

SERMON Aug. 11, 2019
Deborah Elliott and Monika Holzschuh
Trust, Covenant and Unity

Let us pray. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer.

Trust, Covenant and Unity are the words which describe the theme of the Inaugural Meeting of the East Central Ontario Regional Council which Monika and I attended on your behalf the last weekend in May. We are in a time of restructuring for the United Church of Canada as Presbyteries disappear and are replaced by seemingly more distant and larger regional governing bodies. Difficulties and conflict occur whenever there is change. Feelings of loss, thoughts that one's past activities have not been valued and the fear that the new system will not be responsive to our needs exist and all these feelings must be acknowledged. The Regional Council Meeting however wanted to celebrate a new beginning and the opportunity to covenant anew with individuals and communities which share a common faith in Jesus Christ and a common vision for justice and healing. We needed to **trust** that those who worked on the new by-laws for the region did so with love and a desire to be inclusive. If there were oversights or a need for more clarity it was due to the tight deadlines or clerical mistakes – not because anyone intentionally meant to leave anyone out or make the lives of others more difficult. Those present seemed to understand that the documents before us were a work in progress and subject to revision.

Throughout the meeting it was evident that there was **Trust** – trust and an understanding that all those present were working hard and in good faith for the future of the United Church of Canada.

When we realized that it was Monika and I representing the two congregations at the Regional Meeting it did not make sense for us each to go it alone. Both of us thought it was an excellent opportunity to get to know one another better so that our relationship as Co Chairs of the Transition Team would develop and strengthen. To reduce costs to the congregations we agreed to share a room and transportation costs. This was a mini-test of sorts for the representatives of Sydenham Street and Chalmers to negotiate and be able to live together for a few days. We needed to learn about each other and negotiate our individual needs, preferences and quirks. Did we want the air conditioner on or the window open? I learned that Monika eats mostly vegan and, as I enjoy a good steak, we had to determine which restaurant could meet both our dietary preferences. We both agreed that the chosen Indian establishment didn't exactly deliver the promised "fine" cuisine - but it was fine, and things worked out well - and as you can see, we are still on speaking terms!

And I think we discovered that our essential religious beliefs are similar and consistent with the broader United Church of Canada.

As I wrote this section for our presentation and discussed it further with Monika it became clear to me that perhaps it would be helpful as we move forward in our relationship of joint ministry that our congregations consider: What is a need – something that is required for us to feel whole and welcome? What is a preference or desire? And what is just a quirk or habit? What is based on long past tradition

that does not apply in the present? Or what is an important memory in the history of a congregation that should be cherished, shared and celebrated?

Today Monika and I chose to use songs from More Voices. The singing at the Regional Meeting was awesome.

We sang before the services, at breaks, to diffuse conflict and during the services. People were invited to join the choir for the Sunday morning service and many did. It is so important to enrich our lives with music and we encourage you all to consider learning new hymns. The lyrics of some of the newer hymns resonate with current concerns and can provide meaning in these times of change while the older hymns provide us with a sense of comfort and tradition that can also be healing. There is a place for both challenge and comfort, new and old, during times of transition.

In the most recent issue of Broadview, the United Church magazine, Walter Farquharson, who has written many hymns found both in Voices United and in More Voices, answers the question – Why do we Sing Hymns at Church? He says – ‘Hymns express joy, sorrow, brokenness, forgiveness and grace. They call into question the idolatries of the day and speak of God’s love.’ The church has always sung hymns. Psalms were the songs of the Old Testament. Psalm 25 which we read responsively this morning could have been sung by King David alone or by one of his after banquet entertainers before a larger audience – It is a prayer for guidance and deliverance – the lines are short – “To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul – O my God, in you I trust “ There is repetition and balance in the words – as in poetry and song –

“Make me to know your ways, O Lord: teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me.

For you are the God of my salvation;

For you I wait all day long.

Without a doubt, the form of this psalm is that of a song or poem. And because of that, our hearts and minds are much more open to its message than if the words were presented as a lecture or sermon.

Paul uses lyrical fragments and Jesus and his disciples finished their last meal together by singing a hymn. Songs have been used to fight racism, wars and injustice. Women, from the suffragettes to the Raging Grannies have used audacious lyrics to send their messages as they fight to improve health, education and social services. Farquharson talks about the role hymns have in confirming our sense of **Unity** as a community. Songs unite those who sing together to express grief and loss but there are also songs of hope, acceptance and inclusion. He says – ‘We sing to remember that we are part of community of faith much larger than our little gatherings. We belong together, one with the generations of God’s people. We sing as those freed from the chains that have bound us, whatever their nature.’ Singing together builds community and gives us a sense of belonging to that community.

