

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

Connecting Resources with Ministry

Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: New Congregation Can Grow Within Shadow of the Old

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I'm thinking that this would be a good time for us in the Anglican Church of Canada to be thinking about how to plant some new congregations. I'm not talking about new congregations in new housing developments which is something we have been doing for a long time now. I am talking about some new congregations right in the shadow of existing congregations, with their parish boundaries.

I am thinking this way because we seem to be confronted by two inescapable realities. The first is the fact, which seems by now to be undeniable, that the majority of present congregations seem unable to connect with the people around them. The current long-term members of course love the style and tone of their services, and treasure them deeply.

But many others have long since voted with their feet, having decided that there is nothing there to keep them. And many more live in the shadows of their buildings, nursing a deep spiritual hunger but sensing that the style and form of the local Anglican congregation is not going to connect with them.

The second reality is that the majority of our present congregations seem either unwilling or unable to connect with those who have left or never come. In many congregations it would be unwise to attempt radical change unless the leader felt a call to martyrdom.

The current members are still members precisely because they like the church the way it is. That is why they still attend, while others have dropped out. This is certainly understandable and obviously the church shouldn't be disenfranchising its current, life-long, faithful supporters by suddenly turning inside out a style they deeply treasure. But unless something radical is done the current trend of aging, dwindling congregations will continue. This hardly brings glory to God.

So what is to be done, in seeking to serve two radically different constituencies; the life-long, faithful supporters, and those currently outside the faith to whom the Great Commission compels us to reach out? In many cases, new congregations within current parish boundaries might be the only answer – congregations which are free of any local tradition and as such are free to experiment with a sense of adventure, rather than the sense of betrayal that currently accompanies so many initiatives for change. I'm thinking in terms of a forestry metaphor, where new

growth springs up in the shadow of the old, and as the old eventually comes down the new grows up strong and vigorous.

This calls for strong leadership, which says, "We value all those who have supported the church so faithfully through the years, but we cannot allow their preferences to impair our ability to reach the current and future generations. To do so would be to sin against God, our neighbours and ourselves."

It also calls for charity and generosity on the part of those who love things just as they are to be willing to let something happen for others who currently feel disenfranchised, or who cannot hear the gospel through our current forms and structures. Indeed, it calls for us to support such initiatives enthusiastically and to pray that God will greatly bless them.

This is no small order, but I dare to believe that a church that could pull this off would be a church that many would be willing to take seriously.

Harold Percy served Trinity Anglican Church in Streetsville (Mississauga) Ontario.

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