

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: United Church at a Crossroads for Mission

AUTHOR(S): Bonnie Greene

PAPER: 2011-23

REVIEW DATE: January 2011

I'm going to offer you two stories that capture both the opportunities and the challenges of local ministries in our United Church.

Story #1: While at a national meeting of charities working on funding of local community organizations that make our communities work, I met a friend who was just back from a trip out west where he had been talking about closing the poverty gap between the rich and the poor in this country. "Friends," he says, "let's not pin our hopes on Ottawa. What this country really needs is more United Church people!" This man is a Quebecker, a person who really has not been to church in his life, except for weddings. But in communities all over western Canada, he met people from our congregations and outreach ministries who had come out to hear him speak. He was stunned at their knowledge of the issues, the activities they were involved in locally, and at their relationships with low-income Canadians. He had decided that the only hope for closing the gap between rich and poor was more people like the ones he had met.

Story #2: A few months later, I was at another meeting of national charities, including the United Way, CUSO, Oxfam, Volunteer Canada, the Y, the Cancer Society, and so on. A famous pollster was to deliver the results of the second National Survey on Giving and Volunteering. Now I have always had a sneaking suspicion that some of the other charities hoped that we churches would disappear and our donors would give to them instead. Raising money "to do good" is so hard that it would be quite natural to feel that way. So I was unprepared when the pollster reported that by far the biggest number of volunteers and donors to all organizations in Canada were people who were active in faith groups – in their local congregations. The message was clear: the future of other charities and of local communities depends on the future of our congregations. A woman from a non-church group leaned over to me and said, "Whoa! I sure hope your pews are full. Or we will all die when you close your last church."

It is a wonderful witness by our people, but it is also where the rub lies. You and I know:

- how full the pews are in our own congregations,
- how many youth and young adults are among us, being formed as "neighbours and gardeners", rather than just consumers and individuals,
- how many people have had to use their volunteer time on church fundraisers just to meet the annual budget.

We know how fragile the congregations and outreach ministries in our communities are.

Even if our particular ministries are okay, we all take a deep breath when Statistics Canada issues the information on religion from its census. Staff of the General Council put that Statistics Canada information up against our own church statistics. As limited as that picture is, there are a couple of messages we need to think about as a church.

- We have lots of places or buildings where local mission can happen, but they are not where most Canadians now live. The people of the country have moved – 80% now live in just 10 major cities.
- In the four biggest Canadian cities, our congregations shrank, even though the population around them grew. These are congregations that we have depended on as contributors to the mission of the whole church.

Those messages have corollaries that affect the rest of the church. Rural and small town churches are spending a great deal of mission energy on questions of amalgamation. And other local ministries such as seniors' homes need significant renovations – not just a bucket of paint – simply to stay up to the provincial code, let alone meet the competition of the for-profit operators of such homes.

The church needs a major infusion of people and funds, just to stay in place, let alone to enter into new ministries where Canadians now live. We need to figure out how to make that happen.

The crossroads for each local ministry will be met by their local ministry leaders, not by the General Council. However, we are all "United" for a reason. We have a denomination for a reason. There are choices the denomination needs to make about how the resources of the denomination will support those ministry leaders in a rapidly changing Canada.

For example, should we continue ministry in areas where the population is declining? Should we continue ministry in areas where the population is rising but our congregations are declining? Should we leave that ministry to others?

Would it be enough for us as a denomination to gradually decline and to become a legacy church in Canadian society – a fantastic legacy, but a legacy just the same? Or do we still believe God has work for us to do in God's mission among Canadians? If so, how will the denomination provide the support systems and the financial support to do that? What could the denomination do to create an enabling environment for local mission and ministry in Canada as it is becoming?

Bonnie Greene is a member of The Centre for Church Development and Leadership (TUCC) management group. She participates on the ministry team at North Bramalea United Church in Brampton, Ontario.

Church Development Discussion Papers are not formal publications of The Toronto United Church Council. They present independent ideas and observations that are intended to encourage discussion and comment among church leaders in local congregations and Presbyteries. The information, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in these Discussion Papers are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to The Toronto United Church Council. Articles are reprinted with permission.