A STRATEGY FOR TAKING POPULAR CULTURE CAPTIVE TO
COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL AT ST. STEPHEN'S UNITED CHURCH

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A Strategy for Taking Popular Culture Captive to Communicate
The Gospel at St. Stephen's United Church
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It is the goal of this project to create increased awareness in the members of St. Stephen's United Church, Oshawa, Ontario of the link between Gospel and culture. This link is presented in a Canadian mainline Protestant theology and Postmodern, suburban context. Evangelism and mission are placed within this context as a means to the continuing revelation of God's narrative in the world as the congregation translates the truth of the Gospel from the beliefs, values and behaviours of popular culture.

Part One will describe the context of St. Stephen's United Church in Oshawa, Ontario and the problem of outreach in the church. The examination of the link between gospel and culture in Chapter 1 will address this problem of outreach in the Post-Christendom, postmodern context of St. Stephen's. Chapter 2 will address the mission challenge that St. Stephen's is not currently facing. This chapter will also discuss how the nature of culture is changing.

Part Two will consider the biblical foundations for adapting the gospel to a given culture. Chapter 3 considers a re-engagement with the biblical narratives, with the goal in mind to help the people of St. Stephen's learn to read them afresh for non-believers. Chapter 4 reflects upon the way of life in which most Christians were raised, which was a Christendom-influenced, modern culture. This chapter also explains how the Church today finds itself in a land that has suddenly become very strange.

Part Three presents the strategy for St. Stephen's: that the congregation might view itself as distinguished from the world but at the same time sent into the world that is loved by God. Chapter 5 looks at which changes to take seriously and what the response of church leadership should be. Chapter 6 will recommend a strategy that does not go back to "the good old days" of the church, but challenges St. Stephen's to patiently and faithfully identify the themes that God has already prepared in the culture. The final chapter, Chapter 7, will attempt to discern the movement of God's Holy Spirit and discuss how to evaluate the impact of popular culture on the congregation.

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To Cambria

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INTRODUCTION

The congregation of St. Stephen's United Church (hereafter, St. Stephen's) is receiving mixed messages about the world in which it lives and is called to do ministry. On one hand, voices in the secular press are saying that the collective Christian spirit and memory are fading. The world is seen by many Christians as being an increasingly alien place in which to live and serve. The Church is being forced to rethink its place in this new culture. Believers are being told that more of the traditional mainline Protestant churches have reached a point where their traditional emphases and responses are no longer captivating. The Church strives to be the conscience of a culture that on the surface appears to no longer clamor to hear its voice.

On the other hand, believers are being told in the Great Commission of Jesus to his disciples "to go into the world," and secondly to baptize and teach. Christian leaders are being told by their seminaries that they are being offered a real opportunity to renew their faith communities and rebuild their institutions in a way that helps build a new world. Canada is further along in postmodern thinking, culture and lifestyle than the United States. Once a conversation has started, people seem interested in and open to what Christians have to say. Once a connection has been made to their everyday lives, people want to listen to what the Church has to offer and they want to consider an appropriate response.

Taking in these mixed messages, one may ask which is true, whether Christianity is dying in Canada and the influence of the Church is decreasing, or whether the Church can experience renewal. The farmer who leaves the fields "all in God's hands" (John 3:35) for a few years will get different results from the one who plants, waters, fertilizes

and harvests. The church that leaves communicating the gospel "all in God's hands" will have different results from the one that goes out among the people to reap the message and brings each new seeker home for a continued discussion of his or her spiritual needs. This ministry focus paper will consider how the role of mission and evangelism fit into the lives of church members at St. Stephen's, as well as the wider community culture in which St. Stephen's finds itself. St. Stephen's, a fairly typical old mainline suburban church, will be challenged to rethink the relationship between the Church and the world.

Definition of Popular Culture

For this ministry focus paper, the term "popular culture" is defined as the amalgamation of beliefs, values and behaviours of Canadians. The most difficult mission field around St. Stephen's today is the Canadian mass culture, which can be described as Post-Christendom and Postmodern secularity – the lunch rooms, living rooms, bedrooms, and computer rooms within which families live, work, and play.

Canadian Popular Culture

Popular culture is normally invisible to anyone living within it, and it acts as an internal "map" that shapes the way one lives. The Church is often unaware of the culture's presence and influence until believers listen to the hurts and yearning of non-believers and establish relationships with them. A *Reader's Digest* survey done in 2003 also noted that 55 percent of Canadians believe in karma, almost 30 percent believe in astrology and 18 percent believe in witchcraft and spells.[1] The members of St. Stephen's

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[1] Gabrielle Bauer, "God and Other Mysteries," *Reader's Digest*, (November 2003): 55.

will need to manage their personal anxiety about such different beliefs as they enter into this postmodern context and try to understand what it means to be the Church in this culture.

Clearly, Canadian culture has traveled away from the Christian assumptions that used to underpin it . As a consequence, explains Mike Regele in *The Death of the Church*, "The distance between the culture that is emerging and us grows, while our ability to connect with that culture diminishes."[2] It is not the core of the gospel message nor St. Stephen's identity as "a caring congregation" (which is the message written on the church's sign) that is at stake in the widening gap. What is at stake is the cultural "comfort zone" of the congregation. Jesus said that the teacher who has "been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasure as well as old" (Matthew 13:52). Chuck Smith interprets this passage in his book, *The End of the World...As We Know It*: "So even though we need to remain well-connected to tradition and history (the 'old treasures'), we also must be concerned with originality (the 'new treasures').[3] In order to reach the community around St. Stephen's, the congregation must extend themselves beyond their cultural comfort zones.

Canada in the Midst of Transition

Canada is at a time of great moral and missiological challenge. The country is divided not only into East and West but also into rural and urban – perhaps the new "two solitudes" of the nation. In fact, St. Stephen's itself may need to redefine itself along

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[2] Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 198.

[3] Chuck Smith, *The End of the World...As We Know It* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 172-173.

urban lines over the next decade. Canadians must deal with many social and political changes. Like other Canadian churches, St. Stephen's must come up with innovative responses to some profound questions of discernment.

One such question relates to employment issues within the city. For example, the closing of the local General Motors assembly plant demonstrates that people have little control over the international flow of capital. St. Stephen's needs to consider how it can help a neighbourhood adapt to its rapidly changing context, particularly in terms of jobs that are constantly evolving or disappearing in Canada. A second question relates to poverty within the city. The fact that a quarter of the children who live across the street from St. Stephen's go to school hungry indicates that the church is nowhere near eliminating the curse of poverty and neglect in its neighbourhood. A third question asks how St. Stephen's, as a community of faith, can look beyond itself to analyze the broader impact of technology and media on the Church. These types of issues in Canada challenge the Church in general and St. Stephen's in particular to a new transformation. This new transformation is one of trust where God is bigger than one's old missiological definition or puny imagination.

Taking Culture Captive

In the particular post-modern, post-Christendom context of Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, St. Stephen's is being called to take popular culture captive in order to communicate the gospel. Certain themes will be particularly addressed as part of the gospel message. Theological themes include the covenant of God with humankind, the reality of human sin, and the promise of deliverance and salvation. Political and moral

themes include the unconditional goodness and sanctity of simple existence, the dignity

of the person, and the fact that Christ died for all nations, tribes and cultures.

The key to taking culture captive is by leading transformation, bringing the

kingdom closer, and entering into the narratives and stories of the neighbourhood.

Leading transformation involves enabling the congregation of St. Stephen's to see its

current situation and reflect appropriately on how it may reconfigure the life of the

church for mission in postmodernity.[4] Bringing the kingdom closer will take place when

believers reveal God to non-believers by their very lives. Lesslie Newbigin explains, "It

is the [Christian] community that has begun to taste (even only in foretaste) the reality of

the Kingdom which can alone provide the hermeneutic of the message [for non-

Christians]."[5] Entering into the narratives and stories of the neighborhood involves

getting to know others and listening to them. In their book, *The Missional Leader*, Alan

J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk expand of this idea, stating that this goal "requires a

capacity for listening to and engaging the images, narratives, and stories of people with

plenty of stress, anxiety, and confusion in their lives and world that keep morphing and

leave them struggling to make sense of what was once familiar, comfortable, and

manageable."[6] The challenge is to create a space or environment in which the gospel is

reviewed or explained in cultural terms. The proof of this transformation will lie in the

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[4] Alan J. Roxburgh, *TheMissionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 22.

[5] Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 19.

[6] Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 32.

increased trust of church leadership by those in the community and an opportunity to

listen to the real stories and histories of the people.

Discussing culture can bring about a conversation about the truth of life beneath

the veneer of society. The benefit of this cultural analysis allows one to define the

deepest level of identity, the basic rule of human life, and the relationship of God's truth

in the gospel story to the deeply embedded narrative of culture. It gives one a chance to

examine the biblical worldview or to express the biblical worldview in an intentional

way. Books, plays, paintings, and music all have the potential to express ideas and

insights that people have internalized (whether good or bad, true or false) but have not

been able to articulate. A first step for St. Stephen's would be awareness in the church of

what God is doing in the culture. A second step, in the words of Roxburgh and

Romanuk, "is awareness of how the congregation can imagine itself as being the center

of God's activities."[7] Entering into the stories of the neighbourhood requires a third step.

This is "an awareness of what God is already up to in the congregation's context."[8]

Ultimately, the goal is for church members to become aware of their contacts with

popular culture as a way of listening to kingdom stories that are already taking place. In

their book, *A Matrix of Meanings*, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor write,

> There is a conversation about God going on in popular culture that the church is
> not engaged in and is often unaware of. If the Christian world continues in its
> scholastic mode, viewing popular culture as degraded and superficial, then the
> gap between church and culture will continue to widen. Our theological
> propositions will become increasingly redundant to a culture being influenced by
> other forces.[9]

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[7] Ibid., 31.

[8] Ibid., 32.

[9] Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 23.

The United Church of Canada can no longer afford to let the riches of this enormous theological resource go to waste. Detweiler and Taylor write, "Theology and pop culture seem to have a mutual attraction and an intimate interrelationship."[10] Theology involves not just talking about God, but listening to the stories of others. With the recent popularity of worldwide discussions, blogs, and chats in the electronic culture, the Church ought to follow this trend. Believers ought to be in the habit of listening to their neighbours, making friends, and discovering the evolving role the divine may play in people's everyday lives. Doing so allows these friendships to take on a missional quality, as interactions serve as signposts to others that frame Scripture and create local theology.

<center>Christianity as a Natural Connecting Point to Culture</center>

God connects. The first two lines of The United Church of Canada's creed read: "We are not alone, we live in God's world."[11] Canadian culture, the imaginative expression of (mostly) shared lives and aspirations, is the heartbeat of the Canadian people. Faith connects (Heb. 11:6). In God's imagination, people are not driven by an economic world nor are they disembodied from community. Rather, in the clamor of God's connection are the sounds of generations coming together. God's imagination does not rant about money or commodities. God's strategic transformation happens when personal stories are told that reflect stories told in the Bible. The stories in the Bible are full of illustrations, parables, analogies, and visions. People's stories are also

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[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] The United Church of Canada, General Council 1968, alt.

full of illustrations, parables, analogies, and visions that reflect a thirst for God. Even as

the culture is not academically informed by the Bible, the stories of the Bible and of

people today seem to connect with each other. For young spiritual seekers who want a

personal (rather than an institutional) divinity, God in culture connects with them

directly. Many stories of the culture – whether in television, books, or films –affirm the

importance of the divine, the local, the specific.

> When famines, wars, and natural disasters halfway around the world flicker
> through the TV in my living room, they evoke an empathic response; my heart
> goes out to those suffering. In this sense, TV extends my emotions. It connects
> me to human suffering on a global scale and also makes me keenly aware of my
> relative peace, prosperity, and provision.[12]

These are the moments that connect the gospel to people's lives.

Culture as a Source of God's Revelation

Culture is often portrayed negatively; however culture can also be seen as a

source of God's revelation. Colossians affirms that God has "renewed" the faithful to the

kingdom of his beloved son. N. T. Wright, in his book, *Simply Christian*, explains that

the verb "renewed" suggests being reassigned and relocated to a new place, a new home,

or a new calling.[13] Conversion, then, involves God meeting non-believers where they

already are (that is, within their culture, not outside of it) and "renewing" them. Much of

Christ's message addresses the context in which the mission of believers (both

individually and collectively) can be re-ordered along kingdom lines. Roxburgh and

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[12] Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 110.

[13] N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 219.

Romanuk explain how Christ's message can be revealed and testified as the gospel in the

midst of any given culture in all places and at all times:

> Jesus comes among us; the birth narratives are not intended to idealize Jesus'
> birth, irrespective of how we turn them into stories for our own emotional and
> romanticized needs. These narratives take pains to describe the ordinariness of
> the people and the struggles of their social reality (a census under a Roman
> governor, the fear of finding a place to stay because of the immediacy of birth.
> The narratives of Jesus' presence among us start among the ordinariness of
> people's lives. Jesus begins with their lived experience; he enters those
> experiences weaving God's story through their lived stories. He draws people
> into a new imagination about the nature of the good news he incarnates.[14]

David J. Bosch, in his book, *Transforming Mission*, elaborates on this relationship

between God and the world:

> When we speak about God, the world as the theater of God's activity is already
> implied. God's love and attention are directly primarily at the world, and mission
> is participation in God's existence in the world. This was submitted in the
> conviction that there is continuity between the reign of God, the mission of the
> church, and justice, peace, and wholeness in society, and that salvation also has to
> do with what happens to people *in* this world.[15]

Culture gives expression to the source of God's revelation, just as Christ himself was

revealed within the particular story of the covenant people of Israel.

The Call upon St. Stephen's

St. Stephen's may never find all the answers to questions regarding the church's

role within the local community, but in the act of venturing forth into the world the

congregation becomes more open. The congregation may become aware of its outdated,

narrow-minded, and inflexible thinking. Relating personally with the community is a

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[14] Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 74-75.

[15] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 10-11.

way to create patterns that bridge the material and the spiritual world: a way of finding

wisdom. Without a good understanding of Canadian culture and without reading the

Bible in such a way as to interpret what God is doing among non-believers, church

members at St. Stephen's risk shortchanging themselves in failing to become the fully

developed Body of Christ. If this is not the approach of St. Stephen's, I risk

disillusionment as a pastor and the congregation risks becoming less than it is possible for

it to be.

My doctoral work at Fuller Seminary over the last seven years has helped me gain

perspective regarding the role of the Church in the world. Specifically, St. Stephen's

faces the risk of casting itself adrift in a void of abstraction and ideality. Cultural shifts

demand new ways of thinking. My doctoral studies have introduced to me the option of

translating culture into strategy and effect. Accomplishing this requires a practical,

hands-on, on-the-ground, bottom-up relational connection to the community, an approach

which is characterized by "soft leadership," not ideals.[16] By looking at what God is

doing in the culture, St. Stephen's and I, its pastor, can begin relationships, concretely

engage in ministry, and trust that God is guiding us.

Roadmap for the Paper

Part One will describe the context of St. Stephen's United Church in Oshawa,

Ontario and the problem of outreach in the church. The examination of the link between

gospel and culture in Chapter 1 will address this problem of outreach in the Post-

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[16] Soft leadership "is about creating an environment within which the people of God in a particular location may thrive." Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader,* 6.

