

# **TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL**

## **Connecting Resources with Ministry**

### **Church Development Discussion Papers**

**TITLE:** The Regional Church: New, Creative, Effective

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Church development leaders, recognizing the realities of the myriad of changes taking place in society, have been struggling to find new, creative and effective ways to mold congregational life within Toronto Conference of the United Church. Since 2000, the "regional church" model has evolved as a significant option for this renewal.

What does a "regional church" look like? In order to delve into this question, it is important to look at the forms of new church development that have previously been a part of the United Church's life in Toronto Conference. There have been several strategies used in establishing new congregations, but there are two models that, by the sheer number of churches started, have given shape to our presence in the communities of our Conference.

#### **The Methodist Chapels**

Across our region are small chapels started over 100 years ago by Methodist circuit riders on their horses or in their buggies going from place to place. Originally planned as gathering places for a scattered rural population, they are small in size – both small in membership size and small in physical size. They are housed in brick or wood frame buildings often on "postage stamp" size lots that were gifted by the neighbouring farm family. There may be a cemetery and very small 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 much smaller both in height and weight. The church basement is often one or two rooms with the furnace somewhat prominent. The washrooms, added later to replace outhouses, are often in a small lean-to addition or in a simply constructed room in a corner of the basement.

These congregations usually have 50 to 100 members, many of whom represent "pioneer" families who have worshipped in the place for generations. The level of pastoral leadership is less than – sometimes significantly less than – full time. Some have weekend supply, others part-time retired or student supply. Others are on a multiple point pastoral charge and share their full time minister with two or three other congregations.

## The Neighbourhood Churches

From the late 1930s to the early 1980s, the neighbourhood church was the primary model for developing congregations. The Presbyteries and Toronto United Church Council acquired sites within expanding city suburbs and growing small towns. Properties of one or two acres became the home of a building design that included a large fixed-pew sanctuary, small meeting rooms and offices, and often a gymnasium. Very little parking was provided on these properties that were usually located deep within the subdivision, often adjoining the neighbourhood school.

The strategy was consistent. One church was planned for populations of 10,000 to 25,000 people. This made sense for the time because these congregations were established during a period when most people worked in their local area, shopped at neighbourhood stores, participated in cooperative community activities, and walked to church. Close friendship and kinship networks were created and these networks defined and supported the local community. The congregation was an answer to a great need to belong, to find a spiritual home. Being a close *family* community, the congregational focus for programming was "one size fits all", symbolized most prominently by a single weekly "all-in together" multi-generational worship service.

Many active members of these neighbourhood churches have moved away and now commute regularly to Sunday worship. Those who were the youth of the congregation in the 1960s and 1970s have also moved out of the neighbourhood and may now only return, at best, for special occasions. The neighbourhoods have often changed ethnically and other denominations are establishing missions to meet the spiritual needs of the new residents. Neighbourhood congregations passively host these ethnic groups by renting space to them. These changes in membership residency and in building use mean parking is an issue and rentals are the operating budget's critical source of income.

### A changing demographic

Much has been made of the fact that, as Canada's population continues to diversify in ethno-cultural and religious terms, fewer and fewer people in any given *catchment area* are likely to align themselves with a United Church congregation. Less has been made of the perhaps more important fact that even those who are "our people" (either potentially or in fact) understand their relationship to the church very differently than did those who flooded the church during the Church Extension era (1960's) or even the *Ventures in Mission* period (1980's). It is now conventional wisdom to speak of the *seekers* who are supposed to be everywhere in Canada, turning in part to the churches for meaning and purpose in their lives. What these folk are *seeking*, however, in terms of their relationship to the church, is really quite different from those who came in the Extension or *Ventures in Mission* eras. Here is a capsule glimpse of some of those differences:

- Seekers come with almost no Biblical knowledge. They have only the vaguest understanding of the Judeo-Christian story and tradition, and their interest in "spirituality" is more often amorphous and romantic, with few if any roots in the historic faith or practice of the church.

