idolize the church. Re-thinking can and does happen through preaching, through processes of action and reflection, through discernment and visioning.

A strong rooting in the gospel will help people and congregations to resist and reject certain aspects of our culture that are death-dealing such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Christian gospel rootedness will aid us to consider the stewardship of our gifts and resources as churches. A solid basis in our faith and theology, can serve to counter hesitancy and uncertainty, as we engage politically in controversial issues and actions in our communities to bring about the common good.

In looking for ways to authenticate our welcome as a church, the biblical injunction to offer hospitality to the stranger, the other, is a first step in beginning to humble and transform ourselves. In our hospitality we must make room to listen and learn from First Nations people who already knew God before we got here. Are we prepared to open the doors of our theology to include other ways of thinking about God, the earth, and all creatures - to find the spiritual in the earth and its creatures, to affirm the divine feminine?

The UCC does re-examine its theology as a denomination on a regular basis. “A New Creed” in 1968 and “A Song of Faith” in 2006 are evidence of this. However, congregations often seem unaware of the significance and implications of these re-examined theologies or of the original doctrines, being examined, disputed and rethought. It appears that for many, a detritus of unexamined theologies informs our ethics and actions without being fully examined. Some of these theologies are nurtured by informal congregational discourse influenced by the right wing Christian climate that pervades the media and politics. The prosperity gospel and individual pietism still pass as the popular understanding of faith and are preached and practiced in some of our UCC congregations.

The General Council 2006 has recently stated that, “the UCC declare itself to become an intercultural²⁴³ church, and that intercultural dimension of ministries be a denominational priority in its commitment to racial justice, where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all Aboriginal, Francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority constituencies in the total life, mission, and practices of the whole Church.”²⁴⁴ As well as our multi-cultural context, we are also aware of religious pluralism in Canada. The challenges of this context force Christian churches to either defend traditional views, consider theology anachronistic and without value, or re-think their theologies.

As José María Vigil writes in “The Challenges of a Theology of a Religious Pluralism for Traditional Fundamentalist Faith,” North Americans face a looming crisis as traditional Christianity encounters religious pluralism. He declares that the church

²⁴³ Intercultural: referring to mutually reciprocal relationships among and between cultures. (Canadian Oxford Dictionary).

²⁴⁴ Ethnic Ministries Re-visioning Task Group UCC, *A Transformative Vision for the United Church of Canada* (Thunder Bay, Canada: The United Church of Canada, 2006), 138.

needs to see pluralism as positive which means that Christianity must be engaged in “letting go of its privileged status as unique and absolute in the eyes of its faithful. From the new pluralist point of view, all religions are beneficial, loved by God and, for that reason, true, salvific. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that all are also limited and need to be complemented.”²⁴⁵ Vigil goes on to state that an openness to God’s revelation everywhere, including in other people’s cultures and religions, will free us.

Vigil names the theologies that most need to be re-examined and modified in our congregations. The belief in a “chosen people” needs to be changed to an acceptance that there are no chosen.²⁴⁶ The doctrine that Christ is the only way must be modified and incarnation must be seen as metaphor not metaphysics.²⁴⁷ *Mission* with its colonizing overtones and history must be re-understood as building the kin-dom of God, not the church.²⁴⁸

Suggestions. Working with “A New Creed” and “A Song of Faith,” congregations might examine the original doctrines that have been re-thought and consider why and how they have been changed over the years. What essential understandings about God, Christ, humanity and the world have been re-interpreted and for what purpose? What does Good News mean today for ethnic minority people, for First Nations peoples, for women, for the GBLT community, for the earth?

Learning to reflect theologically is a skill that congregational members can cultivate. Through congregational discussions, social, environmental and global issues can be examined in the light of our experiences, our reflections on scripture, social

²⁴⁵ José María Vigil, "The Challenges of a Theology of a Religious Pluralism for Traditional Fundamentalist Faith," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (2007): 10.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 12.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 15.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 17.

analysis, and other sources of wisdom. The community can together formulate theology, in consultation with UCC resources, and plan actions that respond to these issues and brings good news to those most marginalized. This process ensures that questions, about what God is doing and what God intends, are part of our problem solving and not just add-ons to legitimate our actions after the fact. Taking time in worship, in small groups, and in meetings to use this process with the whole congregation can help them become familiar with their part in re-examining their own, often hidden, theological understandings.