Christendom, postmodern context of St. Stephen's. Chapter 2 will address the mission

challenge that St. Stephen's is not currently facing. This chapter will also discuss how

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"Christendom," modern culture. This chapter also explains how the Church today finds

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Part Three presents the strategy for St. Stephen's: that the congregation might

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back to "the good old days" of the church, but challenges St. Stephen's to patiently and

faithfully identify the themes that God has already prepared in the culture. The final

chapter, Chapter 7, will attempt to discern the movement of God's Holy Spirit and

discuss how to evaluate the impact of popular culture on the congregation.

Conclusion

Flexible, nuanced thinking that will be an essential requirement of any innovative

response to the challenge of how to do theology within Canadian popular culture.

Canada is further along in postmodern thinking, culture and lifestyle than the United

States due to its colonial mindset, official bilingualism, and European liberalism. As a

former marketer and advertiser with twenty years experience, I understand the Canadian

cultural worldview and am fluent in its language and customs. As a pastor with this

unique background, I am in a position to affect that culture.

"Believers who want to change the world" need to be current with that culture or,

in the words of Francis Schaeffer, learn "how to speak meaningfully to its own age,"

which he claimed was the responsibility of "every generation of Christians."[17] This

ministry focus paper outlines the shift in my pastoral strategy to help St. Stephen's to

become conversant with people whose thinking has been shaped by postmodern popular

culture. If the congregation of St. Stephen's will follow this lead, the church will deal

with the perplexities of change and see God's world in fresh ways.

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[17] Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 7.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR A LINK BETWEEN GOSPEL AND CULTURE
AT ST. STEPHEN'S UNITED CHURCH

Popular Culture in Suburban Canada

Canada is unique among Western democracies in its constitutional commitment to

multiculturalism, a commitment that has worked extraordinarily well in practice. Despite

extraordinary successes, the Canadian commitment to multiculturalism is being tested in

unexpected ways. Before moving to more specific description within the suburban

context, it is necessary to consider a brief definition of general popular culture in Canada.

Canadian popular culture is an amalgamation of the beliefs, values, and

behaviours of Canadians. Beliefs include the inner structures of how Canadians see the

universe and how one's particular ideological perspective on the world is articulated in

such a way that people are attracted and motivated to be part of something more. Beliefs

affect values in terms of what people prioritize. Beliefs and values affect behaviour in

what people do or how they act.

Beliefs

Suburban Canadians have experienced massive change as part of the population

that finds its identity in religious belief. The neighbour in the ranch style bungalow in the

new subdivision on the edge of town may be religious purists who will maintain their

mother culture and identity; natural resource workers who believe in their ability to

steward the environment; economic immigrants who see themselves as entrepreneurs

looking for a better feeding ground; or arts, science and technology innovators whose

goal is to reinvent themselves as liberated, creative beings. Canada is the largest

geographical nation in the world with room enough to spare on the edges of its towns.

For those who see themselves as adventurers or recluses, the suburbs may offer a slower

lifestyle than the cities.

Canada has long believed in the value of orderly expansion overseen by

government and corporate interests as opposed to the "wild west" mentality. Instead of

the American "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Canada's original constitution

proclaimed "peace, order and good government" to its citizens. Suburban beliefs have

been shaped and maintained by a belief in an ordered cosmos. Suburban Canadians often

define themselves by where they have been or by what they are not. The question, "Who

am I?," for example, might be answered with, "I'm from the Rock (Newfoundland), but

not as Catholic as me mum, eh." This individual is an east-coast Maritimer who now

resides in Ontario, perhaps suburban Oshawa. Such a person will happily identify

himself or herself as a Newfoundlander but not as readily affiliated with a particular

religious group or political party.

The belief gap in suburbia cuts across generational lines. The *Leave it to Beaver*

belief system has changed as people become more comfortable with images that were

threatening the worldview of their parents and grandparents.[1] This belief system was

self-identified as an understanding of the world through an autonomous and human

rationality. It included, describes Wade Clark Roof in his book, *Spiritual Marketplace*,

"imageries of warm, happy families centered around a working husband and father and a

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[1] *Leave it to Beaver* was an iconic American television situation comedy about an ideal American family of the 1950s and early 1960s.

domestic wife and mother and of a close, cozy connection between family and faith."[2]

Canadian suburbanites today may not feel totally at ease in a Wiccan ritual, but they

acknowledge the right of these individuals to worship as they choose.

Acculturation is an important factor in the acceptance of the beliefs of others and

part of the acculturation process involves one's surrounding images. The mass media,

both print and electronic, bombard people's senses and invade their homes. Eddie Gibbs

raises the question in his book, *In Name Only*, "as to whether the TV programmers are

simply reflecting social values or whether they are shaping these values by portraying as

normal that which is deviant or exceptional."[3] Canadian suburbanites are not impervious

to the negatives and positives of culture. For example, the subject of the film,

Philadelphia, is a gay lawyer dying of AIDS, which he acquired during a careless one-

night stand.[4] Hollywood's delicate and sympathetic portrayal of the main character

suggests that his homosexuality should be accepted, and this affects the beliefs of those

who view the movie. People speak of the "spirit of the age," when one language or

image has a role in a culture over a significant period of time. In this case, the structure

of homosexual language that people repeatedly see in the media influences the manner in

which one articulates his or her particular ideological perspective on the world.

In some ways, the inclination of so many suburbanites to believe in a God who

cares about them personally is somewhat surprising, given that St. Stephen's and other

similar churches have been of limited help in getting the word out. But this view

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[2] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 218.

[3] Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Seminary Press, 2000), 174.

[4] Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993).

overlooks the extent to which culture actually predisposes the neighbourhood through which God might speak, by stimulating, for example, interest in the supernatural, a quest for more fulfilling lives, questions about living and dying, and the importance of justice and fairness, values and ethics. Reginald Bibby, in his book, *Restless Churches*, explains, "You, see, consistent with his message (2 Corinthians 5:1), the research findings suggest God may well have grown impatient with the churches, or at least has recognized the limitations of the churches, and frequently has decided to relate directly to Canadians – to show up in Person."[5] It could be argued that God often has had to take the initiative in finding other ways to get the message to people. If that is the case, based on what Canadians are saying – often fairly privately – perhaps the most effective method will be for God to show up in Christians' values and behaviours.

<div align="center">Values</div>

Despite a strong influence of belief upon values, Canadian suburbanites have several unique characteristics based on their views of the world. First of all, values do not follow demographics or geography. Distinct felt priorities and values are more influenced from an urban perspective than a rural one. People move to North Oshawa primarily for affordable housing and easy commuting to work and not due to any specific communal values. Also, values within a household are not good predictors of something that is context-specific, like church attendance.

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[5] Reginald Bibby, *Restless Churches* (Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2004).

The one value most Oshawan suburbanites share is tolerance of diversity. Depending on the source, reported regular church attendance "almost every week or more" varies from 20 to 30 percent in the Durham Region.[6] One factor that initially contributed to greater Canadian religiosity and deference to authority was the historical role played by the United Church. This is in part through the constitutional provisions which protected Catholic and Protestant denominational schools. However, with faith in institutions declining, most Christian denominations are losing their grip on the population. Moreover, many of the values traditionally associated with them have come under critical scrutiny, if they have not been already largely discarded. Adams explains, "These include deference to state authorities ('render under Caesar'), patriarchal definitions of family, guilt, duty, and fear of divine retribution."[7]

Bob Harvey, contributor to the magazine, *Faith Today*, indicates that believers who express their values are more likely to volunteer, give to charities, have intact families, and be satisfied with life.[8] Another way of expressing this is that suburban values are generosity, compassion, commitment to relationships, and happiness; those values are the backbone of virtually all volunteer organizations.

The Dalai Lama commands no one but has millions of admirers around the world. His charm is his humour and utter humility. When he stepped onto stage in Toronto at the Sky Dome before the 20,000 people who had paid $30 apiece to hear him, he said, "I am just ordinary. I have nothing to offer you." Then he went on with the simplest of

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[6] Reginald Bibby, *The Boomer Factor* (Toronto, ON: Bastian, 2006), 192.

[7] Michael Adams, *Sex in the Snow* (Toronto, ON: Viking, 1997), 166.

[8] Bob Harvey, "Values We Hold Dear," *Faith Today*, July/August 2004, 47.

messages: if people want to end the hatred that caused so much suffering in the twentieth century, they must start with themselves. He continued, "First there must be change within yourself, more peace. Individuals like us must make a start, first at the individual level, then family level, then community level."[9] This is a good example of the typical hierarchy of values that Canadian suburbanites choose.

Yet it is unlikely, based on the priorities in the suburban world, that even such religious leaders will make a difference. Archbishop Michael Peers, the outgoing head of the Anglican Church of Canada, told the Empire Club of Canada in January 2004 that within Canadian multicultural society, religion has been treated as "a dangerous commodity likely to lead to conflict or religiously motivated repression if allowed too much scope in public life." The meaning of this statement rings true when a person tries to exercise his or her personal faith outside the confines of the family circle. Suburban Canadians are skeptical or cynical if one's faith is promoted in community organizations such as schools, public libraries or civic government.

<center>Behaviours</center>

The pursuit of "peace, order and good government" has been a guiding principle of Canadian behaviour from Canada's first (British) constitution in 1867. The national ethos and expansion over a large land was formed not from civil war or revolution but from corporate interests under the watchful eye of a quasi-military mounted police force (the Royal Canadian Mounted Police). Out of this grew a sense of peace-keeping, respect

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[9] Ibid.

for authority and comedic satire that loves to poke fun at politicians. Although Canada's resources are meager, it is well-known for its contributions to the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and peacekeeping operations all over the world, currently in Afghanistan. Handguns are illegal and if some poor soul gets murdered, it is still front page news. Although taxes are high, Canadians pay nothing for a doctor's visit or hospital stay.

About 50 percent of the Christian population of Oshawa is Roman Catholic. Unfortunately, census statistics do not break down the Protestant numbers to specific churches and their evangelical activities. An educated guess is that the number of identified "born again" Christians is less than 10 percent. This is significant in the understanding of suburban behaviours. The movie *Saved* would not do well in Canada because there is not an explicitly evangelical church culture. The movie portrays the evangelical Christianity's recruiting success in an American high school. *Saved* would not be understood in Canada against a backdrop of liberal Christianity and modern secular culture. Any efforts at "taking popular culture captive to communicate the gospel" will have to have a "made in Canada" approach. Canadians are highly suspicious of methods and strategies of American evangelicals ("evangelaphobia").

The City of Oshawa

The demographic and cultural roots of Oshawa begin with its location as the Eastern gateway to one of Canada's largest industrial areas. The City of Oshawa is part of the fastest-growing area in Ontario, known as "The Golden Horseshoe," that wraps

around the Western edge of Lake Ontario. By the mid-nineteenth century it was the

largest producer of agricultural implements in Canada. By 1907 the McLaughlin

Carriage Company in Oshawa became the largest carriage works manufacturer in the

British Empire. The company changed its name to General Motors of Canada in 1920 and

eventually birthed one of the world's largest automakers.[10]

Generations of Oshawa

Today the population in the Oshawa census area is 330,000. Statistics Canada

indicates that 20 percent of the population (approximately 66,000 people) is under the age

of nineteen, and 24,600, of these are between fifteen and nineteen. Almost 43,000

households consist of a couple with children between the ages of four and twelve. In the

twenty-to-twenty-four-year-old bracket, 20,000 people were reported. The largest age

group represented in the 2006 census is 97,000 persons between the ages of twenty-five

and forty-four years old. The middle years of forty-five to sixty-four reported 84,000

people. There are about 19,000 people aged sixty-five to seventy-four.[11] Oshawa's

location and infrastructure, complemented by industrial growth, have attracted the

attention of investors, businesses, visitors, educators, and provincial and federal

governments. It would be helpful for this study to position the Church in the various age

groups of Oshawa. The experience of living in Oshawa is different for each community,

segment, or cohort. The characteristics of the following generations will be presented:

adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, and seniors.

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[10] The Corporation of the City of Oshawa, "A Brief History of our City," Oshawa Info Source.

[11] Statistics Canada, "Age Characteristics of the Population," 2006 Community Profile.

Adolescents (Ages 13 to 19)

For adolescents, Oshawa is a sprawling auto city with a reputation, deserved or not, based on bar fights, beer and boredom. A snapshot of Mike Myers' film, *Wayne's World*, captures the culture of Converse high-tops and children preparing to sign up for high school and hunt down a little fun on the streets.[12] In fact, the neighbourhood Myers grew up in (Scarborough, Ontario) is not far from Oshawa, and well represents the present culture around St. Stephen's.[13] For the over-nineteen crowd Molson beer flows heavily through the rough and rougher streets downtown and just up the road at the local university campus. "Wannabe hipster" kids all over North America are sporting the blue-collar, hard-metal look Oshawa comes by naturally.[14] Mirrored sunglasses, trucker hats, cheap gold chains, and mullet hairstyles distinguish the boys' fashion. Fake nails, hockey sweaters, and pleated skirts distinguish the girls'. This is part of the experience of youth culture in Oshawa.

Emily Mathieu, reporter for the *Toronto Star*, describes what life is like for adolescents living in Oshawa: "A little bit dirty, strangely familiar, if slightly unpleasant . . . initially indefinable yet unquestionably genuine and undeniably unique" adequately describes what the local kids call "The Shwa" (slang for "Oshawa").[15] Adolescents illustrate the basic changes taking place within the urban and industrial environment, where the extensive increase in available commodities makes the "postmodern [human] .

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[12] Mike Myers, *Wayne's World* (1993).

[13] Mike Myers is a comedy writer, actor and producer who introduced *Wayne's World* to network television.

[14] Emily Mathieu, "Behold The Shwa," *Toronto Star*, 27 July 2004, D1.

[15] Ibid.

. . an interchangeable part of the whole cultural process."[16] As a result of developments

in technology and education, the new level of affluence has brought a higher standard of

living. This has created many new opportunities for adolescents to shape lifestyles of

their own choosing, and they increasingly want to be their own personal causes, their own

underground myths, subjects of their own fan clubs. In his book, *We Want Some Too*,

Hal Niedzviecki explains the philosophy of the youth culture: "Everything is

entertainment, everything is lifestyle, nobody is right or wrong, everybody is simply

propagating a version of their reality."[17]

Young Adults (Ages 20 to 40)

For young adults in Oshawa, they spend their twenties and thirties doing one or

more of the following: continuing the lifestyle of the youth culture, moving away for

employment, finding a local employer, or attending Durham College/The University of

Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). With a total population between the ages of

twenty-five and thirty-four of 40,000, these are either residents who have found local jobs

or they attend the university. Since UOIT opened beside Durham College in 2003, it has

attracted more out-of-town students than there are on-campus rooms to house them.

Residents near the school, which includes the neighbours of St.Stephen's, have endured a

litany of woes: in a 2007 *Toronto Star* article, Carola Vyhnak attests to "loud parties,

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[16] Barnard Rosenberg and David White, *Mass Culture* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 4.

[17] Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too* (Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada, 2000), 169.

property damage, drunkenness, pot-smoking, vandalism, threats, rowdiness, traffic and parking problems, garbage and overgrown lawns."[18]

Students are fighting their own battle against stereotyping and what they call an unfair rap. "'We're not a popular demographic,' Adam Beardsley notes wryly, taking a break from clearing snow off his driveway. 'When we moved in, a lot of people gave us dirty glares because we're students.'"[19] In Vyhnak's article, Beardsley illustrates the student population: "We're all [video] gamers so we keep to ourselves."[20] If universities and the student clubs they create are the barometers for this cohort, it is clear that they are very insular. Their clubs tend to be based on ethnicity rather than shared interest. They generally do not trust the traditional or institutional – political parties and churches.

