

Change, Challenge and Form

An address by Lynn Freeman to Crossroads United Church, Kingston, Ontario,
on the occasion of its First Anniversary, January 30, 2011

One Saturday, this summer, my adult daughter and I drove from Toronto towards Kingston via Highway 7. We travelled east through Toronto's extensive northern urban sprawl until it gave way to farmlands, fields and woods. We stopped for lunch in Port Perry, a picturesque tourist haven on Lake Scugog, and then set off again. The next part of our trip was through the rich green, wooded landscape of the Ganaraska Hills. Then, as Highway 7 veered north towards Peterborough, we turned south, then east, south, east, alternately, travelling along two-lane paved county roads until we reached Highway 2 at Colborne and followed it home.

We travelled through villages, hamlets and four-corner stops, each one new to us. We passed a surprising number of small churches at measured locations along the road. Most seemed structurally sound and most appeared closed, some were boarded up. In a few locations, the church was the only remaining structure breaking the landscape. On this journey, it suddenly hit me that these structures, built to serve for generations, had been abandoned as major social and economic forces had drawn individuals, families, and communities of families, from declining prospects in rural areas to employment in urban centres. Each of these congregations, in their own time, had faced the painful decision to close.

Later, in the summer, my family and I drove through Prince Edward County, a rural area that has recently experienced population and economic growth. There I noticed that each village and town had its own United Church, each at the same approximate distance from each other as the churches along Highway 7. Only here each of these were active congregations. These two observations converged in my mind as evidence of a century-long process of social change. As people literally moved away from their homes and from their home churches, they built new churches and created new institutional structures. The celebrated birth of the United Church of Canada in 1925 created a new association which linked hundreds of individual congregations across

Canada within a single institutional framework, but it too was created from the seeds of social change and challenge.

This discovery helped to put into perspective, for me, the challenge that is facing congregations in this Presbytery and currently replicated in all parts of the country. The drop-off in attendance, finances and volunteers in our congregations results, to a significant degree, from social and economic transformations that have been taking place over decades and are continuing without abatement. These changes fall outside the domain of the church in both its local and national manifestations. These immense changes include: the depopulation of rural areas; the entry of women into the workforce; a decline in fertility; the growth of smaller households; and an increase in the average lifespan of Canadians. These changes since the late 1950s have been accompanied by a rise in social and economic inequality. Even in Canada, where our commitment to the redistribution of income through social security remains comparatively strong, there has been a steady rise in income inequality over the last 50 years. These trends have been intensified in the last two decades with the growth of the global economy, the ascendancy of neo-conservatism with its emphasis on individualism, and new patterns of international human migration.

I have catalogued these changes for two reasons. First, I want to underline that these immense social and economic changes have caused and continue to cause significant disruption and dislocation in the lives of many individuals and families. This recitation helps to remind each and every one of us that there remains great human deprivation and marginalization within our community, our nation and the world. It also underlines the continuing and desperate need for churches and other charitable organizations to work to alleviate human need and advance social justice at home and abroad. Secondly, this list of major social and economic changes forms a backdrop against which I want to share very briefly the stories of two local United Churches. Each has been engaged in a change process for the purpose of securing a sustainable future.

My home church is Sydenham Street United Church. Located downtown, it was established in the mid-nineteenth century. About ten years ago, following the retirement of a beloved minister who had served the congregation for nearly 30 years, it entered a difficult transition period. And, like other congregations, it faced a decline in regular church attendance and financial support. About four years ago, coinciding with the pending retirement of the then staff associate, it initiated a broad consultative process to identify its future needs and develop potential options for long-term sustainability.

The process began with small group meetings of congregational members with representatives from local health and social service organizations and other churches. This was followed by extensive consultation within the congregation and the eventual identification of three primary ministries and activity areas. "Engaging the Spirit," one of the three, gives priority to worship, faith development, pastoral care and small group ministry. A second ministry focuses on outreach and social justice. A third ministry, "Nurturing the Arts," engages the creative interests of congregational members to enhance worship through artistic expression. It also actively promotes the use of the sanctuary as a formal concert venue in support of the arts and local arts groups, while generating revenues to support building costs.