Using Vigil's suggestions and resources such as "Challenging Empire: A Call to Community" in *Mandate* magazine, congregations can begin to make connections between a colonial theology that supports empire, global capitalism, and Christian domination, and a postcolonial theology of liberation and justice for all peoples and the earth.

Open to Articulate Our Faith – A Call for Confidence

In my research I did notice that for most participants the ability to use the language of justice was limited. Despite the national and public persona of the UCC as a justice-seeking church, many of these congregations did not use the word *justice* nor did they seem to understand the difference between service, charity, and justice. Some participants, however, were very clear and were not only articulate but were intentional in their justice work in the congregation. This meant that discussions, strategies, and actions were initiated in these congregations under a clear framework of education for justice - consciousness raising, advocacy, and action.

As I have discussed earlier, naming is not the only sign that justice-making is going on and these faithful and lively congregations certainly participate in justice making in other ways. However the apparent lack of intentionality and vocabulary is somewhat worrying.

Most participants did not demonstrate the ability to use faith language. Even though they may be part of loving, empowering, risking, welcoming and justice-making congregations, they showed little ability to use basic Christian language and root their explanations in scriptural or theological reasoning. Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29) and Peter, to the Christians in Asia Minor, exhorts the members of the early church to give a reason for the hope that is within them. (1 Peter 3:15)

Lack of biblical and theological literacy may be part of the problem and we need to examine practices of religious education and faith formation as part of this. Perhaps our colonial and privileged past has impeded our learning to articulate our faith. Being part of a majority culture means never having to explain oneself. No longer majority Christian, our society has moved to a post-Christian and multi-faith era, where our inability to articulate our beliefs and identity as Christians impedes our engagement with interested newcomers to our churches. It also thwarts our efforts to act with passion for justice in our communities. There is a need to learn about own Christian heritage, to embrace modern faith statements, and to utilize our own UCC faith and justice resources..

Lack of faith language may also be due in part to the climate of right wing Christianity - a theological closing in - which intimidates and frustrates UCC people of a more liberal mind set. Faith language has been co-opted for ideological purposes and sometimes UCC people distance themselves from that. Instead of responding with our

own views, we may say nothing or try to deny our own Christian identity. Certainly, terms such as *salvation*, *mission*, and *evangelism*, have been twisted into unrecognizable meanings which may cause our members to shy away from using these terms at all.

Proof texting by evangelical and fundamentalist denominations have also become so pervasive on television and at our front doors that some UCC members may even have turned away from the Bible as a source of good news. Skills and confidence in using more liberative interpretations of the Bible may be undeveloped.

In the midst of a multi-faith society, there are ample reasons to become familiar with and use Christian language to explain our values, ethical decisions and political choices. In the face of encounters with people from other faiths, a facility in explaining the basic tenets of our faith, helps deepen engagement. In the welcoming of folk with little or no Christian memory, we can offer the ‘family album’ of our faith, church history, and identity. We can practise articulating and discussing who Jesus is for us. As well, congregational members can learn to use the vocabulary of faith to clarify mission and vision, discern ethical responses, strengthen each other as people of The Way, and witness publicly for justice.

Douglas Hall believes we need to be firm in our theology of the cross even as we are flexible and open in our welcome to all who seek the kingdom God is preparing. He names six principles: Christocentrism; the priority of grace; the dialectical character of theology; faith seeking understanding; Biblical literacy; and faith and dialogue with doubt.²⁴⁹ Through the discussion of these principles, he clarifies how, through theological

²⁴⁹ Hall, 109-118.

rigour and discipline, the Protestant church may find the courage to challenge the institutions and classes that have been its chief supporters.²⁵⁰

Suggestions. I would suggest a greater emphasis on Christian formation in our congregations, but formation grounded in scripture, theology, and the realities of our society and world. Douglas Hall's book, *Bound and Free* is an excellent resource for naming the key principles of Protestant theology that moves conversation beyond easy religious clichés. With this grounding the church may be better able to live out its purpose as an agent for change and transformation in local communities. Instead of separating Christian development and bible study from the rest of congregational life, like an optional extra, it needs to be more integrated.