Middle-aged Adults (Ages 40 to 55)

With 82,000 people in this cohort, this group has been uniquely positioned to have significant input into every sphere of Oshawa life – business, corporations, media, government, education, health, entertainment, leisure, religion, and so on. Mike and Jodie Stauffer, a couple in their early forties, are two nearby residents of St. Stephen's. In Mark Medley's article, "My Own Private Oshawa," the Stauffers provide a composite description of this generation:[21]

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[18] Carola Vyhnak, "Student Parties Push Out Oshawa Residents," *Toronto Star*, 23 January 2007, E1.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., E7.

[21] Mark Medley, "My Own Private Oshawa," *National Post Toronto Magazine*, 1 March 2008, 14.

Jodie works in human resources at the local hospital and Mike is in insurance. They have a sixteen year-old daughter and their son will turn thirteen soon. The family lives in a four-year-old four-bedroom home with a Canadian flag hanging out front, but their neighbourhood is so new the address still doesn't appear on Google Maps. . . . "It's been really different seeing [the neighbourhood] completely change," Mike says. "But you knew eventually it was going to happen." They were both born and raised in the city. "It's the perfect place to raise a family," Jodie says, and they plan to stay until the children are finished school. Everything is close by: shops, banks, schools, grocery stores, entertainment. "We don't have to go anywhere," she says. "Plus, it's only forty minutes to Toronto and cottage country is less than an hour away." Jodie recounts a description that is all too familiar to the city's younger generation. When she went away to the University of Guelph, she told Mike: "I'm never coming back. I'm out of the 'Shwa forever." It just wasn't cool to stay at home.

Seniors (Ages 55 and Above)[22]

Life for seniors in Oshawa, although they are smaller in number relative to the total population of Oshawa, follows a commonly accepted stereotype usually attributed to Baby Boomers. They are a somewhat hedonistic and self-serving generation. Michael Adams, in *Sex in the Snow*, describes Canadian Baby Boomers:

These are people for whom spontaneity is an important part of everyday life. Often society's leaders, they get to travel and meet other interesting people, whether at work or play, or sitting on the board of some charitable organization. They love to eat in fine restaurants, drink varietal wines and debate the issues of the day.[23]

There has been a "ten-year shift" in life stages between the 1950s and the 1990s due to the fact that the average life expectancy has increased about ten years Gail Sheehy believes that older Baby Boomers typically enter a phase in life she describes as a "second adulthood," characterized by a desire to experiment and broaden one's

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[22] The Seniors Group at St.Stephen's starts at age fifty five.

[23] Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 76.

horizons.[24] Every major life phase – from education, to marriage, to having kids, to

death – has been pushed back a decade. The relatively small number of seniors is offset

by the power of their wealth, their liberal, left-leaning politics, and their pleasure-seeking

values. Life is pretty good for most seniors in Oshawa.

Socio-economics of Oshawa

Oshawa is rapidly being transformed from a "lunch pail" town to a "town and

gown" city. In his article, "The Changing Face of a One-industry Town," Stan Josey

writes, "Mayor John Gray is not surprised the latest census migration figures show his

city of Oshawa is smack in the middle of the fastest growing metropolis area in the

country for its size."[25] A Statistics Canada report released in 2005 measured the net

population gains and income levels relative to the rest of Canada. Many of the migrants

are arriving by Jaguar cars and executive jets just up the road at the municipal airport.

They are taking up teaching posts at the university (UOIT), or positions at the new cancer

centre (Lakeridge Health) or in the growing research sector. Foreign competition and

automation in the auto industry has reduced the number of well-paid "line jobs" at the

General Motors plant. The well-worn Oshawa moniker, "The City that Motivates," has

been replaced by "Prepared to be Amazed." The city won a prestigious award from the

2007 International Awards for Livable Communities (LivCom). In his article, "'Motor

city' 3rd Best Little City in the World," Ian Robertson writes, "The home of General

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[24] Gail Sheehy, *New Passages* (New York: Random House, 1995), 5.

[25] Stan Josey, "The Changing Face of a One-industry Town," *Toronto Star*, 29 September, 2005, A1.

Motors Canada and the Oshawa Generals junior hockey team is among the top 15%

world-wide for 'sustainability and livable communities' practices,' according to the

awards backed by the UN's Environment Program."[26] Oshawa fares slightly better than

the whole of Canada financially (see Table 1).

Table 1. Economic Data: Oshawa Compared with Canada[27]

	Oshawa	**Canada**
Per Capita income	$27,352	$25,964
Percent of household incomes less than $20,000	9.40 %	16.70 %
Percent of household incomes more than $100.000	29.93 %	18.04 %
Percent who owns private dwellings	75.64 %	65.82 %

Statistics Canada reports in the 2006 census the following visible minority

population statistics in the city: of the population of approximately 330,000, there are

12,605 Blacks, 6,195 South Asian, and 3,695 Chinese. Black, South Asian, and Chinese

families now crowd into older town home complexes and dense high-rise apartment

buildings, which are surrounded by a newer wave of single-family bungalow

developments. The influx of these ethnic minority populations has created the following

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[26] Ian Robertson, "'Motor city' 3rd Best Little City in the World," *Toronto Sun,* 29 November 2007, 4.

[27] Statistics Canada, "Oshawa: Economic Data," http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/ profiles/ctPrint.cfm (accessed 12 July 2008). All data reflects 2005 census information, except "Percent who owns private dwellings," which is taken from the 2001 census.

issues: 1) the pressure on health care in the area is increasing; 2) affordable and subsidized housing is scarce; 3) and the influx of young families has increased demand for child care spaces.

There are numerous ethnic clubs that provide cultural programs and language classes to the community: Chinese, Filipino, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French Canadian, Hungarian, Maltese, Scandinavian, Ukrainian, East Indian, German, Irish, Polish, Slovak, and West Indian. In June each year, these various clubs, through the coordinating efforts of the Oshawa Folk Art Council, present Fiesta Week. Oshawa's "Week of Fun" kicks off with a parade and pavilions featuring ethnic food and entertainment. Oshawa is the home of Cinefest Durham which screens foreign and art-house films once a month.

The culture in which St. Stephen's finds itself continues to question institutions in all arenas and will question the church's credentials before it will be willing to be open to St. Stephen's or any other church. In a culture of short attention spans, immediate gratification, and decreased social interaction, the only churches that will be effective are those which capture people's interest and imagination with strong leadership and a clear, truthful interpretation of the gospel.

Evangelism and the Social Gospel in The United Church of Canada

Evangelism in the Past

The United Church of Canada was inaugurated in 1925 by an Act of Parliament, formed as a union of the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of

Canada, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada.[28] True to the traditions of its founding

denominations, the United Church studies and speaks out on controversial topics such as

statements of faith, media campaigns, isolation in ministry, the Middle East and systems

of global domination.

Since the union in 1925, the United Church has questioned its *raison d'etre*. The

Church is continually asking: "Why are we?" "Who are we?" "Are we who we say we

are?" In theological terms it asks, "Are we being faithful to the evangelical mandate God

set in calling the church into being?" The United Church of Canada historically has been

a reflective and educational organism. In the early years, the Church's quest to become

more faithful and more culturally relevant was an obsession. The records of early church

debates show the great leaders of social reform movements in Canada arguing for

temperance along with unemployment insurance, health insurance, land preservation

schemes for rural Canada, and old age pensions. As one politician stated, "This great

Gospel of liberty is the meaning of this temperance movement, this movement for the

promotion of good by the suppression of evil."[29]

Throughout the thirties and forties, the records place the Church's concern for

temperance alongside its concern for the well-being of families. Women were exhausted

by family responsibilities and their work in the war factories. The Church led debate for

industrial planning in the post-war era, for world food shortages and for peace-building

between warring nations. With the close of World War II, Canada entered the greatest

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[28] House of Commons, *The United Church of Canada Act,* 1925, 14-15 George V, c.100, s. 28.

[29] Peter Gordon White, *Voices and Visions* (Toronto, ON: The United Church Publishing House, 1990), 84.

period of religious revival in its history. The United Church – through a prolonged series of crusades, prayer and fellowship meetings, radio talks, and a multitude of publications – called for a rededication of its ministry and membership to win the unchurched for Christ. The increased evangelism reached a receptive audience. Canadians desperately were searching for secure anchors for their lives and turned instinctively to the Church. The post-war "baby boom" swelled Sunday Schools, Christian Education groups, and young people's organizations.

But the passion for doing denominational church and evangelism peaked in the late 1960s. Gordon Bruce Turner provides the following statistics:

> Look at the facts! The United Church of Canada, Canada's largest Protestant denomination, peaked in adult confirmed membership in 1965, at 1,064,033. By 1977 its membership had shrunk to 930,226. In 1980 it had 903,302 members and in 1984, adult membership was at a continuing low of 891,384. That shrinkage represented a 1 per cent drop, the lowest of recent date. The most recent figures indicate that the United Church dropped a further 10,000 adult members in 1985, a 1.1 per cent decline rate again.[30]

Membership in the United Church continued to decline with 881,000 reported in 1986 and 786,000 reported members in 1991. With numbers continuing to decline, in 1988, the Thirty-Second General Council "stated that evangelism in the United Church should be understood as 'holistic evangelism' and as such:

- is being, doing, and telling the Christian story;
- involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do in the world in which we live;

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[30] Gordon Bruce Turner, "Outside Looking In," *United Church Publishing House* (1987): quoted in Working Unit on Evangelism and Discipleship Member: *Congregation as Evangelist* (Toronto, ON: The United Church of Canada, 1989), 3.

- communicates, primarily to the world outside, the message of hope, love, faith, and God's justice of the shalom kingdom."[31]

By the late 1990s, despite the continuing decline in membership, the United Church promoted what it called "congregational transformation." In *Embracing Transformation*, a book published by the denomination in1998 , it is explained that the phrase "captures the desire that the denomination may be a community of congregations, whose people perceive themselves to be sent by Christ on a mission of witnessing to what God has done, is doing, and will do in our own backyards."[32]

Evangelism in the Present

The United Church of Canada at present does not have the missionary style of leadership of the "men of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chron. 12:32, NSRV). The institutional Church is in decline and the greater the decline, the more rules and regulations the United Church has introduced. There has not been a congregational start-up in the United Church for forty years.

There is a comfort zone of sorts inside United Church congregations, but it is a dangerous one. The danger is that inside congregations – even the most "successful" ones – leaders and members may be tempted to keep on doing what they have always done, as long as they can afford to. The United Church is in such deep denial despite the fact that the end result will be an approach to evangelism that resembles a palliative care

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[31] Steven Chambers, *This Is Your Church* (Toronto, ON: The United Church Publishing House, 1993), 13.

[32] The Division of Mission in Canada, *Embracing Transformation* (Etobicoke, ON: The United Church of Canada, 1998), 10.

centre. The mission of the Church has become keeping the "patient" comfortable until

the end comes. And any sense of bringing new souls to Christ is tainted by the dire state

of the local church. Diane Walker, in her article, "The United Church of Canada is a

Missionary Church," explains the state of the evangelism discussion in the Church:

> When we talk of evangelism, if we talk of evangelism, we probably mean growing the local church, or more likely, trying to stem the tide of decline in our local church. Evangelism, mission, have deteriorated from inviting people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ, claiming Canada for Christ, to extending an invitation to be part of an organization.[33]

When speaking of the evangelical task in the local context, it is necessary to

remember that the congregation speaks a story of faith and church that is foreign to most

of its neighbours. But the gospel story is one that North Oshawa will listen to again if

believers engage some creativity and courage. The Christendom mindset is still

entrenched to some extent within the neighbourhood. If believers would talk about their

experiences of God, about their faith, about the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives,

people in the community can wrestle in fresh ways with what the gospel means in this

culture. Christian culture and Christendom have been marginalized by a secular public

life, but those individuals can still be influenced by believers' testimony. Even though

many Christians have been disillusioned with inherited forms of outreach, they can learn

that speaking strengthens community and that the legacy of the United Church

evangelism story can change lives.

The United Church of Canada has established name-brand credibility over the

years and, unlike typical businesses, it has hundreds, maybe thousands of people in

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[33] Diane Walker, "The United Church of Canada is a Missionary Church," *Fellowship Magazine*, March 2006, 7.

Oshawa who are loyal to the point of being reluctant to going to church elsewhere. Such "affiliates" have relational ties to the Church through family members and friends that usually go back for decades. If only these believers might understand that evangelism is not about God fixing people, but about God making wholeness out of human woundedness and human imcompleteness. Of the dozens of plaques and memorials in the sanctuary, the one affixed to the pulpit in 1912 has the most resonance: "Their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13). The context of this passage provides illumination: verse 6 begins the section, "And I saw another angel flying through the heavens, carrying the everlasting Good News to preach to the people who belong to this world – *to every nation, tribe, language, and people*" [emphasis mine]. In telling the story of the living Church, believers will find that they are not alone on the journey.

The Social Gospel

There are gentle echoes of the social gospel aspect of the United Church of Canada. The social gospel ethos is still there. Nevertheless, the Church is going through a bit of grief that it is not the political voice or the unified corporate voice that it used to be. In the past, newspaper columnists have called the United Church "the New Democratic Party at prayer" (social leftist national political party). But recent news trends have changed that perception. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, in their book, *A Matrix of Meanings*, make the following recommendation for Christians today: "With hard news no longer our window on the world, conscientious Christians must develop a theology out of pop culture if they hope to promise a theology of social justice."[34]

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[34] Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 202.

St. Stephen's is focused on maintenance, not mission. St. Stephen's is focused on maintenance, not mission. Largely due to the aging nature of the congregation, the beliefs, values and behaviours centre on fiscal responsibility and the survival of the church in some idyllic Norman Rockwell form. The topic of conversations usually revolves around what "a friendly little church we have" or "how can we fix the leak in the roof at the least possible cost?" Mention of ministry that declares a blessing on the region or is sensitive to the needs of the church's neighbours is met with a stunned silence. The congregation is not ready to face what the external pressure of culture eventually will force upon them.

The Demographic and Cultural Analysis of St. Stephen's United Church

Christians are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence. In the spirit of part of the United Church creed, St. Stephen's gathers to celebrate God's presence and to respond by going out into the world as followers and friends of Jesus Christ. The church's service of public worship on a Sunday morning expresses the dynamic quality of a subculture (the Christian Church) that has been eclipsed by an imported local culture (Canadian popular culture). The members of St. Stephen's comprise a subculture that has isolated itself in the midst of its multicultural, suburban setting. St. Stephen's is not responding to the social context in which it finds itself.

St. Stephen's is situated in the North-central part of suburban Oshawa, an area of small businesses, apartments, and single-family homes. It is also adjacent to large areas of new homes, homes under construction and areas of big box retail stores under

development. Located in an ethnically changing neighbourhood that conforms to the preceding cultural description of the city as a whole, the traditional constituency at St. Stephen's of middle-class workers of the auto industry is rapidly aging. The Sunday worship service gathers the remnant of an older exiled culture that live in a world that has long since changed around them. Worship is the act which brings St. Stephen's into existence and sustains its sense of loyalty and tradition. The membership consists of those brought to faith by socialization or kinship ties.

