

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

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The United Church faces stark choices. Will we choose life or accept death? We have celebrated the achievements and acknowledged the failures of our United Church over 80 years. Now it is time to look to the future. Does the United Church have a future? Will the United Church live to celebrate its 100th anniversary? If we want the answer to be "yes," now is the time to let our imagination tell us where the Spirit is leading us.

As he gazed upon the promised land, Moses said: "I set before you today, life and death, blessing and curse, therefore choose life." (Deut. 30:19) What does it mean for us to choose life? It doesn't mean doing the same things in the same way while expecting a different result. It doesn't mean living in the past. It doesn't mean spending our time on yesterday's problems while avoiding tomorrow's opportunities.

For the United Church a key component of choosing life is to give birth to new congregations. Is this not what the disciples of Jesus were about? To choose life will require us to put massive amounts of energy, money and resources into new congregational formation. Regrettably, during the next 25 years many congregations will close. Unless we give birth to as many new congregations as we lose we will continue to decline in membership. We will choose death over life.

Between 1945 and 1965 our United Church membership grew significantly, exceeding one million members. We were a people on the move. Four hundred new congregations were formed in 20 years. Church schools were filled and overflowing.

In the past quarter-century, the formation of new United Church congregations proceeded at a snail's pace. The leadership of the church was at best indifferent and in many instances openly negative toward efforts to support new congregational formation.

Although it achieved its goal, the Ventures in Mission program fell far short of the requirements for new congregational development. Despite this, some progress was made and those new congregations that formed and grew have become beacons of hope in a dry and barren land. Foremost amongst those who persevered were congregations formed around ethnic compatibility and congregations emerging on the periphery of massive urban development.

It is my conviction that the formation of new congregations, "communities of faith," is absolutely essential to achieve life and health as a church. Health is dependent upon the growth of new cells. Will we choose life or will we choose death?

Thirty years ago, the then three Toronto Presbyteries hired a consulting firm to undertake an in-depth study of the future of the United Church in Metropolitan Toronto. The consultants came to this conclusion in their final report: *The United Church of Canada in Metropolitan Toronto wants to survive. It wants to be a viable force within the culture. The chances of doing so are very slim.* Obviously the consultants were wrong. The United Church in Toronto did survive. But is survival enough? I don't think so. Survival is undoubtedly a worthy goal. We have spent the last 25 years as a denomination trying to survive. We can be grateful we have survived. Surely now is the time to choose a higher goal.

Many years ago, Professor Terry Anderson proposed that there are three levels of goals: survival goals; maintenance goals; and mission goals. To settle for survival goals or even maintenance goals is not to choose life. To choose life is to choose *mission goals*. I would propose therefore that we band together as United Church people and set a modest but achievable mission goal – to form 100 new United Church congregations in the next 25 years and in addition to establish 10 new United Church camps.

Not all new congregations require land and buildings but many will. Surely new congregations should not be burdened with massive debt. It is hardly good news for young Christians seeking a church home to be told that they must add to their financial burden by paying for their church building. Where new churches are required, we should together raise the money that is needed and place them, debt-free, in growth areas. Some of our Evangelical sister denominations are doing this. Why shouldn't we do it?

We may ask, how can our denominational structures do this while carrying the burdens of other issues? They can't. We need a radically different approach. I would propose that we stimulate and encourage the formation of a new agency for congregational and church camp development within The United Church of Canada. This process might begin with conversation and consultations convened by the moderator involving lay people of vision and conviction embodying theological and entrepreneurial gifts.

Will we collectively, as members of The United Church of Canada, choose life or death, blessing or curse as we move toward our 100th anniversary? The choice is ours to make. In the words of a hymn: *For what we choose is what we are, and what we love we yet shall be, the goal may ever shine afar, the will to win makes us free.*

Albion Wright is a former Executive Director of Toronto United Church Council. Albion passed away in 2010, and this discussion paper is among his legacy gifts to the church.

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