The life of Jesus is the core Christian narrative and the paradigm for our faith. It is the lens through which we, as Christians, view the world and God's action in it. Perhaps the whole congregation needs to become more intentionally a learning community, working much harder to explore our lives and root our faith in a metaphor of exile rather than a metaphor of empire.

Adult education that is integrated and part of longer worship might support and nurture more of our people as less and less emphasis in family life and society supports a Christian life way. Members can gain confidence to speak about faith in a way that is empowering for them, the church, and the world. We can learn how to re-frame and speak about traditional Christian values in a way that helps others to hear us before dismissing us as religious fanatics or idealists.

Because of our multi-faith context, we may learn more about ourselves as Christians by learning to speak with those who are practitioners of other religions.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

Congregations could invite people from other faith groups to share their beliefs, practices and perspectives on Christianity with them. Most helpful would be engaging in cross-religious/cultural discussions for the sake of discovering common values and commitments.

Here, as in the section on re-examining our theology, a process of praxis - action and then reflection leading to action - could help congregational members become more confident in thinking about, articulating, and living their faith.

Open to Self-examination and Critique – A Call for Humility

Sometimes the church operates from a place of knowing without taking the time to do learning and reflection. Programs are set up to meet a need and then carried on indefinitely without review and examination. Food banks are one of the ways many churches have responded to the problem of poverty and homelessness in our communities. Yet food banks, and other acts of charity, are multiplying while social problems persist. In fact, some would say that charity itself maintains the injustices that create poverty. How can churches think more deeply about the programs and activities in which they are engaged? How can they test the faithfulness of their responses against the gospel of Jesus?

First of all, congregations can learn to interpret the gospel of Jesus for our time, clearly visualizing what good news might mean for people who are living in poverty, who are differently-abled, GLBT, ethnic minority, aboriginal. Secondly, members can learn to look at our world through the lens of social and global analysis. Tools to help do this kind of critical thinking exist in many UCC resources such as *Mandate* magazine. If

our accountability is to the gospel of Jesus, and the gospel's accountability is to the poor and marginalized, then we can learn more about systems that create marginalized peoples. We can learn how people of white dominant culture benefit from those systems and how the church can consciously seek to resist and change those systems.

A spirit of humility is part of the call for congregations to become ongoing learning communities. We can start by admitting that we don't know all the answers, that we live in a complex world, and that we can only discover the path ahead by walking it with our eyes, ears, hearts and minds open. This requires an intentional process of learning and self-examination that combines theological reflection with social analysis.

We might also spend some time learning about how others see us. We could ask about ourselves from those on the street, from ethnic minority peoples, from First Nations peoples, from neighbours and friends. Is our sense of ourselves as accurate as it might be?

Feminist learning methodologies stress the need for learning in community, the need to reflect on different aspects of knowing, the need to begin with the experiences of the marginalized, and the need to build theory and theology from lived experiences. Learning is not about amassing abstract knowledge (biblical or otherwise) but about thinking our way into action for justice.

Suggestions.. Feminist learning models can be used in decision-making, visioning, and discernment situations to help people reflect on their experiences and move them to both a theological understanding and a plan for action. These learning models can be used for personal reflection as well as for community self-examination.

They help to connect our experiences with our thinking and theology. These models also help to illuminate new clues for action that can be life-giving and just.

One way to open ourselves to self-examination and critique is for our congregations to become more like experimental learning communities where learning is ongoing, community-based and transformative. Intentionality in learning as a community might help the church to become both more humble and more responsive to the needs of its communities. In one model I have experienced, instead of creating a committee, a group of culturally mixed people decided to become an intentional learning community. Learning is based on sharing and reflecting on personal and professional experiences that have intercultural dimensions. Our commitment is to struggle and learn together, keeping a journal between gatherings to help us. We are learning how to question our privilege or lack of it, articulate our questions, and frame our hopes.

Criteria for self-examination might include examining the five traits of openness that I have discovered in this study. Through a process of introspection, congregations might assess how their practices reflect radical welcoming, loving relationships, risk-taking, empowering leadership, and justice-making.