For the most part, the congregation of St. Stephen's feels isolated and fragmented. Church members are confused and afraid to talk to one another about the future. St. Stephen's has no strategic contact with people outside the congregation such as unchurched non-Christians, unchurched Christians, or even churched Christians in other denominations. Entire generations of youth, college-aged students and young families in the church's community are being ignored. There is a sense of concern regarding "where all the young people have gone," but unfortunately this concern has not let to reflection or understanding. St. Stephen's is not currently a missional church, in that it does not see itself as part of the *missio Dei* (God's mission), which David Bosch describes as "God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate."[35]

Bibby describes growing churches: "What typically characterizes growing congregations is their strong emphasis on ministry to children, young people, and young adults, and their effort to address the spiritual, personal, and relational needs of people of

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[35] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

all ages."[36] Unfortunately, this is not true of St. Stephen's. Out of one hundred

members, sixty-four are in the 65-and-over age group. Twenty are between 50 and 64

years of age; ten are between 35 and 49 years of age; five are between 20 and 34 years of

age; and only one member is between 16 and 19 years of age. The church does not

recognize baptized children as members, but there are approximately a dozen pre-school

aged children in the congregation.

In addition to being an aging congregation, other characteristics reveal the fact

that the church does not reflect its community. For example, of the one hundred

members, none is from a visible minority group, and only three members are bilingual (in

German and English). The struggle to keep the doors open in a changing neighbourhood

is the truest presentation of St. Stephen's. It is a small congregation with a majority of

blue-collar retirees. Sixty percent of the congregation is female and forty percent is male.

The majority of the 65-and-over age group is widowed or never married. There are about

half-dozen family clusters with grandchildren attending but no adult children in

attendance. Approximately half of the congregation has been attending St. Stephen's for

more than thirty years; these members grew up on local farms when the church was rural.

As a long-established and dwindling congregation, the members' attachment to

the place is a major part of the glue that binds the group together. A major component in

holding together the congregation is clearly their close tie to the building. The careful

upkeep of the grounds, meticulous cleaning of the rooms, and rebuilding of the tower

after its collapse last year places at the top of the priority list the maintenance of the

building. The heritage tie may be influential in causing longtime members to maintain

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[36] Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 22.

their affiliation with and participation in the congregation despite a move to a new residence or nursing home. The church of thirty years ago is remembered with denominational and congregational nostalgia. As members of the congregation where heritage and nostalgia are cohesive forces they often describe the "recent new members" as people who have joined since the 1980s. "Young members" are referred as those under forty years of age. Growing old together is a cohesive force, however, there is sometimes a reluctance to recognize the strengths and assets of the long-term members as a meaningful ministry to the "newer" members.

A church's identity is a powerful shaping element of congregational life, but it is often a hidden face of the congregation, publicly articulated and advertised only in blunt ways. As described in the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, "Lodged in gossip, in unwritten rules, and in a myriad of tacit signs, the components of identity are more stumbled upon than codified."[37] A recent incident between a member of the 65-and-older group and a twenty-something visitor characterizes the cultural gap facing the congregation. The young visitor wore a baseball cap to worship and was confronted afterwards by the older church member, who instructed him to come next time without the hat "out of respect" for the assembled worshippers.

There are no easy answers regarding how to transform St. Stephen's into a more missional church. Nevertheless, by struggling together with those who seriously want to see new generations of Christians, the congregation will be able to see more clearly.

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[37] Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, eds., *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville, KY: Abingdon, undated), 14.

The challenge for this research project is significant. St. Stephen's needs to provide for the neighbourhood a theology and evangelism that proclaims the values of the gospel. The church must communicate the theology of the gospel in all of its diversity and a way of living that helps to navigate our troubled world. A congregational survey taken in 2003 indicated the number one concern as "welcoming new people" without an analysis in the rest of the report of who the church might be welcoming.[38] St. Stephen's is not grappling with a growth problem, nor is it naming the painful consequences of not doing evangelism. In spite of the contemporary changes in the popular culture and the growing gap between the community and the church's aging members, St. Stephen's continues to do the same things over and over. Walker gives the following exhortation to the United Church of Canada: "If we are not offering Jesus Christ, if all we have to rely on is our reflection in the mirror, then it is vain to consider that the worlds will beat a path to our door, to become more like us: our mission will be fruitless, our evangelism gutted of its power."[39]

Emerging Vision, Values and Mission of St. Stephen's

The evangelistic dialogue must begin with listening and an active outreach ministry. Unfortunately in Canada's polite culture, people have filtered out religion to the point where the Church has lost people's curiosity. But at some point the Church has to unfold the gospel message where people live. This means establishing relationships

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[38] St. Stephen's United Church, "Joint Needs Assessment Committee Report," January 2003.

[39] Walker, "The United Church of Canada is a Missionary Church," 7.

first and clearly pointing out Jesus' message at a pace at which the person could take it in.

Jesus encountered a woman at the well, made a split-second decision, and turned a

conversation from the routine to the spiritual (John 4: 25-26). In *Inside the Mind of*

Unchurched Harry and Mary, Lee Strobel comments, "This is the turning point where

most of get tripped up, isn't it? We're not sure how to turn everyday conversation to

spiritual matters in a natural way. And, again, do you know what the key is? *It's*

listening."[40]

According to Christian Schwarz in his book, *Natural Church Development*, in any

given congregation probably fewer than 10 percent have the gift of evangelism.[41] Since

the members have no formal ministry involving non-Christians they are going to have to

make split-second decisions with the neighbours, clerks or tradespeople they encounter

on a daily basis. It is impossible to have meaningful relationship with new people

without communication. It is hoped that the members of St. Stephen's will, in Strobel's

words, "take a deep breath, trust God, and take the spiritual road."[42]

In a Session of Elders held in 2004 it was pointed out that according to the recent

congregational survey of issues relating to a ministry call, the primary concern was that

of welcoming new people.[43] As the Elders considered the church's main business, the

general consensus was that the core task of the church should be one of proclaiming the

traditional core gospel message and making disciples. After a short presentation on the

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[40] Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 91.

[41] Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 1996), 34.

[42] Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 93.

[43] St. Stephen's United Church, "Joint Needs Assessment Committee Report," January 2003.

diverse cultures around the church, the Elders' immediate realization was one of how separated they are from the world.[44]

The meeting translated into a number of steps toward evangelism and being more connected to the world. As pastor, I initiated a long-range change process in 2005 by convening a group of leaders as a Transformation Steering Committee. This resulted in the presentation of a six-week program called "Pursuing God with U2," held in the spring of 2006. Aspects of God in the music of U2 designed for adult spiritual formation and evangelism was offered to the community. On the heels of the popular Dan Brown book and movie entitled *The Da Vinci Code*, a four-week program based on the book was presented in the fall of 2006. The hope was to give the community an opportunity to bring questions about God or about Jesus that were raised by Brown's book.

A serious auto accident demolished the front of the church in the spring of 2007 but the Transformation Steering Committee continued the process of evangelism with the distribution of two direct-mail flyers to the immediate neighbourhood. The accident took its toll on the morale of the congregation, but after rebuilding was completed in January 2008, there have been continued efforts to reach out. Every two weeks, a local food cooperative group is offering a popular fresh and preserved organic produce market out of the church. St. Stephen's also has recently been hosting a weekly twelve-step recovery program for cocaine addicts called "The Vision Group." Since January 2008, I have been facilitating a weekly twelve-step recovery program for those who struggle with stress in their everyday lives; this group is called "The Serenity Group." The program has

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[44] Meeting of Session of Elders, 16 September 2004, Official Board Minutes, St. Stephen's United Church, Oshawa.

resulted in welcoming four new church members since January. Unfortunately, in the four years since the Elders' meeting in 2004, the membership has fallen from 135 to only 105. But this drop in membership can be mainly attributed to deaths or transfers of members due to relocation.

Unchurched Christians

Although the number of unchurched non-Christians is significant from the demographic data (approximately 25 percent of the local population), the congregation of St. Stephen's is not yet prepared to listen to their secular neighbours. Since Oshawa has a higher concentration of nominal Christians, it may be wiser to take steps towards evangelism with these people. For example, there are many in the community who call on St. Stephen's "for burial purposes only" and others who attend only at Christmas and Easter. Engaging with these nominal Christians will give St. Stephen's a measure of success as the congregation attempts to meet their needs.

Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Southern California, contends that to reach secular people the Church "must use words they understand, and music they understand also. In my opinion," he explains, "music is the most important factor in determining your evangelistic target, even more than preaching style."[45]

St. Stephen's has already made some progress in this area of evangelism to nominal Christians. One measure of success is that St. Stephen's has been able to attract a growing number of unchurched worshippers each Sunday. A "successful" worship

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[45] Rick Warren, quoted in George G. Hunter, III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 151.

service, in accordance with Paul's speech in the presence of King Agrippa and his court

(Acts 26), is one in which the worshippers gather in humble submission to the light of

God (v.13) and hear a heavenly voice spoken directly each of them in their "native

languages." This voice is also the language of the risen Lord which repeatedly calls out

the worshipper's name (v.14). Paul heard God speaking to him in Hebrew, the language

of his own native culture. Lesslie Newbigin, in his book, *Foolishness to the Greeks*,

suggests that success in an awareness of what is involved in the communication of the

gospel across a cultural frontier: he writes, "The communication has to be in the language

of the receptor culture."[46] In the passage, God tells Paul that his all-consuming passion

(that is, destroying the Christians) is wrong. This story not only reveals God speaking to

each one in his or her own "language," but it also exhorts the reader to stop harmful

convictions, to "turn around, and renounce the whole direction of his life, to love what he

had hated and to cherish what he had sought to destroy."[47] This accomplishes a second

aim of worship: to lead nominal Christians to genuine praise of God and growth of

character.

Another measure of success relates to the large number of people attracted to

community life events such as the Seniors Group, the United Church Women, the Choir

and numerous fundraising events. Though some of these individuals are unchurched

Christians or nominal members of another United church, they are interested in St.

Stephen's and are open to a closer affiliation with its members. Biblical success here

could be defined in the number of unchurched people who are experiencing testimony of

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[46] Ibid., 5.

[47]Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5.

Jesus by their participation in these church activities. Just as Paul was called to the service of God in the communication of the gospel ("But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me" [Acts 26:16]), so also has St. Stephen's been called to preach the gospel to "the Gentiles." Newbigin describes true conversion, which is the hope for all nominal Christians: "If it is truly revelation, it will involve contradiction, and call for conversion, for a radical *metanoia*, a U-turn of the mind."[48]

St. Stephen's has also offered a few programs that are designed to connect with the unchurched. One such program (mentioned above) explored aspects of God in the music of the band U2, and it designed for adult spiritual formation. The structure and assumptions of the course may help those for whom music is of particular interest. The seminar and workshop structure allowed participants to discuss the spiritual value of rock music. The multimedia format simply assumes that contemporary popular media is a useful place to look for the footprints of the Holy Spirit. Since the older participants were not familiar with U2, this served as an attempt to bridge the culture barrier with younger church members as well as friends and neighbors.

Another program recently offered (also mentioned above) was The Nicodemus Project, a four-week study of Dan Brown's book, *The DaVinci Code*.[49] Conversations already buzzing by unchurched Christians about fiction, fantasy, and film were linked to broader human experience, and to even deeper faith questions. The idea of the program

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[48] Ibid., 6.

[49] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

is to mimic Jesus by empowering participants to look more deeply at ways God may be speaking to them.

The program was designed as a faith-culture dialogue for the neighbourhood, although unfortunately no one from the neighbourhood showed up. This was despite the church's best efforts, which included extensive local direct mail advertising, conversations with local business people, and posting a notice on the church's outside sign board for several weeks prior to the event. This may point to how slippery and mercurial popular culture is. Or it may point to a lack of relationship with the surrounding community. As a point of comparison, there are other churches in the city that are connecting with the unchurched by way of similar events that involve popular culture. Mission to the unchurched Christian still needs to break the "stained-glass" barrier of St. Stephen's.

Unchurched Non-Christians

Bibby helps to explain why evangelism in the present North American culture is difficult:

> Large numbers also have limited involvement with the country's religious groups. They frequently feel that the churches are not in touch with who they are, what they want, and what they need. To be fair, many of those people are not necessarily sure themselves what those needs are – sort of like being hungry but not knowing what one wants to eat.[50]

In addition, believers who would evangelize must deal with the Canadian distaste for people who "wear their religion on their sleeves," as Canadians would put it. As Strobel

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[50] Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*, 178.

suggests, Canadians for the most part play it safe rather than tilt the conversation toward spiritual topics, and they withdraw rather than talk about their faith.[51]

This reluctance of Canadians to talk about their faith exposes a cultural challenge to the United Church of Canada regarding friendship evangelism. The United Church views the "call to conversion" as a one-time ritualistic decision rather than a journey of discipleship with a community of faith. The Celtic way of evangelism fits into the cultural context of suburban Canada very well. Conversion must be understood as a process of shifting spirituality to public life. A shift to public life as a place of engagement is one which flows out of the faith community between believers and non-believers. St. Stephen's will have to go beyond what the denomination requires for conversion in that members must invite discipleship. Currently, when St. Stephen's members get together they inevitably talk about how much they love the church community, but they do not discuss the mission of bringing people into the fellowship of their community of faith. Friendship evangelism must become an integral part of the church culture.

The first step in the model of Celtic evangelism is to establish community with new people, a practice not happening at St. Stephen's at present. The official federal multicultural programs held in various locations in Oshawa during Fiesta Week may help the church with its strategy of evangelism. Most people attending these events are seeking the experience of another culture in a fun, non-threatening environment. This model has experienced reasonable success with respect to the objective of bringing

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[51] Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 92.

church members and non-church members together. However, along the way, a study of what happens evangelistically at these events has not been done. Rethinking evangelism will result in the practice of tapping into the creative interactions with new individuals.

Mission is certainly part of the heritage of the Christian Church in the reformed tradition. Craig Van Gelder, in *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, concedes that "doing mission in this context is hard work and will require thoughtful reflection on the part of the church."[52] St. Stephen's should extend that heritage of mission and be a safe place where a dynamic conversation between the gospel and the postmodern context can take place. St. Stephen's faces the task of discovering how to do mission in a way that brings hope to the inherited forms of church and explores new ways of translating the gospel within the emerging postmodern context.

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[52] Craig Van Gelder, "Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition," in George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 138.

CHAPTER 2

PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES CONFRONTING MISSION AND
EVANGELISM AT ST. STEPHEN'S UNITED CHURCH

Strategies for Understanding God's Communication

At present God's communication with people is different than it has been in the

past due to a set of different stimuli[KS1]. This does not mean that God's revelation is

different. Under the creative impact of the Word which believers receive and obey, they

are drawn into the sphere of its effective operation in the world. By living one's faith in a

media-drenched culture, God communicates with the world. Today's culture is one of far

wider technological potential than before. A large campus of techno-savvy students lies

just up the street from St. Stephen's, for example. A neighbourhood of greater cultural

diversity is growing ever larger around Oshawa. Canadian society in general, through

historic shifts in political ideology, is creating structures in constant flux. But there are

deeper reasons as well. God in Jesus is communicating and moving in the midst of a

complex mix of apprehension, bewilderment and hope – the despair-inducing events of a

financial crisis and the losses of jobs and homes, the depersonalizing effects of

globalization, and the disconcerting yet challenging implications of the government's war

on terror. The Word of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ to operate as a living Word

today, affecting the horizontal dimensions of human existence.