We would like to share some observations about how the sometimes difficult issues at this first Meeting of the new Regional Council were negotiated: a covenant of sorts in this post-Presbytery time - with a Regional Council whose

territory now stretches from Kingston all the way to Toronto, one of only 16 in all of Canada, with one hundred and fifty faith communities.

We were both impressed with the sincere desire of all present to make the new governing region work as well as possible.

When discussions got too heated, we sometimes broke for a hymn, which cleared the air, made us refocus, and set the right tone.

When criticism was voiced, it was preceded by a statement of appreciation of the other person's work or vision.

We valued these good models.

During the Sunday worship in Lindsay, 4 new Ministers were ordained to the Order of Ministry, and as part of their preparation, each of them recorded themselves answering the question: What does **Covenant** mean to you?

We would like to play for you a brief clip in which the Reverend Megan Jones responds.

We feel that her words speak very much to the situation our two congregations find themselves in.

We have been worshipping together since January 2017.

Last September, each congregation covenanted with our Intentional Interim Minister Barry King, but we have not covenanted with each other.

We will soon need to make a decision about our future: together, or apart?

Will our covenant be with the members of our own congregation,

Or are we going to form a larger covenant and continue along the road to becoming one faith community?

Reverend Megan Jones: What does covenant mean to you?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uFD0Z3bGXw> 1:34

When I think about a covenant, and when I think about covenantal relationships, of course I think about those divine covenants that are woven throughout our scripture, the covenants that show us again and again that God is seeking a relationship with us, that God is seeking connection and these covenants, they provide us with a framework of a relationship with God, but also with each other and creation, and not only for our ministry, but also for our lives as Christians. Covenants are chosen relationships, they are a partnership, entered into freely and not simply a contract. They are relationships based on a loyal love that flows both ways, and is blessed by the outpouring of God's grace, and such a relationship - it respects the integrity of those involved. A covenant has mutual commitments and obligations, and it is not to be entered into for personal gain or advantage, nor does it gloss over the past. Rather a covenant acknowledges the history of our past relationships, it recognizes those past failures and wrongs, and hurts, while at the same time it strives to walk into the future together, building trust with each step. These are the relationships we should strive for and not just in our ministry, but also in our lives, because God is calling for us to commit to them whole-heartedly, because they are transformational, they help us to grow, they help us to change the way that we see the world and those around us, and they connect us together.

As Rabbi Jonathon Sacks said: When we strive to live our lives in such a way, we come to understand that we are covenantally linked to God, to those around us, to

creation, but also to those who will come after us. So in a covenant, we seek to help others, we seek to serve, and we also allow them to help us. And it's not for personal gain, but rather because we see each other as God's beloved, and living in a covenant together, we may reflect the love of Jesus Christ back out into the world.

Will our covenant be with the members of our own congregation,
Or are we going to form a larger covenant and continue along the road to becoming one faith community?

A vote, and a decision, will need to be taken in January 2020.

We will need to sort out our relationship with each other,
and what God wants us to do.

How are we going to best make a difference in this world?

In September, both congregations will begin a series of facilitated discussions and reflections designed to bring us together in envisioning this future, and the Transition Team looks forward to assisting the congregations in moving forward. Whatever our decision will be, let us take it, and live it, as Rev Jones said, "seeing each other as God's beloved ... reflecting the love of Jesus Christ back out into the world".

May it be so.

The Transition Team has been exploring ways for people from each congregation to get to know one another. One idea would be to draw names from a hat and pair you up randomly and suggest that you go away for a weekend – just as Monika and I did. But I think Barry King has some ideas about less radical ways to provide opportunities for sharing stories. The facilitated conversations that will occur over the fall will allow us to build **Trust**, explore the nature of what it means to live in relationship with one another and with God, to **Covenant** anew, the relationship between our congregations, if that is the desire, and to work together to build a future of **Unity** of mission and of purpose.

As Monika has mentioned we are going to engage in a discernment process during the autumn months concerning the future of our two congregations. However, we do need to make some decision by January 2020 so that we can plan for the potential end of the Interim Ministry in a year's time. Please engage fully in the conversations and facilitated discussions this fall as we discern our future.

Luke's Gospel, read this morning, expresses the need to be ready – "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for the master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. – You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him". Amen.