Key UCC documents, such as “A Song of Faith” and “Mending the World,” can also offer principles, educational resources and theology on which congregational accountability to gospel values can be based. Time at a congregational retreat or in small conversational groups, might serve to both orient newer members to the ethos of the UCC and to remind longer term members of the qualities that help to make the congregation faithful and lively. Challenging Canadian congregations to greater openness, with both

humility and confidence, happens when these traits are juxtaposed with present concerns re poverty, relationships with First Nations peoples, and multi-cultural issues.

We are called to be with the suffering people and groaning creation in solidarity with those who are building alternative communities of life. The locus of the churches is where God is working, Christ is suffering and the Spirit is caring for life and resisting destructive principalities and powers. The churches that hold themselves apart from this concrete locus of the Triune God cannot claim to be faithful churches. In each historical moment, faithfulness to such a calling requires critical self-examination. Where we are accomplices with systems of domination and injustice, we need to repent.²⁵¹

Domination and injustice are signs of God's kingdom vision lost. Congregations must engage again in hearing God's call for justice and peace and seeing all of what they do as focused on that end. An open attitude can be an asset in these times. Humility may lead us to vulnerability where we are open to learn. Humility may help us to hear critique without blaming our critics. Humility may lead us to recognize the presence of Christ in places and people who are not Christian and who will never come to our churches. This humility is another form of hospitality that recognizes that we are not always the host and that mutuality in giving and receiving is a good thing. Humility may help us re-think what we mean by *mission* and *gospel* and begin to work from the margins to bring change for the world, not just the church.

Open to Risking More Boldly for Justice – A Call for Confidence

I would encourage congregations, after careful social analysis, to risk more boldly for justice within their larger communities. With the help of UCC resources and theological reflection, the deeper causes for brokenness and despair can be examined. Congregations can learn about the church's complicity in unjust social structures that

²⁵¹Justice Peace and Creation Team WCC, *Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (Agape): A Background Document* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2005), 5.

create racism and poverty. A focus on radical welcoming is one way to break down barriers that prevent right relationships with our neighbours. Congregations can also seek partners with a common vision for justice and act in concrete ways to change attitudes and systems that diminish people and destroy the earth.

We are most relevant as churches when we respond to the topical issues of our times. To witness publicly is to know where we stand and to invite our community to stand with us. Congregations are most energized when they feel passionate about their vision and are empowered to educate, advocate, and be in solidarity with others. To engage in public witness is a sign of hope in our communities and world. Ethical decisions to recycle, shop locally, and buy fairly traded products are spiritual practices that model new and faithful life ways. They serve to promote simple living, environmental sustainability, and economic justice for people of the two-third world. Proclaiming these commitments through signage in and outside the church building helps others to know that our faith communities are caringly engaged with the world.

Radical welcoming involves affirming all people regardless of race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, ability, or gender. How is our choice for diversity boldly proclaimed from the pulpit, in our programs and structures, from our building, in our newsletters and promotional materials?

Racism is a real evil in our midst. Congregations can take steps to develop relationships with people from First Nations communities, with ethnic minority groups, and other faith groups, to dispel stereotypes and discover common vision. Accessibility must encompass physical to theological openness as we audit our structures and our practices for blocks to the full participation of all people.

The church can have confidence, not in knowing all the answers, but in holding a vision of hope. God's kindom vision of the great banquet for all peoples, regardless of culture, religion, economic situation, sexual orientation, gender, ability, ought to compel the church to take risks, to act boldly and compassionately for justice. To gain confidence, congregations can seek to value the historic stances of the national church and to acquaint themselves with the efforts and commitment the UCC has made over the last twenty-five years.

Collaboration with others also builds confidence and empowers churches to witness and act for justice publicly. Multi-cultural and multi-faith partners may bring us new perspectives and bolster our efforts to counter racism, end the exploitation of the earth, reduce poverty, and build more welcoming and gracious communities.

Suggestions. In order to risk more boldly for justice, congregations can open themselves to becoming more vulnerable to those who are most needy in their communities. All the congregations in Toronto Conference sit on land originally settled by First Nations peoples. Many are geographically close to First Nations UCC congregations. Yet we have few relationships with each other. Congregations might explore what it means to be treaty partners with First Nations peoples. They could learn about our obligations as Canadians and imagine future relationships. Consciousness raising and education may lead to advocacy and solidarity with many First Nations communities struggling for land rights, for spiritual wholeness, and for political voice in Canada.