Crossroads United Church is the other church. It has worked faithfully to create a new vision for its future. We celebrate its first anniversary today, but it is nearly three years since the idea of this new congregation was first imagined. I had the privilege of being present during two years of this transformation. I served as one of two Presbytery representatives on the joint committee, established by Queen Street and St. Margaret's United Churches, to explore the idea of amalgamation. I was also a Presbytery representative on the joint committee charged with developing a proposal for amalgamation, a proposal which would then be presented to each congregation for its independent consideration. Subsequently, I served on the Joint Needs Assessment Committee.

From my experience, I can assure you that each of these committees and their members worked faithfully and diligently on your behalf. They also benefitted from regular consultation with the members of both congregations. Thoughtfully and consensually, the committees developed a new vision, mission and organizational framework for a new church. A sub-committee collected potential names and defined a balloting process, including the resolution of tie votes. (Some of you may recall that they were, in fact, two ties in the process of determining the name.) The committees were blessed with wise **and** sensitive leaders. They gave priority to the possibilities for the new congregation, while also acknowledging the personal, and sometimes intense, feelings of loss and grief experienced by many individuals. Your ministers supported the work of the committees. They also jointly, gracefully and generously provided spiritual leadership to the two congregations, which were now worshipping together. The vision for the new congregation drew on the history, strengths and values of the two parenting congregations, and it offers new and exciting possibilities for the future. It is this remarkable achievement that we celebrate today.

Both of these congregations—Sydenham Street and Crossroads United Churches—have undergone successful and holy transformations in my view. The general circumstances prompting these congregations to take a bold first step towards change were similar. They were different in detail and process. The primary goals of the two “new” congregations are similar in general terms, but again different in detail. Both honour the foundational Christian values of faith and charity, values which continue to be best represented in the words of Jesus as the two greatest commandments and which I first learned in Sunday School a long, long time ago. The first is: “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The second is: “To love your neighbour as yourself.”

These two congregations have each articulated a renewed commitment to Christian faith development and social justice. In their respective new forms, both congregations face the opportunity to live out these commitments in new, different and meaningful ways, some of which have yet to be discovered.

I am hopeful for the future of these congregations. I am also hopeful for the future of the United Church of Canada, if it too is willing to implement organizational change. I strongly believe that there is a tremendous need for new forms of church organization at the local, regional and national levels. The needs are so great; our resources are so few. Looking towards the future, from the perspective of the past, we can see that change, cooperation and integration have been an essential part of the history of the United Church of Canada both before and since its founding in 1925. These patterns of change, cooperation and integration have been motivated in part by social and economic forces that fall outside the direct influence of individual ministers, churchgoers and congregations. When looking to understand why there are fewer people in the pews, fewer volunteers to serve on committees, and fewer dollars on the collection plate, considering these larger social and economic changes may help us to better understand both the impact and the opportunities that facing us, as congregations. In looking outside our walls, we may discover new ways in which we, as individuals and as congregations, can better “love our neighbour.”

In looking outside our walls, we may also identify new partners who share our commitment to greater social justice in a world of increasing disparities. Such partners may be churches—of our own or another denomination, other faith communities and even non-faith communities. Through cooperation and partnership with others, our gifts of time, treasure and talent may be more effectively employed towards alleviating human need and advancing social justice locally, nationally and globally. In looking outside our walls, we may also find that the differences between us are no greater than the differences that we know to exist within our walls.

If there are many organizations—clerical and sectarian--that share our commitment to social justice, the church carries a relatively unique role in being concerned about our spiritual health. The compelling human search for meaning—in life and in death—is made no less compelling amidst our many material comforts. Through worship, prayer and inspiration, alone or with others, the church can provide us

with the strength to meet the challenges of our daily lives, the peace to accept ourselves and others, and the understanding of what it means to live in God's grace.

In my experience, it is only through the church which we can come to know the meaning and power of the first commandment: "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Today's reading from Micah reminds us to God's expectations for us; The Beatitudes, a more familiar reading from Matthew, reminds us of God's transcending power.

Change has been a constant reality in the history of the United Church of Canada and in congregational life. We can look to an idealized past church life or we can recognize the inevitability of social and economic change, and be ready to reform our church structures, as need and opportunity arise. In so doing, we face new possibilities to grow in our faith and service as individuals and communities.

In creating Crossroads United Church, you have each accepted change and embraced hope for a new church future. It has been both difficult and at times painful to give birth to this new congregation, but the future of the United Church of Canada depends on local congregations giving new vision and creating new forms for congregational life. You are approaching the end of your planning. Your life, as a new congregation, is just beginning. In this achievement, there is much for you to celebrate, and there is much for you to share with other congregations. Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today.