- Seekers are far more interested in the programs the church has to offer than they are in the community life of a congregation. In the Church Extension era, it is safe to say that the primary motivation driving many new suburbanites to the church was a yearning to “belong”, to find a place and a spiritual home. Today’s seekers are happy enough to get to know other folk at church, but what they really are seeking is programming for themselves and, particularly, their children. They want to have a happy life, and are interested in anything the church can offer them and their kids to increase their sense of worth and fulfillment.
- Rooted in a culture of strident consumerism, seekers are quite accustomed to the notion of “paying for what they get”. They understand that a BMW costs more than a Chev, and they are used to making choices on the basis of a “cost-benefit analysis”. They demand excellence in programming, but understand that excellence has a cost and are willing, if not eager or in some cases able, to pay it. Possessing little church background or training in a culture of “benevolence”, however, they are less inclined to think in terms of “giving” freely to causes that do not in some way benefit themselves. They look for direct linkages between costs incurred and services offered.
- Based on their interest in good programming above community, seekers do not 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, to get to, and to park at when they arrive. Air conditioning is nice, too.
- Membership means little or nothing to today’s seekers. It was said (perhaps with generous hyperbole) that, in the 1960’s, all one had to do was stick a sign with a United Church crest in an empty field, and folks would show up with their certificates in hand ready to build. In the 1980’s, people probably couldn’t find their certificates, but with encouragement could be talked into confirming their belonging in the congregation. Today’s seekers have discovered that membership bears no relationship to the availability of the United Church programs in their lives, (“You mean, we can bring our kids to Sunday School whether we’re members or not??”) and so can see no reason to make such a commitment.
- Because they come frequently from mixed, or no, religious background, seekers place little value on denominational connection. They may have some vague sense of the United Church being “open”, and may enter our doors because they think they will be welcome here; beyond that, they know little and care less about our church’s history. If there is better programming for their kids at the other church down the street, they will go there without a second thought.
- Today’s seekers trust electronic communications more than any other mode; verbal communications come a close second, with traditional print media far behind. This is a direct inversion of the order held in the 1960’s.
- In the 1960’s, men were the movers and shakers behind most of the development. Women defined themselves as “auxiliary” and discovered ways

to shape the process, even if subtly and invisibly from behind the scenes. In the group of today's seekers, women are the primary church connection and men, who are not prepared to serve as "auxiliary", sit more or less marginalized on the sidelines. Or, more likely, stay home.

- Seekers are children of the rock generation (musically). Fewer than 3% of Canadians under 50 years old name "Classical" as their favorite form of musical expression.
- There is a whole new category of potential members in modern "recreational" communities that could be described as "young retirees". These people, in their mid 50's to early 60's, are migrating to the lower housing costs and pristine lifestyle of cottage country. They bring a church background and often "large church" experience; they enjoy the "quaintness" of rural churches, but may not be prepared to trundle off to outdoor plumbing or to freeze in sanctuaries that are heated one hour a week.

There are, of course, always enough exceptions to prove any good rule, and that surely applies here. But the group whom the United Church might seek to reach in this "third wave" of development is very different from those to whom we reached out in the 1960's, or even the 1980's.

### **The Third Wave - The Regional Church**

The new millennium requires a new model – a third approach to the way church development is done. The focus must now move to the establishment of regional churches – churches that think regionally rather than concentrating on a local neighbourhood or suburb. By definition, regional churches are not "one size fits all" congregations. They are clusters of overlapping communities of people, worship gatherings, small groups, and program teams. They recognize that people have differing ministry needs, tastes in music and worship, and life stage issues and interests. While appearing to be bigger (and physically they are), these churches work hard at being the faith home to these many different overlapping circles of people.

Regional churches are easier to define than they are to describe. This is because an effective regional church will look and be different in each different context. There are, however, some common characteristics that can be used to depict most regional churches. Regional churches tend to have:

- ...multiple worship experiences that acknowledge the diverse expectations and differing requirements of people. Such worship is planned to meet generational, cultural, sub-cultural, language, special interest or ministry needs. These services occur on Sunday and during the week. Worship involves musicians, actors, dancers and singers. Use of electronic media is common.
- ...a myriad of small groups to provide opportunities for deeper associations. Groups can centre on fellowship, learning, welcoming newcomers, serving the community, advocacy, and preparing for creative worship. In a multi-focused regional church, the small group becomes a place of belonging.