Congregations could strive to bring to life the lines of "A New Creed" such as, "to seek justice and resist evil." Reflecting on how they are seeking justice and resisting evil

in their communities could open their eyes to realities they might often choose to ignore. Preaching too, might include a prophetic call to justice on a regular basis. Through self-reflection, study, and learning, members can be equipped to both discern evil and resist it as a community.

The UCC has published numerous documents and educational resources to help congregations better understand our world and the gospel call to transform it. Workshops, bible studies, worship resources are available to help congregations respond to our neo-colonial, multi-cultural, and multi-faith world. The UCC has a national reputation as seeking justice and speaking our prophetically. Unfortunately, many of our congregations shrink from this stance. In the crisis of survival and purpose that we now face, faithful and lively congregations will seek out the resources of the national church to deepen their sense of purpose and help guide their life in community. Educational resources such as, “Mending the World,” “A Song of Faith,” “A Transformative Vision for the United Church of Canada,” and “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire,” can aid congregations in the process of consciousness raising about the mission of our church in the world. These resources are best animated by skilled facilitators.

Further Research

As I have worked through this study, many questions have arisen which go beyond the bounds of this research. Deeper studies on individual congregations might be undertaken to examine more carefully how it is they have become so open. How much does history, heritage, leadership, or location play in the vitality and vision of a congregation?

Studies on the relationship between the church as institution and the church as *ecclesia* might be attempted. How much does one support and encourage the other? How much can one limit the life of the other? What factors contribute to the rise of inflexible church institutions, and what keeps some church institutions flexible and responsive to their context? How does a denomination as well as its congregations live out a prophetic witness to a broken world when it is part of that brokenness?

Further research could be done on alternative methodologies for Christian education that integrate learning, justice-making, and faith formation in a more experiential way. Models for this kind of learning seem to abound in the fundamentalist denominations that promote “mission trips” but whose undergirding theology of mission and emphasis on charity, belie the gospel as we have come to know it in our UCC Protestant tradition.

Conclusion

Faithful and lively congregations do not exist in a vacuum. They grow out of the history, hopes and struggles of faith communities engaged with challenging contexts and changing understandings of themselves as church. When congregations are open to the movement of the Spirit, conflicts and concerns can be transformed into opportunities for growth and widening of the human heart. With humility as well as confidence congregations can use the tools of our faith, the power of the gospel message, and the inspiration of the life of Jesus, to empower their efforts to bring new life to bloom.

Since I started my research, further changes have occurred and will continue to affect Toronto Conference congregations. A re-structuring of the Conference will mean a

loss of centralized and specialized staff to support and resource the work of Christian formation, congregational development and justice work. It will also mean an end to Conference wide committees that have served to bring local and global concerns and needs of congregations to a forum for discussion, problem solving and creative response through workshops, written resources, and experiential learning events. Recent national UCC staff cuts will mean less staff expertise available to congregations especially in the areas of faith formation support and resourcing for Canadian justice work through coalitions, mission support, and staff expertise. Even though new staffing arrangements and Presbytery boundaries may bring fresh ways of supporting the curriculum of the church, it seems to me that the very areas in which congregations are most vulnerable and in need of support – articulating our faith; re-examining theologies and practices; and acting more boldly for justice - are the very areas where leadership will be reduced.

Keeping the channels of communication open and flowing from congregations, through presbyteries, conferences, to General Council and back again, will be extremely important to the identity and ethos of the denomination in the next few years. The tendency toward congregationalism and away from a united and uniting vision for the church already exists and will be further strengthened, I believe, through these recent changes. There will continue to be struggles to become the church God calls us to be in the midst of institutional crises like aging buildings, and a numerical decline in membership. There will continue to be a searching for easy answers to church growth. There will continue to be challenges to the church as we become more conscious of, examine, and lament our role in the exploitation of the land, of aboriginal peoples, and of ethnic minority populations.