The effect of these pressures is that people are searching God for new anchor

points for their lives. The profit-driven modern marketplace that surrounds the Church is

regarded by some with growing mistrust. Many find it unfulfilling. They search instead

for connections with God's spirit. One can measure society's growing appetite for those

connections in bookstores, in college courses and in websites related to spirituality. It is

an appetite for God that must be nourished and encouraged.

The present cultural climate assigns the Church a place on the fringes of one's

existence, yet the creative strategy for understanding God is part of what makes one

human. In theatres, galleries, libraries, hockey rinks, community centres, and fundraisers,

on television and movie screens, in schools and homes, the limitless expression of God's

imagination is displayed. Access to this understanding of God is everyone's birthright.

But for too long many Christians have neglected to exercise their claim for the nature and

character of God.

The Latin words [KS2]*ut omnes unum sint*" on the United Church Crest are

translated, "That all may be one." It is the official signature of The United Church of

Canada. It is a visual presentation of both the cornerstone of the faith and the traditions

that have shaped the Church since before union in 1925. Unfortunately, movement since

then has emphasized the "transcendent" nature of the Triune God.[1] But Jesus comes to

humankind much more dynamically as the living Word, the criterion of Truth. It is time

for the United Church of Canada to break the mold and to encourage local church

communities to be both "united" with Christ and "uniting" with the world.

The Word-made-flesh enlightens and guides people, through the operation of the

Holy Spirit, to the *kerygma* and *koinonia* of the Church. Van Engen writes, "The Church

becomes *mission* in following the Lord as an apostolic community that is in constant,

dynamic movement, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of light in the midst of the

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[1] Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 26.

kingdom of darkness."[2] The missional strategy, then, has its origin in the self-disclosure of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the love of God the Father. The "Pharisees and Sadducees" in the kingdom of darkness are part of a larger culture that loves to test Christianity's truth claims (Matt. 16:1). The public's curiosity and interaction with the "signs of the times" knows no bounds. If missionary work is the criterion for all the Church's activities then it is going to have to go outside itself to answer biases and questions that people ask of the revelation of God.

To think and pray about the Trinitarian mission of God is to be convinced that the foundation for doing ministry in the world and engaging the culture will have less to do with denominational boundaries. What will make more effective leadership is to see the congregation on a journey with other pilgrims and the Triune God. With the dark forces about and the saints pulling for believers, this chapter will turn its focus towards how God speaks through the Holy Spirit to reveal himself.

Strategies for Communicating God's Message within the Culture

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is good news that belongs to everyone. It contains a simple message of God's story that is an essential part of what it means to be human. Those who would hedge it about with exclusivity and excessive reverence, as if its blessings were a privilege only available to particularly insightful members of a private club, commit a kind of theft. All have a share in God's riches, and all have the ability to respond to the gifts of the Spirit.

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[2] Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, 78.

Providing access to the gospel involves more than driving a van of kids to church on Christmas and Easter. Access is no longer a matter, as it was once described, of luring people into the sanctuary and whispering explanations of the liturgy in their ears as they sit there dumbstruck. Youth, minority and ethnic cultures, students, people with disabilities, residents of tenant apartments as well as residents of the growing subdivisions: access to God's message is a right that belongs to all, as ordinary – and as vital – as the right to read or the right to shelter. It is a matter of making available something that is integral to the fullest enjoyment of health, harmony and happiness.

In observing the visibly religious, Paul harshly decried their widespread self-righteousness, their tendency to live out the letter rather than the spirit of the law, and their inclination to distance themselves from the very people (Jews and Gentiles) who required ministry (Romans 2:17). Jesus himself ministered both in the synagogues and outside of them, mixing not only with devout people but also with so-called sinners, reminding his critics that he had come "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He ministered to spiritual needs, forgiving sins and pointing people to God. But he did not stop there. He actively addressed personal needs, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, even restoring life (e.g. Luke 14:1-6).

He also gave considerable attention to teaching people how to relate with more compassion toward each other, particularly emphasizing the importance of such caring transcending one's immediate family, friends, and racial group. He exhorted his followers to care for their enemies, strangers, and outsiders as well. In his book, *There's Got to Be More!* Reginald Bibby writes, "The historical Jesus who didn't endorse synagogues just because they were synagogues should not be expected to endorse

churches just because they are churches."[3] In the Church today, much that is taking place in the name of "outreach" is foreign to the concerns of Jesus. If the need for communicating God's message is to be met, that has to change.

The Scriptures speak of God's passionate desire to answer people's cries of desperation and meet them in their culture, to turn bondage into freedom. This is the communication of the Creator's unsurpassing love for a world gone astray, a love that would lead him ultimately to the cross, to enter into the pain of others, bearing people's suffering and sin, to hand it back to them as redemption. This is the story of the unswerving narrative intent of the Author of creation. The challenge of this strategy is to liberate people from their bondage and incorporate them into his grand design.

In developing a strategy for communicating the gospel amidst the North Oshawa culture, the solution just does not lie in a charismatic prophet who can read "the obvious signs of the times" (Matthew 16:1-4). Rather, in the words of George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, the solution lies "in a community of committed Christians who are willing not only to hear the gospel together in our [neighbourhood] but also to pay the price that obedience to that gospel will demand."[4]

Traditionally, The United Church has addressed a social order but not a cultural order, without any attention to a particularly Canadian worldview. The Church thus needs leadership for teaching and action. Walter Wink, in *Engaging the Powers*, reminds his readers that the systems of North America are not all evil: "Individualism, mechanism, technique, and the rest are beneficial if they are kept in check by higher

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[3] Reginald W. Bibby, *There's Got to Be More!* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake, 1995), 10.

[4] Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 156.

values and social systems."[5] Unfortunately, religious extremism, political polarization

and regional aspirations carried to the extremes in Canada are equally destructive. God's

calling leads people to examine their social organization and their awareness of culture.

A starting point for communicating God's message within the culture is to bring the

governance and leadership of St. Stephen's under the lordship of Christ and his kingdom.

The Subculture of St. Stephen's compared with the Suburban Popular Culture of North Oshawa

St. Stephen's is a small Protestant church of one hundred members in a growing

community of North Oshawa. There are approximately a dozen children under the age of

twelve (including pre-school age) attending worship services. The members of the

Official Board have indicated that during the past several years, the church's young

people, because of career opportunities outside of the automotive sector, left town after

they graduated from high school. They then married and raised their children in other

communities. They have concluded that few young families live in the community, and

most of the young families who remain are either Catholic or Charismatic. There is also

a concern about church finances, as members say, "We cannot grow, because we cannot

afford the ministry we have now and keep our old building maintained."

In contrast to the Board's conclusions, however, enrollment at the local public

school is at capacity. Looking down the street from St. Stephen's, there is a wall of low-

rise condominiums, townhouses and apartment buildings. And a small village of college

dormitories is being built just a kilometer down the road. If the reached only the people

in the immediate vicinity, it would not need to worry about expenses at all. In addition,

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[5] Ibid., 156.

the church sanctuary has plenty of available space on Sunday, and the classrooms and basement are empty six months of the year and could be rented to community groups.

It is also true that the members of St. Stephen's do not think too expansively about these "new families" because their migration has pushed ministry needs beyond the church's capacity to respond. As many are recent immigrants to the country, several families fall below the poverty line and need a great deal of financial, emotional, and social support. The members of St. Stephen's have been unable to engage in ministry with these families. They do not associate with "the poor" on general class principle, and they view their needs as too great to be met by a small church. The attitude of church leaders could be summed up in the following statement: "We are fine church family, and we worship at the same time in the same way every Sunday. If the new folks who are arriving want to join us and accept the way we do things, then they are welcome."

God Communicates through Personal Experience

"Unless a congregation responds to the ongoing changes within its community, it will lose part of its missional purpose," writes Peter Wernett in his article, "Community Information and its Impact on Local Congregational Ministry."[6] God reveals himself through personal experience. The biggest stumbling block for St. Stephen's is that its members have been molded in their Christian faith through a lifetime of cognitive, rational training and have been connected to the faith by clan or kinship ties. But there are many people who are not raised in Christian homes and who have not received

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[6] Peter Wernett, "Community Information and Its Impact on Local Congregational Ministry," Net Results Magazine, July/August/September 2005, 10.

Christian training. For such individuals, spiritual formation primarily occurs through

experience and participation. Dan Kimball, in his book, The Emerging Church, states

that the pre-Christian culture is "drawn to the liturgical, the visual, the majestic."7

Relating to the Personhood of God

God's speaking to humankind through re-categorization and diversity is the most

accessible manner of describing the face of God to non-believers. A demonstrative

image of the personhood of God in the form of an icon is open to multiple interpretations.

The face of Jesus is an accessible icon (there are 20 portraits of Jesus around the church!)

which can serve as a reference point for every decision, program and strategy. People

relate to the human revelation of God in Jesus. The Holy Scriptures provide that

foundational authority of revelation through which believers can experience and

participate in God's rule of justice, peace and love in all creation. Scripture is witness to

revelation and a means (by the power of the Holy Spirit) through which revelation is

experienced and continued. The role of believers is to interpret and be ambassadors of

this way of life so that they can invite others to become part of it.

How God Relates to Humankind as the Trinity

When considering the task of revealing God to others, the reality of God that is

diverse and dynamic is so vast that the human mind cannot comprehend a God who

created all things. When speaking of God, human words are able to contain the reality of

God as the "self-giving Spirit" that is in Jesus. It is significant that believers

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7 Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 222.

communicate with God as "uniting in love given and received by us" that tradition calls the living Word or Son.[8] God is the Trinitarian person, the union of Jesus the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. In those three personas, he is sharing the joy and happiness (as Creator), but also the loneliness and despair (as Redeemer), and the pain and hopelessness of human existence (as Sustainer). This personal God is one who risks loving people, even if they looks and acts a lot differently than he does. Lesslie Newbigin, in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, writes, "A true relation to God cannot be independent of our relation with other people."[9] This is true of God and should be true of believers as well.

Loving God means, first of all, realizing that one has "slipped up,"[10] yet realizing that God still has still offered an invitation to follow him. Johnson writes that as believers, we "affirm that God's relation to the world is grounded in God's own being capable of such relation."[11] Just as God himself befriends the world, so ought believers do the same. And in such friendship with non-believers, it is important to focus on personal experiences of God. Newbigin writes, "Through the work of the Spirit we are led into an ever fuller understanding of [the Godhead] as the Spirit talks of the things of Jesus and shows them to us through the experiences of our place and time**.**"[12]

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[8] Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 206.

[9] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 165.

[10] The biblical term for this is *paratoma,* which is used in Romans 11:11 to indicate "stumble so as to fall."

[11] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 201.

[12] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 164.

Ministry in a Postmodern Canada

Considerations Facing the United Church of Canada

As The United Church of Canada begins its ninth decade, it is fair to observe that the denomination finds itself in a culture of both crisis and opportunity. Unless it is prepared to deal with the culture, however, the opportunity will slip through the Church's fingers and it will continue to drift to the margins of society. It is time to initiate a new conversation within the culture, and to ask some different questions than have traditionally been raised.

Church leaders must consider the following questions. What is the role of ministry in a Church and country whose axis is shifting? Canada's national political and economic debate was long shaped by the Ontario-Quebec axis, but is now shifting west. What is the role of the Canadian Church in a world whose axis is shifting, where a post-9/11, post-Katrina, Iraqi war, and Republican sex scandals era point to the end of the age of the American Empire? How do churches help a culture adapt to rapidly changing postmodern contexts such as jobs that are constantly evolving or disappearing? What does it mean to support congregants responding to the stresses of a "just-in-time" delivery world, and of an era in which they will be required to constantly retrain and reinvent themselves? What ministry pressures do these new realities bring to church leadership? How will churches respond to a society mired in debt if a 1980s-style spike in interest rates is accompanied by a return to a 1970s-style problem of inflation? How will churches function in a Canada where there is a danger of an increasing divide based upon education and opportunity? How shall believers minister?

There is no question that The United Church is at a crossroads. Either it will find new ways to minister to the culture or it will fade into irrelevance as a historical curiosity of the twentieth century. To explain its decline, David Haskell cites the work of American sociologist Rodney Stark, who says that when a faith group – like the United Church – positions itself as just one path of humankind available to a spiritual seeker, it is like a company endorsing the competitor's product because it is just as good.[13]

The challenge for ministry in a postmodern Canada is significant. Can the United Church provide for Canadians a theology and practice that expresses Canadian values? Can it communicate the gospel in all its diversity and a way of living that helps to navigate this troubled world? Can churches minister in a denomination that leads not in certainties, but through a "clear ambiguity," a place where questions and doubts are not only valued but honoured?[14] And can believers be honest enough to recognize the depth of the challenge and the need for ways to minister that go into a postmodern culture?

Challenges to Postmodern Ministry

In his book, *Unknown Gods,* Reginald Bibby provides compelling evidence that church membership and attendance figures in Canada do not warrant the conclusion that Baby Boomers' spiritual searches are particularly consequential. A church like the Community Pentecostal Church down the road from St. Stephen's can claim considerable growth to fill a cavernous auditorium, but the recruits are already believers and are

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[13] David Haskell, "Easy going Church Turns 80," *Toronto Star,* 20 August 2005, L11.

[14] Christoper White, *Seismic Shifts* (Toronto, ON: United Church Publishing House, 2006), 15.

merely shifting location. The swell of religious interest by Baby Boomers is merely a "circulation of saints." There is a great deal of talk about religion in the culture, but little actual increase in the number of people who follow Jesus.

There are certain challenges to postmodern ministry presented by the suburban Canadian context which affect St. Stephen's. The first is the need for believers to be willing to share their faith. The second is the need for believers to be aware of and willing to meet the needs of their non-Christian neighbours and friends. The third challenge is bringing and keeping young people. A fourth challenge facing Canadian believers is how to provide worship and music that can be meaningful for both active members and less active affiliates in the culture Finally, a fifth challenge is overcoming the recently negative reputation of The United Church of Canada.

A Willingness of Believers to Share their Faith

When it comes to spirituality, St. Stephen's shares a sobering finding with most "churchgoing" Canadians and the first challenge to a postmodern ministry. Few Christian pew-sitters are sharing their spirituality with others. Asked directly, most say, "I keep my spirituality pretty much to myself" or "I don't wear my religion on my sleeve." A few will indicate that they share it with "some people who are close to me such as relatives and neighbours." According to Bibby, only 12% of Canadian Christians

report that they can relate their spirituality to others in their own religious groups. The

latter includes less than one in three actively involved, weekly attenders.[15]

These findings point to the need for St. Stephen's to develop creative ways of

opening up the communication lines on spirituality. In the future, they will not lack

competition. Michael Higgins and Douglas Letson, in their book, *Power and Peril*, note

that while the thirst for a meaningful or living spirituality is unquenchable, " there are not

a few purveyors of the 'spiritual arts' willing to peddle their dubious wares at a speedy

rate and at cut-rate costs."[16] They maintain that a spirituality that is communal,

historical, theological, with justice as part of its very definition, is a spirituality best

poised to thrive in the new century.[17] This type of spirituality is what most leaders have

in mind for mission and evangelism in The United Church of Canada. The task at hand is

for the believers to accept this vision with open lines of communication as well.

