

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: The Church on the Urban-Rural Fringe of Greater Toronto

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For all faith communities, the urban-rural fringe of the Greater Toronto Area is a place of spiritual discovery and growth; a place of welcoming. Church development leaders for most denominations venture into these areas that stretch from Pickering to Markham to Vaughan to Brampton to Barrie knowing they must create something out of nothing. And they have a definite action plan that in most cases follows a very set pattern for church growth. They buy five or ten acres of land, they send in a team of two or three organizing ministers to get things going, they build a modern, energy efficient, high tech, clean, air-conditioned, accessible and welcoming building. They have a two-acre parking lot and soft comfortable seating for their auditorium.

For church development leaders in the United Church, the experience is quite different. The United Church is already in these huge growth areas and has been for a long time. Our presence is shaped by over 35 congregations, all of which have a great deal in common with one another. Most are well over 100 years old – started by Methodist circuit riders on their horses or in their buggies going from place to place. They are small in size – both small in membership size and small in physical size. They usually have about 50 to 100 members, many of whom represent "pioneer" families that have worshipped in the place for generations. They are small brick or wood frame buildings often on postage stamp lots that were gifted by the neighbouring farm family. There may be a cemetery and a very tiny parking lot. The sanctuaries hold in the proximity of 100 people. The pews are straight back seating designed for an earlier generation of people who were on the average much smaller both in height and rear-end size. The church basement is often one or two rooms with the furnace somewhat prominent. The washrooms are in a small lean-to addition or in a simply constructed room in a corner of the basement.

Also a similarity among them is their level of pastoral leadership that for most is less than – sometimes significantly less than – full time. Some have weekend supply, others part-time retired or student supply. Others still are on a multiple point pastoral charge and share their full time minister with two or three other congregations. Sometimes, worship services are held every other Sunday.

They have one other big thing in common. On Sunday morning when folks come out from worship, they are gazing over rows and rows of new houses creeping toward them. In some cases, the new houses completely encompass them and, in

their midst, these little buildings stand, looking totally out of place in the modern architecture of the neighbouring new homes, schools and shopping centres.

These more than 35 little churches represent a challenge for the church development initiatives of the United Church in the region. And that challenge comes to us in four different ways.

The first challenge is that these little churches usually do not provide the kind of setting and program that the vast majority of newcomers are looking for. In a study commissioned by Toronto United Church Council on the demographic profile of the "seekers" who live in the new suburbs, the findings were very clear:

"Seekers are far more interested in the programs the church has to offer than they are in the community life of a congregation. Based on their interest in good programming above community, seekers don't especially care if their church is in their neighbourhood. They are used to driving everywhere for everything and so what matters to them in terms of location is that a church is easy to find and get to, and easy to park at when they arrive."

Not wanting to just use our own United Church material, let's examine the results of a major study done for the Southern Baptist Convention on what was important to seekers in their selection of a congregation.

This is the list:

- number one: adequate parking
- clean and modern facilities
- high quality nursery and preschool area
- a wide variety of quality programs
- relevant and quality music
- clean bathrooms
- friendly people
- outgoing greeters
- a clearly marked and functioning welcome centre
- good signage
- comfortable chairs
- attention-holding preaching.

Very few of the churches involved can check off more than two or three items on this list.

The second challenge these small congregations pose for church development is that most share a corporate belief that there is virtue and value in remaining small. It is a strong but often faulty belief that people moving into the neighbourhood will love to worship in an historic little building. This may be true for a bride and groom driving around looking for a good place for photo opts, but it's not true for most young families looking for a well run church school, a clean and safe nursery, and comfortable and modern facilities. Most often they will drive right by to the new church where all of this and more is provided. And they can do this because denominational labels are meaning less and less.

The third challenge is the amount of energy, time and money that is required to supervise these congregations. For Presbyteries, finding pastoral leaders willing to work a few hours a week takes time. Managing the oversight and stewardship of these churches also takes resources. Sometimes mission support grants are needed. As one person said at a Presbytery planning meeting, "It costs us a lot maintaining their freedom to be and remain small."

Finally, the last big challenge is the psychological effect these churches have on the Presbyteries involved. And it manifests itself in two ways. First, in some cases the Presbytery is lulled into the belief that they've got the new subdivisions covered when, in fact, what they have is a quaint landmark for people to use when giving directions to the new church complex of another denomination. The second manifestation is fear. The Presbytery may know what is needed, may even have a God given lightening-bolt vision, but there is fear of offending and making waves. And so the Presbytery approaches development conversations with these little churches with about the same enthusiasm as they would if they had to walk through a field of rattlesnakes. And too often what results is minor tinkering when a major retrofit is needed.

There have been examples where these little churches have shared the vision and have made bold and wonderful decisions to never be the same again. But in these very few cases, it meant the Presbytery and the congregation needed to experience a partnership that was built on trust. And if these examples are to be lived out in other places in the urban-rural fringe of our region, then these little churches will need great courage, the kind of courage that comes from knowing they are not in this venture alone. The verbs used in this process can be either frightening or exciting – relinquish, relocate, rebuild, work, and welcome. They can be exciting words if the vision is clear, if it is developed and owned by all the partners, and if it is built on the goal of sharing the Good News and giving people a place to grow in faith.

Yes, these little churches are a challenge, but they also provide a great opportunity for our United Church in the urban-rural fringe. If we creatively, willingly and cooperatively make our plans for how best to serve the new neighbourhoods in the region, our United Church will have one exciting thing going for it that the other denominations will not have. We will have caring and capable people already there extending a warm greeting to the newcomer with the welcoming news that the celebration can begin because they've arrived.

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