For congregations to be faithful and lively they will need to have a strong sense of identity and be willing to hold fast to an ethos of radical welcoming, loving, risk-taking, empowering and justice-making even as outward structures may crumble. Nothing short of a Damascus road conversion of heart, soul and mind can save our privileged church from itself. Nothing short of Paul's shocked confrontation with himself as a collaborator and persecutor for the empire will dislodge our easy privilege. Paradoxically, this time of crisis may be the opportunity that the church needs to clarify its vision, re-member its mission, and act with humility and confidence into a new open and faithful way of being church.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Congregations Involved in the Research - A Brief Description.

Collier St. United Church is located in a growing city one hundred kilometres north of Toronto. Located on the main street in the city centre, it boasts many programs and a facility well used by the larger community. It is a large church with approximately 1200 members and three ministry staff. Programs originally established for children with special needs in the community have been operating for decades and adults with mental challenges have long been integrated into worship. A variety of children's, youth and adult programs involve the time and talents of many lay leaders.

Dalston–Crown Hill United Church is a recently amalgamated rural church located just north of a growing urban area. The congregation of 140 members still worships in both their buildings. The church is seen as a gathering place for the larger community as well as a sanctuary for its own members. A mix of local established families and newer members from the surrounding area create a lively intergenerational community of faith that welcomes new leadership and new ideas.

Ebenezer United Church is found in an established suburb of Toronto, Canada's largest city. The church has a long history beginning as a small rural church and growing with various phases of housing development and population growth. It is now in the midst of another wave of demographic changes bringing in a primarily Asian immigrant population interested in more fundamentalist Christianity. The congregation of 160 members is ethnically mixed and is working intentionally to live out its vision of discipleship.

Heritage United Church is located in Ontario summer cottage country in the village of Washago. This congregation is part of a two point pastoral charge and has a fluctuating membership that increases dramatically in the summer but averages 85. Plans to build a larger church are under discussion but constrained by present financial realities. The church, with an active music program and church school, is a central and welcoming part of village and rural life in this area.

North Bramalea United Church is a relatively new church located in the growing bedroom city of Brampton, west of Toronto. This intergenerational ethnically mixed congregation of 560 members is planning to expand into a larger building in the near future. The use of technology in worship and the presence of vibrant children's, youth and adult programs attract many new Christians. Two ministry staff persons are supported by a technology team.

Norval United Church is a congregation of 270 members bursting at the seams of its small country church building. Plans are underway for re-location and expansion. The church is located near Georgetown and Brampton, commuter communities of the Greater Toronto Area. Strong children's and youth programs, as well as welcoming worship and pastoral care attract young families. The Norval congregation is also active in social support to their community.

Sarawak United Church, part of a three point pastoral charge, is a small country church located north of the city of Owen Sound on the Bruce Peninsula. A relatively recent influx of young retirees from Toronto and long range commuters has added new members to this primarily rural-based church of 90 members. The congregation seeks to be welcoming to the new, while honouring the past, as new housing developments in the area promise a growing population.

Toronto Chinese United Church is an ethnic minority church originally established in downtown Toronto to serve recent immigrants from China. Its newer location in a Toronto suburb affords it space for a new and larger building and ample parking. Two congregations worship in two Sunday services, one in Chinese and the other in English. This congregation of about 210 members works hard to connect the two congregations and members from all generations. One Chinese speaking and one English speaking minister provide pastoral leadership.

Trinity-St. Paul's United Church is a downtown church located in the heart of the city of Toronto. The church faces directly onto a main street near an upscale shopping area but its steps and facilities also provide temporary sanctuary to homeless people. This congregation tries to take its urban context seriously through programs, services and political action. The congregation of 290 members has declared itself and its space a Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts. Two full time pastoral staff are employed by this congregation.

Appendix B

Letter of Invitation to Congregations

35 River's Edge Dr.
Toronto, ON
M6M 5L4

Aug 29, 2006.

Church address
Chair of the Board

Dear Board Chair:

I am writing to invite your congregation to be part of a study I am conducting with ten "faithful and lively" congregations in Toronto Conference. Your congregation has been named as "faithful and lively" by Presbytery members across the Conference. Congratulations!

As part of my work as Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Congregational Development I am undertaking this research as a way to learn more about how it is that some congregations thrive despite the changing socio-political and cultural environment in which they find themselves. Groups from five congregations including congregation name will receive the Response Forms to complete and each will be interviewed as a focus group. Another five congregations will only complete the Response Form. I plan to use what I learn through this study to encourage other Toronto Conference congregations to meet the challenges of their contexts in faithful and lively ways. This research is also part of a Doctor of Ministry program in which I am engaged through San Francisco Theological School.