A Willingness to Meet the Personal and Relational Needs of Others

A second important challenge for postmodern ministry has to do with the ability

of St. Stephen's to contribute to individuals and their relationships. However, if churches

aspire to minister better to the personal needs of those in the culture, they face two

challenges: first, they must be aware of such needs; and second, they must be able to

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[15] Reginald Bibby, *Restless Churches* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake, 2004), 90.

[16] Higgins and Letson, *Power and Peril* (Toronto, ON: Harper Collins, 2002): 329-330 quoted in Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 90.

[17] Higgins and Letson, (2002): 381 quoted in Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 90.

respond to what they find. The latter challenge is a complex one and will be dealt with in more detail in Part Three of this paper.

At St. Stephen's, the awareness hurdle is one that can be seen in anecdotal responses to questions posed to members about their own experiences being known and cared for. These include people who currently attend services at least once and month and are considered "active members." The questions centered on whether St. Stephen's,, as a church, was aware of their personal problems over the years and how much support the church had provided. There were no reports that St. Stephen's failed to give them the support they needed when the church was aware of what they were going through. This supports the self-identity as a "caring church." About half of the respondents told of St. Stephen's being generally aware of their problems and coming through with appropriate support. These included highly active members who attend worship every week. However, about a third of the active members said that St. Stephen's was not completely aware of their personal problems – although all of these people said nonetheless that they felt supported in dealing with their difficulties. (This may sound contradictory, but one can assume that they found nurture in public worship, coffee hour, and other social connections through the church). An important implication confronting mission and evangelism can be made here. If churches are unaware of the personal concerns of the frequent attendees, then the chances are slim that they will be aware of the personal needs of friends and neighbors around them, let alone respond to such cultural needs.

Youth

The third challenge is bringing in and keeping young people. Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski have extensively researched Canadian youth through a spectrum of studies.[18] Their research reveals that young people are fascinated with the supernatural realm, and hold traditional beliefs on levels comparable to adults. Of the teens surveyed, 78% believe in life after death. Large numbers believe they have experienced the presence of God. Their openness to mystery is further suggested by the finding that 63% of teens have personally experienced precognition. Religious identification is high, as 76% of teens identify with some kind of church group. About half of young people acknowledge that they have spiritual needs and 60% say that spirituality is important to them. About 40% who attend services less than once a month nonetheless say that they are receptive to greater involvement with the church, if they found it to be worthwhile.

The youth research also provides some important clues about what is required for young people to become involved. The surveys have found that there is nothing more important to teens than their friends. In all three surveys, friendship tops the value rankings and also tops the charts when teens were asked what they enjoy most. Number two on the enjoyment list is music. Number two on the value list is freedom. Bibby concludes, "It's a pretty modest creative jump to deduce that, if the three most important

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[18] Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski, *Emerging Generation: An Inside Look at Canada's Teenagers* (Toronto: Book Society of Canada, Ltd., 1985); Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992); Reginald Bibby, *Canada's Teens* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), 252 and 254.

features of teenage life are friendship, music, and freedom, young people can be expected

to be receptive to environments where all three are found."[19]

As with adults, if young people are going to consider attending church, the key is

for them to find that their involvement is worth their time; they need to believe that

postmodern religion significantly touches and enhances their lives. One other factor

should be mentioned here. Of the enjoyment teens receive from their religious groups

(revealed in a different survey conducted with particular religious groups), only 15% of

United Church teens indicated that they receive "a great deal" or "quite a bit."[20]   Other

factors may bring them in; significance will keep them in.

Worship and Music

A fourth important hurdle facing St. Stephen's in postmodern Canada is how to

provide worship and music that can be meaningful for both active members and less

active affiliates in the culture. It is a particularly important issue for the Church. In

ministering to people on the fringes of church, the worship gathering is generally the

primary point of contact.

The postmodern worldview of many "non-believers" is shaped by rock bands

such as U2 or Tragically Hip, TV shows such as "The Simpsons" or "Deal or No Deal"

and films such as "The Lord of the Rings" or "Harry Potter." People are searching for

something. They mostly feel on the edge of society. At St. Stephen's, the Spiritual

Formation Group (using the music of U2 as a catalyst) learned about the rock concert

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[19] Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 99.

[20] Bibby, *Project Teen Canada,* 2000.

experience: "It's all about power and community, and feeling the despair and anger that's going on in our world."[21]

Creating a tasteful place for worship, a well-organized greeting team, a competent preacher, or a meaningful order of worship is a waste of time without gaining some comprehension of what the "unchurched" believe, why they believe it, and how those beliefs work out in daily life. The Christian Formation Group and the Nicodemus Project provide discussion questions within an explicitly Christian context. Sermons that reach a postmodern mindset are likely to contain references to popular entertainment, such as "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," "WarQuest," U2 or the "DaVinci Code."

People in most United Church churches have adjusted their emotional lives on Sunday morning to willingly suffer something boring. They see this commitment as spiritually virtuous. But that type of spiritual life does not interest the teenager next door who is inspired by Buffy Summer's courage, humour and willingness to sacrifice herself in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The biggest cultural gap at St. Stephen's, for example, is between those who show up on Sunday, sing a few hymns, hear a sermon and go home, and those who are searching for an unfiltered religious experience – larger than their daily, media-intensified lives.

Understanding what matters to one's neighbours is essential to today's Christian experience. This might mean a skateboard park in a church's empty mid-week parking lot, or viewing clips of "The Simpsons" in Sunday school, or hosting a fair-trade coffee bar instead of "fellowship time" after worship. If a church makes worship relevant and fun, non-believers will listen to what the church has to say. The friendship and

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[21] Scott Boughner, "What a Trend We Have in Jesus," *Fellowship Magazine,* September 2004, 9.

community that first attracts new people to worship will be fostered by an approach to worship that respects diversity of opinion and civility of expression. "If we struggle to make decisions about what kind of popular culture we want to bring into our worship, then we all can start to understand what kind of Jesus we believe in and teach."[22]

The United Church of Canada's Negative Credibility

It is also necessary to reflect on the impact of issues that have negatively affected the credibility of The United Church of Canada, which poses a fifth challenge. Issues such as sexual abuse by priests, Anglican/United Church-run native residential schools, and controversies surrounding gay and lesbian marriage have had a cultural impact on the ability of The United Church churches to minister effectively to postmodern Canadians.

The extensive publicity given to sexual misconduct, particularly on the part of Catholic priests, and the legacy of The United Church's involvement in native residential schools have not exactly been good for public relations. The various positions that The United Church of Canada has taken on sexual matters – notably same-sex marriage, along with gay ordination – have been divisive within the denomination. At a recent Presbytery (second-tier judicatory) meeting there was a discussion around the identity of The United Church and how the inclusive theologies across the spectrum of the denomination may have contributed to the loss of the denomination's public voice. Church leaders must consider how all this negative publicity has affected mission and evangelism to those who may be on the fringe of Canada's postmodern ministry.

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[22] Ibid., 9.

It is impossible for all involved to get what they want. There are some United Church members who want more cultural engagement and some who do not want to "bow to the culture." The United Church should display tolerance for clergy who are willing to exercise their ministry in accordance with the scriptures, and in continuity with the faith of the saints. True equality would put more authority into those clergy engaged in an evangelistic gospel ministry in a popular cultural setting (e.g. the Billy Graham Mission). Positive change that addresses organizational factors is reasonable and should be heard and taken seriously.

Bibby cites certain organizational factors that would make it worthwhile for people to be more involved in the United Church: "enjoyable services…more open to modern culture and issues facing people today…less abstract…treat people as equal…interactive programs…dropping the formality, ceremony, and bringing it down to the human level…less involvement in controversial social issues…make it interesting, try new things…a strong focus on spirituality, greater acceptance of and harmony with other religious groups, less politics and power struggles."[23] The United Church is not necessarily meeting these needs very well. Organizational issues are a common problem. Pollster George Gallup writes, "The fact is, significant numbers of people find churches irrelevant, unfulfilling, and boring."[24]

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[23] Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 224. These quotes were gleaned from Bibby's research project titled "Project Canada," completed in 2000.

[24] George Gallup, "The Six Spiritual Needs of Americans," *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1992), 12-13.

Challenges in the Neighbourhood:
Being a Front Porch instead of a Closed Garage

One of the interesting barometers of community health is the front porch of the

residence. Since about half of the residents near St. Stephen's live in apartments or

townhouses, they have no access to shared space. Many of the local residents live on

busy thoroughfares with only the sound of cars driving down the street. Rows of

enclosed townhouses create enclaves where it feels unsafe. Faces are unfamiliar;

relationships are not built. Street sidewalks and city-built parks are deserted most of the

time. Residential streets within the subdivisions have no one sitting on the front porches

and the garage doors are only opened to allow the cars out.

In the context of this neighbourhood, the challenge of "community" is that it is a

misunderstood term. The term often gets appropriated in the culture by interest groups

and Internet users, but it is more intimate than that. White contends, "True community is

the gathering of multiple generations with differing perspectives, bound together by

something bigger than themselves."[25] St. Stephen's has an opportunity to offer a bond of

community to the neighbourhood so deep that it could allow individuals to transcend

difference, resolve conflict, live in tension, and focus on the meaning and mission of the

Good News. Evangelism at its best offers such a community; at the present St. Stephen's

offers only a caricature for helping people hear the gospel.

A challenge in the neighbourhood is the closed-off gated nature that models the

worst of what it is to be human. In the midst of the nine-to-five grind, debt collection and

consumer envy, this individualism does not lend towards caring for one another. The

community of St. Stephen's could demonstrate how to live a balanced life based upon

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[25] White, *Seismic Shifts*, 23.

biblical values that transcend culture and are focused upon joyful and God-affirming strategies. The true spirit of evangelism allows the gifts of the young, middle-aged, and old to be valued and cherished. If the members of St. Stephen's would tap into the popular culture, they would realize the opportunity to provide identity and belonging in an isolated neighbourhood. Contemporary church writer Leonard Sweet has stated that "the connectedness of a community is such that the devaluation and dehumanization of one is the devaluation and dehumanization of all."[26]

The challenge for St. Stephen's is to become a "front porch" to North Oshawa, instead of a "closed garage." Visibility is important. The church stands at the crossroads of the two busiest thoroughfares. However due to introverted architecture, people cannot see into the building. Most people driving by have no idea what goes on in the building. Visibility could be improved by sponsoring a Durham Regional Transit shelter (with the church name prominently displayed) at the intersection. Instead of a set of solid windowless doors at the main entrance, visibility could be heightened with glass doors. At Christmastime, rather than have the church choir and organist entertain the church members, the congregation could share its stories behind the creation of much-loved carols, both sacred and secular. Another "front porch opportunity" could be a blessing-of-the-animals service. Many children and seniors have pets to substitute as companions. This idea taps into the popular culture and could provide direct evangelism to the community by bringing in the Humane Society, veterinarians, and animal lovers.

By exploring non-threatening ways to invite people in, St. Stephen's can create opportunities for mission and evangelism, and also meet the challenges in the

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[26] Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), 190.

neighbourhood. Past experiences of doing cross-cultural studies and public worship

gatherings have revealed that people in the neighbourhood are very skittish about church.

Perhaps they are cautious of the cultural stereotypes or have been wounded by past

church experiences. "Front porch opportunities" are gentle Canadian ways of sharing the

Good News in fresh ways.

The challenge in the neighbourhood presents St. Stephen's with an opportunity.

This opportunity is to go to the church's neighbours as missionaries, not expecting them

to come to the church. To "go" means more than offering church programs and worship

in hopes that they will attract visitors. Instead, church members must incarnate the

gospel in their relationships, going to friends and neighbours and presenting Christ's love

and claims in terms that are relevant to their needs. The members of St. Stephen's must

begin to view themselves as cross-cultural missionaries in their own neighbourhood.

CHAPTER 3

DISCERNING THE GOSPEL WITHIN POPULAR CULTURE

Taking Culture Captive

A New Creed

We are not alone,
      we live in God's world.
We believe in god:
      who has created and is creating,
      who has come in Jesus,
            the Word made flesh,
            to reconcile and make new,
      Who works in us and other
            by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church:
      To celebrate God's presence,
      To live with respect in Creation,
      To love and serve others,
      To seek justice and resist evil,
      To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
            Our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
      God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.[1]

The Apostle's Creed is a confession of faith in the first person singular. "A New

Creed" (printed above) declares in the first person plural what The United Church stands

for. It is interesting that in the history of confessional statements by the Christian

Church, they have generally come in response to crisis. The Genevan Confessions of

Christ and the Lutheran Confessions were written in times of polarity and tension

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[1] The United Church of Canada, General Council 1968, alt.

between Christ and culture. They acted as converters of humankind in culture and society. Methodist statements of doctrine from John Wesley point to the idea of Christ's transformation of culture. The formation of the United Church of Canada, known as the Basis of Union in 1925, came as the result of the unnecessary overlapping in the work of the different branches of the Christian Church in Canada. The Barmen Confessions in the 1930s in Germany declared the sole leadership of Jesus Christ in a time between the great world wars. And finally, "A New Creed," written in 1968, is a liturgical statement that was deliberately ambiguous to give voice to a liberal shift in Canadian culture. It is little wonder that that year marked the zenith of church growth in Canada. This puts into perspective how God's communication has been shaped by the professional theologians from three founding communions – Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian – that united to form The United Church of Canada in 1925.

The Mission of God Is Post-denominational

While considering the Trinitarian mission of God, it is clear that the foundation for taking culture captive will have less to do with denominational boundaries. Rather, Christians are on a journey with other pilgrims they have yet to meet, and with the Triune God. The problem is more deeply rooted than the contemporary expressions of the Christian faith from The United Church of Canada. It has to do with the Church's identity, purpose, and calling.

The Present Post-Christian Culture

Canadians are living in a culture that once was Christian and is now post-Christian, and in many ways, anti-Christian. And many churches are "bowing to the culture." Connie Woodcock, in her 2008 article titled, "Take the Christ out of Christianity, what's left?" complains about a colleague who has gone to the extreme in allowing the culture to dictate theology. She writes, "But most of all I do not want to hear any more from the Rev. Gretta Vosper, the minister at West Hill United Church who has apparently managed the ultimate doublethink. She has removed God, Jesus, the resurrection and most of the Bible from her services, yet claims to be a Christian."[2] The words of "A New Creed" speak in powerful ways to Canadians who truly believe that "We live in God's World." Given the complacency of non-belief in Canadian culture and the barricades against manifestation of orthodox Christian belief in the public and United Church domain, non-believers think the field is entirely theirs. The thought that Christianity might have meaning and private significance for a great many Canadians, beyond its anthropological and historical significance, is an insight into God's world. In this present secular dispensation, God is an empty word, a hollow signifier, and the idea of reverence for his name is at best the reflex of a post-Christian culture.

Canadian culture today, having lost the Judeo-Christian focus, is more like Rome in the second and third centuries. Lesslie Newbigin, in his lectures at Princeton University in 1986, made that comparison.[3] He explained that Christians had a choice.

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[2] Connie Woodcock, "Take the Christ out of Christianity, what's left?" *Toronto Sun*, 14 April 2008, 19.