- ...growing and equipping participants to do ministry rather than developing social service programs totally managed by professional staff. People are well trained to be visitors, counsellors, caregivers and mentors.
- ...a team of staff rather than a single ministry agent, although not all staff need to be full-time paid employees. A case is to be made for the need of a senior team leader, a person with strong leadership skills. The team consists of ministers and program leaders, both paid and volunteer, who find their calling in specialist areas of ministry.
- ...decision-making structures that are creative and effective. By the very nature of being a "multi-focused" regional Church, requirements placed on congregational meetings are impractical and often ineffective. This same "multi-focused" life means a great deal of trust must be placed in the leadership because all participants usually do not know individual leaders.
- ...a focus on children and youth ministries. This focus finds its first expression in the creation of a place for children and youth that honours the authentic, deep spirituality and gifts for leadership that are uniquely theirs. The young are not seen as potential Christians needing indoctrination; rather they are honoured as authentically spiritual beings in their own right, needing opportunities to share that spirituality with the whole community. These ministries have a high degree of professionalism, quality programming, exceptional leadership and safe and secure environments.
- ...a quality building that has multiple worship centres and various size meeting rooms. Flexibility, multiple-use, accessibility, and climate control are the key design factors in creating space. The building is in use seven days a week. Parking areas are large.

The above statements describe what all regional churches by their nature "tend to have". But what distinctive core values would a regional United Church have if it is to be faithful to the theology, character and ethos of the United Church as it has developed in the changed and changing context of Canada today? The scope of this article does not permit a full definition of these, but the essential core values of the regional United Church would include:

- *...being vitally inclusive.* No other quality so defines the distinctive contribution of our denomination to the religious mosaic than our commitment to be welcoming and inclusive. For a regional United Church, this means sending clear and consistent signals to the community that all are welcome here, not just as visitors nor as recruits, but as persons whose spiritual journey will be honoured, respected and nurtured.
- *...being vitally intelligent.* Yes, it's true; even to say this implies precisely the kind of elitism that we deplore as a denomination. But something else is equally true! Amongst the vast pool of seekers looking for a church like the one we are describing, the vast majority does not believe in a literal and historical interpretation of the Bible. For them, the truth of God rests within the myths, allegories, imageries, parables and metaphors of the Biblical

account. They are looking for ways to deal with this mystery and mythology. They sense there is "something more here", and need to know there is another option besides Biblical literalism on the one hand, and total cynicism on the other. They yearn for an intelligent way to think about the Bible and its teachings and to practice and share spiritual disciplines like worship and prayer. A regional United Church needs to offer ways to deal with scripture, tradition, worship and practice that are intellectually consistent with the world in which most Christians live today.

- ...being vitally involved with the working out of the Reign (Kingdom) of God. Because we are a Christ-centred church not just in name but also in practice, a regional United Church must be a beacon, visible to the whole community, of justice, integrity and hope. It must live its life as a contemporary expression of the social gospel that has defined our denomination throughout the last century, and is needed more desperately today than ever before. It must be clear, right from the start that a commitment to the community's poor, hungry, broken and desperate ones is intrinsic to the very heart of the new regional congregations being created. And that commitment goes beyond charity to social change, beyond sympathy to justice making.

Regional churches are important to the future of new church development within the United Church. They have great potential to be growing and financially viable organizations in areas not yet served by our denomination. They also confirm that bigger does not necessarily mean better. People gather in smaller groupings to enhance their worship life, their involvement in ministry, and their growth in the faith. The regional church will serve both those who seek to have their needs met in the "large mall complex" and those who want to experience "the intimate village".

The regional church, with its focus on small group ministry and multiple worship experiences, is also a practical option for congregational redevelopment. For existing United Church congregations seeking imaginative ways to both serve their demographically changing communities and maximize the use of their human and financial resources in mission and ministry, this model offers a creative and financially effective alternative to amalgamations and closure. The same holds true in areas where creative consolidation of existing congregations can and should occur.

### **Not only, but also**

Church development leaders have been willing to discuss the establishment of regional churches, but they continue to return to four key interrelated activities that must also be attended to as part of this endeavour. These tasks are:

1. Ensuring that the structures and governance procedures of the United Church are alive and creative enough to give support to a regional church vision.
2. Interpreting the vision of the regional church to our current church members who have long established views of what "church" should be.
3. Encouraging existing congregations of the United Church to see the regional

church as a ministry opportunity rather than as a threat to be met with fear and suspicion.

4. Training and equipping identified United Church ministry personnel to serve and function as part of a large multi-dimensional staff team.

## **Conclusion**

Regional churches are only part of the answer to how to reach out to our changing society. Only time will tell if they are better or worse than any other type of church development. Even so, the United Church has much work to do in establishing new congregations in communities where our people are without a church home. It also has much work to do in redeveloping existing congregations in our changing cities, suburbs and rural areas. Because the church exists to love God, to make disciples, and to serve the community, vital worship and a vision for mission to a local region is crucial. One thing is certain, careful stewardship of valuable resources in people and property will determine our future.

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