Besides helping other congregations, I hope this process of reflection will prove thought provoking and helpful to you as a congregation striving to follow God's Spirit into the future.

If you agree to participate, these are the next steps:

- a) Choose 5 or 6 people from the congregation who would each be willing to answer a Response Form and attend a focus group gathering about your congregations' life. This group should include: a long time member, a newer member or attendee, a youth or young adult, a Board member, ministry personnel. The overall group should

include as much as possible a balance of women and men, ethnic minority and majority participants. **Send this list of names plus e-mail or regular mailing addresses to me at barblloyd@rogers.com or 35 River's Edge Dr. Toronto, ON, M6M 5L4.**

- b) The Response Form and consent form will be e-mailed or mailed to all participants in mid-September.
- c) Participants are asked to bring their Response Forms to a Focus Group gathering on a date in Sept. or Oct. to be arranged. At that time we will spend two hours in more in-depth discussion about the nature of your congregation's life, ministry and mission.
- d) Choose a meeting date, in consultation with me, for the focus group to gather on your premises. Dates that are available so far are: Sept 19, 22, 25, 29. Oct. 2, 3, 4, 6, 11, 13, 16, 18.
- e) To help me fill out my knowledge about your congregation's situation, please send me a recent JNAC, Annual Report or other documents from your congregation which include information about your history, activities, finances, mission and vision.
- f) A final report about the findings of this study will be sent to all participants and to the Board by Spring 2007.

Thank you so much for considering this request. Please don't hesitate to contact me at the number or address below if you have questions. I look forward to working with you.

Together in Christ,

Barbara

Barbara Lloyd
 Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Congregational Development
 Toronto Conference

Phone 416-242-9460

From Oct 3 on please phone 416-241-2677 #230 or 1-800-446-4729 #230

barblloyd@rogers.com

Appendix C

Letter to Participants

Barbara Lloyd
Conference Minister for Christian Formation and Congregational Development
Toronto Conference, The United Church of Canada
Research address: 35 River's Edge Dr.
Toronto, ON
M6M 5L4
barblloyd@rogers.com

Sept 15, 2006.

Re: Research Study and Permission Release Form

Dear research participant:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study of Toronto Conference congregations that thrive in the midst of challenging times. This initiative is part of an International Feminist Doctor of Ministry program through San Francisco Theological Seminary that I have been working on for the last couple of years. The results of the study will become part of my dissertation. I hope that this research will reveal strengths on which your congregation and others can build, and symbols and stories that can inspire new initiatives for developing faithful and lively congregations in the Conference.

Ten diverse congregations in Toronto Conference will be studied. Five congregations will receive Response Forms to be filled out individually by 5 or 6 members. Another five congregations will receive the Response Forms and will also be interviewed in focus groups. All participants will receive a summary of the findings of this study.

I hope that your participation in this study will offer you an opportunity to: reflect on your own congregation's life; contemplate the marks of faithful and lively congregations; contribute to research that will benefit other congregations; and to deepen your sense of commitment to the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ in our time.

I estimate that filling in the Response Form may take about two hours of your time. You may want to look at the questions first and go away and think about them before writing in your answers. Remember that I am asking for your opinion, insights, and experiences, not the "correct" answers to the questions. **Please return to me with the Permission Release Form by Oct. 16, 2006.**

During this study, confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Completed Response Forms, interview notes and digital files will be kept securely by the researcher (Barbara Lloyd). Digital files of interviews, without participants' names, will be shared with the transcriber only. I do not expect to use personal names in the research study summary or my dissertation. If I do decide to use names I will request your permission before I do so. However, I would like permission to quote from the interviews or Response Forms. You are free not to answer any specific question and to terminate the interview (if applicable) or withdraw completely from the research at any time.

Thank you so much for your thoughtfulness and time.

Barbara

Barbara A. Lloyd

- a) Why do you think others see this congregation as faithful and lively?