[3] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

They could either be open in their public witness and face the risk of persecution, or be a private religion; he uses the term, *cultus privatus*. That is, they could practice their faith in private, which would in turn give them protection from the harassment of the Roman army and the freedom to live. The freedom that is sought for the Church today is the calling to be in mission. As Canada has become a post-Christian nation, like the early Christians in Rome, believers are called to risk by worshipping openly. Today's believers should move beyond a private practice of religion; rather, they should be in mission to a country that has already heard the gospel. While there is not "the cold contempt for the Gospel"[4] as may have been the case in the 1980s, there are fixed ideas about Christianity in the culture and a developing contempt for the faith in The United Church of Canada.

<div align="center">Authenticity, Community, Transcendence, and Meaning</div>

In considering the question of how believers speak to a secular world that pushes faith into a privatized setting, Bosch speaks in clear terms about how believers are to live out that faith, regardless of circumstances. He explains the idea of engaging the culture by focusing on the term *missio Dei:* "The missio Dei, that is, God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate."[5] Douglas John Hall's *Ecclesia Crucis* provides the

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[4] Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda* (London: SPCK, 1985), 249; quoted in Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 68.

[5] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

missional church with concrete examples for a meaningful engagement of the culture. He writes,

> I want to show, first, how our society longs for something that its performance denies and its operative values frustrate and, second, how, as those who themselves participate in that longing, Christians may engage their society from the perspective of faith and hope. Their four quests I consider here are the quests for (1) moral authenticity, (2) meaningful community, (3) transcendence and mystery, and (4) meaning.[6]

The Quest for Moral Authenticity

There is a quest for authentic morality strongly present in the Canadian culture today. The reason for this is bound up with the loss of the "social contract"[7] that existed between the old morality of the evangelicals and the new morality of those who first governed the country. Each side originally agreed that the God of the Bible was supreme and that the morality which flowed out of this view of God was best for society. However, in the events of the 1960s, older national leaders were replaced by a new generation. What this new generation of leaders said and did indicated that they had little regard for, or understanding of, a biblical view of life. In retrospect, it is evident that an emerging secularity severed the historic linkage of Christian thought with public life in Canada.

Although there is a growing interest in understanding the role of church in society, Hall describes the impotence of the "old morality" in the face of the great public moral questions:

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[6] Douglas John Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 206-207.

[7] Brian Stiller, *Don't Let Canada Die by Neglect* (Markham, ON: Faith Today Publications, 1994), 90.

Most of us who are members of the once-mainline churches, whether lay or clerical, are well acquainted with this dilemma personally. We ourselves, as parents or teachers or simply citizens, know from the inside how difficult it is to experience anything approaching moral authenticity today. We hardly dare to examine our own lives, for we sense both their moral contradictions and their deep but largely unfulfilled longing for authenticity.[8]

The Quest for Meaningful Community

A meaningful engagement of the culture, like the quest for moral authenticity, needs to also recognize meaningful community where people live deeply connected to and who love one another. While the members of St. Stephen's have close social and kinship ties, there is a conspicuous absence of an authentic community of people living differently, with Christianity as an alternative basis for living, and not just a set of propositional beliefs, history, tradition or polity. In North Oshawa, there exists a view of life that the freedom and autonomy of the individual are primary to society and life. But individualism and most forms of community have failed people. It takes little wisdom to recognize that individualism cannot continue to be the cornerstone of society. Meaningful community, then, is a powerful draw for the postmodern culture.

The Quest for Transcendence: Environmental Issues

The gospel under the power of God and through the Church can also take culture captive in terms of its commitment to environmental issues. The environment and pollution are high on people's cultural radar. In the wake of environmental awareness, Canadians have been attracted to Celtic spirituality. William R.L. Haley, in his article,

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[8] Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 208.

"Roots for the Uprooted," explains, "Celtic Christianity reminds us to seek the presence of God in the midst of everyday life and to practice wise stewardship of the environment."[9]

The connections between Christian faith and the search for some sense of transcendence and mystery are most likely to occur with the students at the UOIT/Durham campus. In spite of the advanced technology, of frenetic mobility and notorious partying, they are eager to embrace the concept of "talking and thinking dust" ("dust" refers to environmental issues).[10] In making this connection between Christianity and a commitment to the environment, parables, movies, songs or analogies would help to make Christian truth claims clear.

The Quest for Meaning: Existentialism

Another voice of the culture which possesses postmodern overtones can be called "agnostic existentialism." Canada's emerging world, unfortunately sees existence as more important than essence. Experience is supposedly where reality can be found and has replaced the old-fashioned search for "the meaning of life."[11] Unfortunately, agnostic existentialists hold that the chaos of this world presents a universe without ultimate reality, order, or meaning. Objective realities and principles are laid aside or ignored. Failing to look beyond the immediacy of temporal existence, deep despair can easily ensue. The gospel is always communicated through the medium of culture. R.

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[9] William R.L. Haley, "Roots for the Uprooted," *Re:generation Quarterly*, undated, unpaginated.

[10] Anthony Duncan, *Celtic Christianity* (Dorset: Element, 1992), 99.

[11] Ibid., 212.

Scott Gornto, in his article, "Journey Missional Community," writes, "It becomes good news to lost and broken humanity as it is incarnated in the world through God's sent people, the church."[12] The Church must find ways to engage this existentialism and introduce the gospel.

Essentially, what a postmodern wants is something real: real relationships, real love, real experiences and real encounters with God. Postmodernism opens a strategy of ministry and evangelism in the twenty-first century. Postmodernism involves a concern for marginalized groups. Drew Dyck writes, "Many streams of postmodern thought are animated by the desire to do justice to the claims of those whom the dominant culture has excluded."[13] The Church opens the Bible and sees God's concern for the poor and disenfranchised. Contrary to what is implied in secular culture, it is the Church, motivated by the gospel, which powers much of the relief and charity work in Canada.

Summary

The quest for meaning is related to authenticity as it entails freedom from the past and a radical openness to the future. It means acknowledging that traditional compass points verifying the closed and fixed world of the past are now useless. The present culture is irrevocably characterized by impermanence and the believer's desire is to nudge it towards being "ready to carry the full burden of its spiritual emptiness and

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[12] R. Scott Gornto, "Journey Missional Community"; quoted in Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 136; http://www.youngerleaders.org/webzine/webzine.htm (accessed 2 May 2008).

[13] Drew Dyck, "Getting Our Bearings," *Faith Today,* July/August 2005, 28.

yearning in the presence of the Holy One."[14] In these cultural values of authenticity, community, transcendence, and meaning, the Church must be ambassadors for Christ.

Canadian Culture from the Point of View of Creation, the Fall and Redemption

Creation

One of the primary works of God is creation. Culturally known as "hewers of wood and drawers of water," Canadians inherently know that every detail in God's creation has a specific function. This is true even when the function may not be apparent at first glance. In the name of functionalism, Oshawans have taken advantage of the availability of steel, petrochemicals and cheap hydroelectricity to build automobiles for the world. All living things in God's creation are characterized by their ability to bear fruit. Christian Schwartz, author of *Natural Church Development*, states, "It is no accident that Jesus repeatedly referred to this natural law and applied it to the spiritual realm."[15] In Matthew 7:17 and 20, Jesus proclaims, "Every good tree bears good fruit" and "You will know them by their fruits." Since fruit – according to both culture and the Bible – is visible, believers are able to communicate the gospel on this theme. God created the natural resources of gifted people in ministry. They are cultivated through the functional structures of the Church and are able to communicate the gospel to bear fruit for the kingdom.

Oshawans seem to be able to talk in positive terms about producing a positive future for themselves. A key dimension of such an orientation is hope. Most people of

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[14] Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 212.

[15] Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 1996), 76.

Oshawa are intensely hopeful, even when circumstances do not particularly warrant any optimism. A pervasive response to adversity is the assertion in conversation that "tomorrow will be a better day." More specifically, people talk about the creation of two new public schools, a new senior citizens' centre, a massive recreational sports complex, a new university, and several new subdivisions near the church. This talk is not particularly rational. There is no guarantee whatsoever things will actually improve but this feature of positive conversation reflects a measure of hope in creation.

In the midst of struggle, pain and disappointment, people invariably declare hope. It is offered daily in the news and official reports: "Tomorrow's a new day"; "We're not giving up"; "I'm going to get better"; "We'll win more medals at the next Olympics"; "Oshawa has many things it can be proud of and looking ahead, shows even greater promise."[16] These are not clichés from people trying to put up a brave front. The Apostle Paul exhibited such hope when he wrote, "We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them" (Rom.8:28). Hope is the key to the healing of pain. Brian Stiller, in *When Life Hurts*, writes, "Hope helps us see outside our hurt, past the plaguing fear, gripping dread, unnerving anxiety, and paralyzing despair." [17]

God is calling St. Stephen's to discern the gospel within the culture that will attract attention. When a church lives up to Paul's advice, it will shine like a light in a dark place; it will have joy within itself and power to win others (1 Thess. 5: 4 and 16).

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[16] City Staff, *Annual Report to Citizens* (Oshawa, ON: The Corporation of the City of Oshawa, 2004), 2.

[17] Brian Stiller, *When Life Hurts* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999), 20.

God has placed St. Stephen's in a culture where the apostle/prophets of the Bible have

been replaced by culture barons who tell us that we should dream of being a "hero"[18] or

"famous."[19] The prophets and evangelists of old have been replaced in the

neighbourhood by people who create powerful influences on the imagination. When

people watch movies and television shows they are more than being entertained; they are

being formed and shaped. If believers heed the words of Paul, then they should not scoff

at the "prophets of Hollywood" as long as the Church "tests everything that is said, holds

on to what is good, and keep away from every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:20-22). Like the

gospel, it is film and television which propose forms of the created world and ethical

ways of living in those forms.

In the culture's desire to preserve the planet, and its orientation of hope, the

danger exists that people adopt a pantheistic understanding of God in which God loses his

transcendence. "When pantheists worship creation as if it were God, they are in fact

nihilists, for God cannot be both the hope for creation and at the same time be creation

itself."[20] Ultimately, therefore, it is to a sound doctrine of the Trinity that

environmentalists must turn if they seek the transformation and redemption of the world,

for it is in the Trinity that God is at the same time both transcendent and immanent – both

above creation, yet part of it.

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[18] This term refers particularly to the popular movie, *Hero* (2002), directed by Zhang Yimou.

[19] This term refers particularly to the popular movie, *Almost Famous* (2000), written and directed by Cameron Crowe.

[20] Andrew Stirling, *The Trinity* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2002), 172.

The Fall

The gospel is rooted in the sovereignty of God over human history, in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, in the ongoing presence of God through the Holy Spirit, and in God's eschatological redeeming of Creation. While this God is the creator of the world and lovingly involved in the world, "God does not act alone but within an elaborate human network of politics, economics, and social customs," write Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhmueller in *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*.[21] Within the course of history it is also clear, state Senior and Stuhmueller, "that God does not impress us so much with his power as with his mercy and tolerance toward human weakness, ignorance, and even deliberate sin."[22]

The biblical doctrine of creation affirms that God created something which was essentially good, but through the power of sin and disobedience, the cosmos fell from its ideal state. The culture is no stranger to the dark elements and jagged edges in biblical narratives and personal struggles. In an evangelistic context, St. Stephen's does not have to look far for proof of the fall. Canadians have anxiety about a lot of things, especially money, health and time, which are at the top of their lists.[23] Among their other prime concerns are their children, their jobs, their lack of recognition, and the feeling that they want more out of life. To live life as a Christian and to get to know people in order to share the Good News is to find people experiencing pain in addition to joy.

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[21] Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 37.

[22] Ibid., 37.

[23] Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 203.

Every believer only needs to briefly scan the "dark deeds and attitudes

unflinchingly portrayed in the biblical narratives, and even darker feelings honestly

confessed in some of the Psalms"[24] to know only too well about the struggles of life.

Friends, relatives, and neighbours suffer in any number of ways. Hopes and dreams are

decimated. People die, including the very young. In his book, *The Road Less Travelled*

M. Scott Peck rightly concluded that life is difficult.[25]

Bibby has conducted a survey series he calls "Project Canada," in which he has

compiled data regarding where people turn in their times of need.[26] Respondents were

asked to answer the prompt, "When I face a serious problem, I turn to …." The most

common responses were spouses and parents. Perhaps significantly, very few ministers,

or other religious figures were mentioned. The good news is that Canadians sometimes

find their religious groups to be a personal resource via friends and certainly via faith.

These assumptions signal the need for church leaders to be far more in touch with the

culture, especially how young people express their concerns, in order to help their

members communicate the gospel.

One media that is used to express struggle and pain is the music video. Music

video has a vivid way of meditating on suffering and separation in particular. At the

beginning of Pearl Jam's video, "Jeremy," the youth culture's list of grievances against

its elders is presented.[27] During the opening stanzas, the phrase "Genesis 3:6" flashes

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[24] Steve Scott, *Like a House on Fire* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 79.

[25] M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 15.

[26] Reginald Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series (Toronto: Stoddart, 1984, 1992, and 2000).

[27] Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," *Ten* (Epic, 1991), Compact disc.

and then disappears. Tom Beaudoin, author of *Virtual Faith*, explains, "Genesis 3:6 describes how, at the serpent's behest, Eve took fruit from the forbidden tree and gave it to Adam. Appropriately enough, a scriptural verse about the beginning of life on earth and the supposed entrance of sin into the world appears at the beginning of the video."[28] The verse refers to loss of innocence. Beaudoin continues, "Jeremy is not only a prophet like Jeremiah but also a messianic figure, a type of Christ."[29] People have difficulty separating their experiences of individual suffering and their relationships to others. Robert Detweiler, in *Breaking the Fall*, concludes, "The world is thus fundamentally 'fallen,' flawed by the individual's recognition of difference that at the same time both creates the conditions for meaning."[30]

Redemption

The gospel theme of redemption is also found in Canadian culture. "The top four valued goals for Canadians are freedom, family life, being loved, and friendship."[31] Succinctly stated, freedom and relationships are at the top of almost everyone's redemption list. Canada has a popular government lottery corporation that advertises "Imagine the Freedom" on all possible media. That constant bombardment affects the worldview of Canadian culture. Looking particularly at youth culture, young people under nineteen years of age are prohibited from purchasing gaming tickets. Youth

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[28] Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 105.

[29] Ibid., 106.

[30] Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 74.

[31] Bibby, *Restless Gods,* 106.

culture is typically depicted as wanting freedom but it may be truer that teenagers place

supreme importance on good ties with others. A nineteen-year-old reminded St.

Stephen's at a U2 Spiritual Formation workshop, "All us kids need love and support from

someone or something." Adults also value redemptive relationships. A fifty-three-year-

old woman in a bungalow (ranch-style) neighbourhood near the church expressed as

much while talking about baptism: "The most important thing in life is relationships –

relationships with God, with family, and other people."

This brief evidence of the gospel in culture begins to explain that non-believers

are yearning to hear that their culture is valued. It also explains the reality that the

Church and its message are closely knit with the non-Christian culture. It is not out of

reach for believers in Canada to say to their non-believing friends and neighbors, "So

now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all

of God's holy people. You are members of God's family" (Eph. 2:19). Such a statement

will draw people to the Church. What is true for adults is also true for teenagers. A look

at teen or gang culture reveals that relationships have been and continue to be the number

one source of enjoyment for young people. This value mimics Jesus' own words: "And

here is how to measure it – the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives

for their friends. You are my friends if you obey me" (John 15:13-14). Many popular

movies, video games, television programs, and advertisements extol the virtues of

sacrifice for the sake of redemptive relationships.

