

# **TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL**

## **Connecting Resources with Ministry**

### **Church Development Discussion Papers**

**TITLE:** Affiliates: There's Work to be Done

**AUTHOR(S):** Vincent Alfano

**PAPER:** 2011-01

**REVIEW DATE:** January 2011

For ten years my sister taught in the church school. Every Sunday, week in and week out she would prepare her lesson and head off to the local United Church to meet "her kids". When she wasn't teaching, she was in worship. And she kept busy participating in the programs of the congregation, helping at rummage sales and rehearsing the Christmas pageant.

Five years ago, she took a break. Her two older teenagers, my niece and nephew, were in high maintenance mode, and her career as an educator was now eating into her evenings and weekends. Our mother was being relocated into a nursing home as her Alzheimer's disease advanced. So my sister stepped back and stepped out of the custom of going to church. Those four hours on Sunday were required in the busyness of her routines.

She continues to keep in touch with her friends from church. She goes for walks with them, calls them on the phone, and writes notes when they have a birthday or a need for a "get well". She wanted news from the church and knew she was just "on a sabbatical". Her declaration to family and friends was, "Well, I think I'll try the choir next."

I've often wondered how many people are out there who really and truly believe, with their whole heart and soul, that they are members of a certain denomination and congregation. The results of any census make it clear; there are people in every community who have self-proclaimed ties to a church home. They may come at Christmas and Easter. They may show up at the annual congregational dinner or at the anniversary service. They may send in a cheque now and then, or drop their kids off at church school. They may have been active several years ago and then stepped back. They may have attended church school and headed off to university. They may, like my sister, just need a break to get their busy life in some order. They may not be there on Sunday, but when the census-taker comes to the door, they say they are United Church, and often say it with some pride and enthusiasm.

Here then are the big questions. Are they on the congregation's list of participants? Does the congregation know them; know their names and the names of their kids; know where they live, what they do, and what their needs are? Do these people receive the congregation's mailings? Are they visited? Are they made to really feel welcomed?

Research would indicate that most congregations do not know these folks, and if they are known, they are not a priority for ministry. They exist on the edge in a culture that takes great care in "pruning the roles" and "saving every penny (or 59 pennies plus tax in the case of a stamp)".

Let me continue the story of my sister. Something else was happening in her relationship with her church. Perhaps the first sign was that the mail from the church began to thin out until it stopped. Her offering envelopes were discontinued because she hadn't been around. When a lengthy hospital visit was required for my brother-in-law, the pastoral care from the church was a less than five-minute phone call from the minister.

Reg Bibby reports in his book *Restless Churches* that what happened to my sister happens far too often. And when it happens, it's at the peril of the congregation. He says, *"For too long, Canadian religious groups have been stuck in a paradigm rut where they have viewed people in dichotomous black-and-white terms. Reflecting both ecclesiology and theology, they have variously tended to divide individuals into two categories: active and inactive, saved and unsaved, involved and uninvolved, good and lapsed, lost and found, saint and sinner...people are either churched or unchurched."*

My sister always believed she was "in", a part of the congregation. She needed a break and hoped that need would be understood. The congregation saw an empty pew and figured she was "out" and included her in the ranks of the "unchurched".

Reg Bibby says its time to move to a new paradigm in dealing with people. *"Rather than viewing them as 'churched' or 'unchurched', it is more accurate to see them as 'affiliates'."* Why wouldn't we do this? Think about it! Who better to involve in the life of our congregations than the people who already "affiliate" with us and who have an attraction to us. It's obviously the very best place to start. Bibby continues, *"What is important here is to see people who identify with a religious group as part of that group's pool of people, regardless of their level of participation."*

So, what replaces the old "you're in or you're out" model? Image a series of concentric circles with active members in the centre circle and moving out from there are rings of people with different levels of involvement. In the second ring are people who perhaps attend once a month, in the next are those who join in at high points of the church year, and so it goes until you reach the outer ring of the disaffiliates who only hold a memory of church school or watch their parents' involvement from a distance. This is not a "snapshot" image, but one that is in continuous motion. Remember, people are constantly moving back and forth from one ring to another. Even disaffiliates – people on the most outer ring – are often just temporarily disaffiliated and will return when the baby's born, or retirement hits, or if they have need for the rites of passage.

This contribution to our thinking by itself makes *Restless Churches* a valuable resource for most church development leaders, but there is even more. Bibby writes: *"What's needed so badly today is a commitment on the part of churches to do what they can by way of moving beyond ministries that are turned inward, and reaching out to Canadians who need ministry."* He challenges those of us in church

development ministries to reconnect with people – especially people who already affiliate with us – and to move them toward the centre. It can be done but it involves locating our affiliates, being in conversation with them, assessing their needs, assessing our ability to respond to the needs, and then getting new ministries up and running. Each step is critical and requires changing old patterns and a whole lot of “thinking outside the box”. In *Restless Churches*, Bibby offers a well thought out methodology for “people out there on the lines” that is both doable and works.

But this is not a simple “magic potion” packaged program to increase membership and fill offering plates. Bibby’s conversations with affiliates continue to confirm that these folks on the outer rings will move toward the centre if, and only if, it is worthwhile to them and their families. What makes it worthwhile? You guessed it – effective ministry. Quoting Bibby, *“Affiliates spoke first and foremost about being receptive to greater involvement if religious groups could help them deal with their spiritual needs, cope with personal issues, and have better ties with their partners and their children. In one word, Canadians are open to churches that have significance.”*

In *Restless Churches* we are first being offered a vital reminder that people will give themselves to those things that they define as important. And if that reminder challenges us, then Bibby patiently works with us to answer the important questions that will naturally follow:

- Are we in touch with what people need?
- Do we want to provide what people need?
- Are we able to provide what people need?
- Can we do so with integrity?

Speaking directly to The United Church of Canada, Reg Bibby sets out the challenge. *“If the United Church embarks on a program of literally finding its affiliates and others, communicating with them, determining their diverse spiritual, personal, and social needs, and attempts to respond to those needs, the Church in turn will be embraced by larger numbers of people. The goal is not so mundane as to put people in pews; but if people find significance in the church – find that their lives are enriched by faith and the faith community – they will participate.”*

Vincent Alfano is Executive Director of Toronto United Church Council.

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.