 - b) What evidence would you offer for describing your congregation as faithful and lively?
5. a) Are there historical factors that have contributed to your congregation being lively and faithful?
- b) If so, what are they?
6. What are the greatest challenges your congregation has faced in the last five years?
7. How do you see your congregation responding faithfully to these challenges?
8. What have been the costs and benefits of these responses?
9. a) How does your congregation maintain a sense of faithfulness and liveliness in its current life?
-
- b) What is currently so central to your congregation's life that it must continue if you are to be a faithful congregation?

10. How important is it to you that your congregation is a) faithful b) lively?

11. What difference does your congregation make to you, your family, your community, the world?

12. What relationships with outside people and/or groups help your congregation to be faithful and lively?

13. Please share a story of your congregation's faithfulness and /or liveliness that you have experienced, witnessed or heard about.

14. What symbol/image/biblical model best describes your congregation? Please explain.

15. Where do you or have you see the presence of Christ/God's Spirit in the life of your congregation?

Thank you.

Appendix E

Permission Release Form

PERMISSION RELEASE FORM

(Focus Group Participants)

I, _____ (name) voluntarily and with understanding consent to participate in this study of faithful and lively congregations in Toronto Conference.

Please initial after each statement to indicate agreement.

- I agree that material from the Response Form and the focus group interview can be used by Barbara Lloyd for her Doctor of Ministry dissertation and for the summary of research on faithful and lively congregations. _____
- I agree to allow the researcher, Barbara Lloyd, to use quotes from my Response Form and the focus group interview in her Doctor of Ministry dissertation, and in the summary of research on faithful and lively congregations. _____
- I agree to allow the researcher, Barbara Lloyd, to use quotes from my Response Form and from the Focus Group Interview without using my name but in association with the name of my congregation. _____
- I agree that our interview will be recorded and then transcribed _____

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____

Contact Phone _____ E-Mail _____

Date _____

Interviewer: Barbara A. Lloyd

Please mail this completed Permission Release Form back to Barbara Lloyd BY OCT. 16, 2006. (35 River's Edge Dr. Toronto On, M6M 5L4)

Appendix F

Excerpt from “A Song of Faith” (UCC 2006)

We sing of a church

----- seeking to continue the story of Jesus
 ----- by embodying Christ’s presence in the world.

We are called together by Christ

----- as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
 ----- loving what he loved,
 ----- living what he taught,
 ----- striving to be faithful servants of God
 ----- in our time and place.

Our ancestors in faith

----- bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living;
 ----- upon their lives our lives are built.

Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints,

----- experiencing the fulfillment of God’s reign
 ----- even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.

The church has not always lived up to its vision.

It requires the Spirit to reorient it,

----- helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,
 ----- challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,
 for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

We sing of God’s good news lived out,
 a church with purpose:

----- faith nurtured and hearts comforted,
 ----- gifts shared for the good of all,
 ----- resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,
 ----- fierce love in the face of violence,
 ----- human dignity defended,
 ----- members of a community held and inspired by God,
 ----- corrected and comforted,
 ----- instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,
 ----- creation’s mending.

We sing of God’s mission.

We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.

For the sake of the world,

God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.

In the church,

some are called to specific ministries of leadership,

both lay and ordered;
 some witness to the good news;
 some uphold the art of worship;
 some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering;
 some build up the community of wisdom;
 some stand with the oppressed and work for justice.
 To embody God's love in the world,
 the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship
 of all believers.

In grateful response to God's abundant love,
 we bear in mind our integral connection
 to the earth and one another;
 we participate in God's work of healing and mending creation.
 To point to the presence of the holy in the world,
 the church receives, consecrates, and shares
 visible signs of the grace of God.
 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.

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.

Carrying a vision of creation healed and restored,
 we welcome all in the name of Christ.
 Invited to the table where none shall go hungry,
 we gather as Christ's guests and friends.
 In holy communion
 we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed,

forgive as we have been forgiven,
love as we have been loved.
The open table speaks of the shining promise
of barriers broken and creation healed.
In the communion meal, wine poured out and bread broken,
we remember Jesus,
We remember not only the promise but also the price that he paid
for who he was,
for what he did and said,
and for the world's brokenness.
We taste the mystery of God's great love for us,
and are renewed in faith and hope.²⁵²

²⁵² UCC, "A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada L'eglise Unie Du Canada," 7-9.

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