It is through people's experiences and of the Holy Spirit whom Christ sends into

the culture that they are united with Christ and are called to embrace the One who

redeems the world. As Christ's disciples, the Church is obliged to continue the ministry

of redemption by partaking of the sacraments and, as redeemed creatures, participate in a relationship with Christ to a culture that needs redemption. According to Jurgen Moltmann in his book, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, "the presence and future of redemption, the church and the kingdom of God are framed and comprehended by belief in the Holy Spirit."[32] This means that in the sense of the spirit, the continuing history of the Church, the communion of the disciples, and the forgiveness of sins are to be interpreted as the future of the world.

In terms of family and child-rearing, Christianity offers redemption. A consistent communication of gospel virtues such as love, patience, understanding, encouragement, and trust will provide the anchor that children and teenagers need in stressful and changing times. The beliefs, values and behaviours in the home that are sheltering or redemptive are reflected in the sacramental actions at church in public worship. Most Canadians recognize that a positive parental example and stability influence children greatly, and that a good happy marriage will do more to prepare young people for life than rules and surveillance.

It is important to note, however, that good interpersonal relations that extend well beyond the culture to communicate the gospel are open to misinterpretation. Steve Scott, in *Like a House on Fire*, summarizes the story of Jesus' anointing by Mary:

> In chapter twelve of the Gospel of John it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus who anointed Jesus. At a dinner in Jesus' honor, she used an expensive perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, then wiped his feet with her hair. Judas questioned the action, and accused her of making a pointless and expensive gesture.[33]

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[32] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London, England: SCM Press, 1977), 198.

[33] Steve Scott, *Like a House on Fire* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 102.

Judas misinterpreted Mary's act, but Jesus reminds his audience – then and now – that images and symbols have value. It will be up to those who interpret spiritual themes in the present culture to be reminded that signs, metaphors and images are doing a valuable work of the Lord.

The Disengagement of St. Stephen's United Church versus the Engagement of Suburban Popular Culture of North Oshawa

Church Culture

Thinking about St. Stephen's as a cultural tribe engages theology as a relevant factor in the differences between the Christian message and the beliefs, values and behaviours of the host suburban society. Since The United Church of Canada is indeed "bound up with the middle-class, Caucasian, liberal element of our society, we shall have to learn that the Christian gospel is not a stained-glass version of the worldview of that same social stratum."[34] Religious culture is important. Among other things it sets the mood of one's religious experience. It articulates motivations for one's actions. It provides people with a vocabulary for faith, with stories that make faith real. It provides a community of believers who share the language and stories. There is no religion without culture.

One problem of an established church culture, however, is in the danger of offering the modern equivalent of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer decried as "cheap grace." This type of Christian living can occur when people follow the culture of Christianity or

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[34] Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 199.

the culture of their churches, rather than following Jesus himself. Bonhoeffer spoke about the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. He wrote, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."[35]

Another problem with an established church culture is that it can be voracious. St. Stephen's was founded on the principles of historic orthodox beliefs, but over the years it has added values, beliefs, and practices that are no longer useful for more authentic reengagement of the host culture.

The Lack of Evangelism at St. Stephen's

In terms of evangelism, little to none has been done at St. Stephen's for decades. With the emphasis in the United Church on personal and social ethics has been the emergence of a silo mentality. In many parts of church life, especially in theology, the starting point for evangelism is ethical conclusions around economic reform issues such as poverty reduction, global peace, energy awareness, native reconciliation, and the like. As Howard Clark Kee has suggested in *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, these are ideas and trends embraced by the United Church national leadership elites.[36] While many people have been quick to criticize the United Church as a structure, the distrust in the national level of the Church has emerged as "nothing more than the kinds of musts

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[35] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (trans. R.H. Fuller, rev.ed., 1960), 30.

[36] Howard Clark Kee et. Al., *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 734.

and shoulds and ought-tos that one can hear from many other quarters, along with the ubiquitous language of 'rights.'"[37]

In spite of the contemporary changes in the culture and the growing culture-gap of its aging members, St. Stephen's continues to be comprised of predictable middle-class liberals without a value for evangelism. The spiritual issues affecting people are not going to be met by the usual church yard sales, potluck suppers or Valentines teas. Unless the theological foundations of repentance and faith are presented as the basis for evangelism, the fundamental teachings of the Christian tradition will be unintentionally disengaged from the dominant culture.

As indicated, suburban Oshawan culture may refer to what are held up as proper values and attitudes. A cultured suburbanite listens to CBC radio, is active in a volunteer organization, appreciates good art, and is tolerant of his or her neighbours. The culture may also refer to the varied ways in which different religious communities live. In North Oshawa people recognize the unique cultures represented by the Polish, the Muslim community, or evangelical Protestants. North Oshawans also recognize there are some cultural activities common to all suburbanites, such as buying groceries at the local supermarket, watching the latest movies, and visiting friends in a coffee or donut shop.

<div align="center">Ideas for Evangelism at St. Stephen's</div>

Evangelical Christian groups in North Oshawa are demonstrating creativity and flexibility as they attempt to respond to the diverse spiritual needs of suburbanites. These

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[37] Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 201.

churches are being aggressive in both creating milieus where people can be comfortable and meeting in familiar, non-threatening settings such as schools, city parks, and even the local airport. These more orthodox Churches have considered the place of Christian theology in the emerging religious renaissance. Chapters 6 and 7 will expand on these types of practices to make God's call upon St. Stephen's more relevant for those in the spiritual marketplace.

<div align="center">The Importance of New Wineskins</div>

Canadian culture is not something "out there," which somehow imposes itself upon people. Rather believers have internalized both Christian and cultural values through social or kinship ties so the line between faith and culture reflects a line through people's own hearts. This is an opportunity for pastoral leadership. For Christians who have been culturally brought into the faith in the midst of a modern worldview, God is calling them to communicate God's message in a way that is foreign to them. He is calling them to communicate the gospel in a postmodern way.

In the past, Christians, to borrow a phrase from Marshall McLuhan, confused the medium with the message. The medium was the church building and the message was the belonging, the participation, and the sharing of values. The village church that was originally St. Stephens provided a modern, individualistic, and highly rational concept of the gospel. Douglas John Hall speaks of the "established" religion in his Canadian village church that echoes the Constantinian ambition still cloaking St. Stephen's: "In my village, whose only substantial barrier to the total victory of 'the uniting church' was the stubbornness and concupiscence of some of its Calvinist element, there was absolutely no

sense of incongruity between the Christian gospel and the 'values' of the community at large."[38] For Christians whose faith was formed in the former dominant culture, God's call is to shift towards a gospel that is more postmodern, communal, holistic, and experiential, in order that they might reach people in the present.

Like it or not, Christian theology and interpretations of Scripture have a long history of mirroring forms of culture. The old modern approaches to faith mirrored the linear, rational, and abstract attributes of the Church that is disengaged from the suffering of the world. This is not an inherently negative reality, especially if one is aware that God's call on Christians is changing. Hall explains this work of theology in two ways:

> The kind of disengagement that I am talking about indeed cannot occur apart from the suffering of the church, not least of all the kind of suffering that is inevitably entailed in the movement from a more private, ethnic ecclesiastical engagement to one that is fully public.[39]

> We forget too easily how confining was that mode of the religious life, how consistently it prevented the gospel from being heard, how insidiously it identified the morality of bookkeepers with the new law of the Christ.[40]

Some methods, and thus the message, should change and evolve – this is part of God's ongoing creation and relationship to God's people.

Pastoral leadership need not fear such change. Long before the observation that the church building was confused with the message, Jesus expressed this same pastoral relationship connection. Matthew writes of Jesus' explanation of his methods and message of suffering (fasting):

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[38] Hall, *The Future of the Church*, 13.

[39] Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 203.

[40] Hall, *The Future of the Church*, 18.

> And who would patch an old garment with unshrunk cloth? For the patch shrinks and pulls away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger hole than before. And no one put new wine into old wineskins. The old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine must be stored in new wineskins. That way both the wine and the wineskins are preserved (Matthew 9:16-17, NLT).

Jesus understood the intimate connection between the medium and the message, the container and the content. He explains that a new container (wineskin) must bear with it new content (wine); so also old methods (worn garments) will retain an old message (worn patch). Such engagement will enable Christian leaders to read the Bible in a new light as they seek insights in response to the challenges of methods and media in postmodern contexts. Eddie Gibbs, in his book, *ChurchNext*, contends, "Pastors must be equally skilled in exegeting both Scripture and culture, bringing the understanding derived from this interplay to the task of applying biblically grounded insights to the issues of postmodernity."[41] Gibbs also indicates that pastoral leadership "requires a clear sense of vision for a desired future that is significantly different from the present."[42]

The leadership in the evangelical Church holds to a theology of change in which the wineskins (methods and media) must be constantly renewed and updated. The opportunity for pastoral leadership may be found in the most dramatic point of this passage: the emphasis for Jesus is that the wine itself is new. Jesus came proclaiming a new message, not just new methods. According to Roxburgh and Romanuk in their book *The Missional Leader*, "This is a missional activity focused on formation of a people as

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[41] Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 32.

[42] Ibid., 34.

God's new society."[43] A theology of change would source the latest marketing strategies

that come from polls and studies, but the medium of change would look like a new

community of Jesus, which is mentored in practicing new habits.

Non-Traditional Religious Vitality

Guardedness against the Negative Aspects of Culture

The New Testament writers' caution about the pressure to conform to this present

age (see Romans 12:2), the danger of loving the things of this world (see 1 John 2:15-17),

or the deception of the world's wisdom (see 1 Cor. 3:18-19) remain relevant to the

engagement of suburban popular culture of North Oshawa. It is not the culture as a

whole that comes under the condemnation of the Scripture writers. Rather it is the

aspects of culture that undermine or stand in opposition to God's will and purpose. As

believers live with the tension of culture being both an opportunity and a threat, culture

cannot be reduced to a simplistic slogan or a one-dimensional label.

A Resurgence of Interest in Spirituality

The evidence of the resurgence of spirituality in suburban culture is taking a new

trajectory is not difficult to find. Bibby writes, "That interest has been evident in the

popularity of books such as *The Celestine Prophecy, The DaVinci Code,* and *The

Purpose Driven Life,* as well as the response to a movie like *The Passion of the Christ.*"[44]

Analyses of the nature and sources of non-traditional religious vitality have been

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[43] Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 119.

[44] Reginald Bibby, *The Boomer Factor* (Toronto, ON: Bastian, 2006), 183.

produced by academics and journalists including Ron Graham, David Lyon, and Peter

Emberley in Canada.

Peter Emberley reflects on the increased penchant for and commitment to

alternative spirituality displayed by Canadians who are displaying a fusion faith:

> One encounters a resplendence of baby-boom culture and consciousness: We are
> destiny; we will tolerate no "men in hats"; we seek the challenge beyond all
> challenges; our spiritual guides must walk the talk; we want ritual, not doctrine;
> we need to release the child within us; we will be as *bricoleurs* picking and
> choosing what works for us; if religion at all, it has to fit our comfort zone;
> spirituality must be nurturing, and embracing; we need to get back to a pure
> beginning.[45]

Evidence that the resurgence of non-traditional spirituality in suburban Ontario is taking a

new trajectory is not difficult to find.

This emphasis on non-traditional religious vitality within a secularized context is

important in that the gospel is being discerned within the culture as "either a product of,

or concomitant with,"[46] secularization. Even in Christian education and the media this

non-traditional religious vitality is acknowledged. For example, a recent flyer from the

United Church included a page of titles for recommended reading including: *The Five

People You Meet in Heaven, Chocolate for Lent, The Gospel According to Tolkien, The

Gospel According to the Simpsons, The Gospel According to Harry Potter, The Gospel in

Disney, The Gospel According to Peanuts*, and *Beyond the Matrix.* In a 2006 *Toronto

Star* article, Stuart Laidlaw stated, "While only about one-third (32 percent) of adult

Canadians attend religious services at least monthly, over one half (53 percent) engage in

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[45] Peter C. Emberley, *Divine Hunger* (Toronto, ON: HarperCollins, 2002), 153.

[46] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (London, England: T & T Clark, 2004), 47.

religious activities on their own at least monthly."[47] This interest in alternative

religiosity is also being examined in universities; for example, Campbell University, a

Christian university located in Buies Creek, North Carolina, offers an honours course

titled "Popular Culture and the Sacred". Dennis Haack quotes Jaclyn Stanke and

Elizabeth Romo regarding the inception of the class:

> "We started talking about using popular culture to get across God's message,"
> said Stanke (one of the professors offering the course). "It's there, but some time
> we just don't see it. One thing led to another and the professors developed a
> proposal for an honours course that would combine the use of scholarly works on
> the subject, movies, television series and music as curriculum materials." "The
> best of popular culture, music, television is much more than just entertainment,"
> they stated in the course proposal.[48]

The violence and vulgarity of today's popular culture may offend some Canadians, but

movies like *The Matrix*[49] and *The Terminator*[50] contain deep messages. In particular,

there has been a blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the secular.

The spiritual significance of the gospel is found in the everyday. Non-believers

are intensely interested in such topics as life after death, reincarnation, angels, and

meditation. Popular music and films are permeated with religious symbols. Casinos,

sports events, and rock concerts feed people's longing for transcendence and hope. Paul

Miller, in an article titled, "Rattling the Cages," writes, "The end of Christendom has not

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[47] Stuart Laidlaw, "No church required," *Toronto Star*, 3 May 2006, A4.

[48] Denis Haack, quoting Jaclyn Stanke and Elizabeth Rambo, "Christian Discernment 202," *Washington Post*, 2005, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/17AR2005101701579_pf.html (accessed 15 December 2005).

[49] Andy and Larry Wachowski, *The Matrix*, 1999.

[50] James Cameron, *The Terminator*, 1984.

led to atheism, as many church people think, but to a new paganism."[51] Never before has

the public yearned more deeply for spiritual significance; and never before has it been so

alienated from the Christian Church. The gospel is where the Church should go for

guidance.

The Role of a Pastoral Theology of Mission in Addressing Postmodern Issues

There are challenges to the role of pastor inherent in the perspective of the

postmodern context that affects the mission of the Church. The first character that the

pastor must address is the postmodern perspective of constantly having to focus attention

on the "now" of life as an important reality. People's lives are consumed by being in a

daily round of busyness that may be reduced but it cannot be ignored. As Van Gelder

points out in his essay entitled, *Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition*, "There is

bias against being in favor of becoming."[52] This results in a challenge to pastoral

theology in that there is a conflict between the God of human history and an awareness

that human purpose is contingent on God. The pastor in the postmodern Church seeks to

transform the context. The pastor affirms the new order in the midst of everyday

connections rooted in the past and in renewal defining the future.

Another challenge for mission is to confront the meaning of hoping in God's

future rather than in one's own weak efforts and achievements of mission. The

postmodern context recognizes that in the human condition, "there is human hurt for

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[51] Paul Miller, "Rattling the Cages," *Fellowship*, June 2004, 11.

[52] Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 137.

which no social or political cure exists."[53] The biblical perspective connects this

relevance of human existence with the reality that believers are a pilgrim people, and

there is a "homeland," a "better country," that believers' hearts seek (Heb. 11:14, 16).

The aspect of mission as God defining the future is that Christ is part of one's history and

is the inaugurator of a new era to human existence. The defining feature of this new

future is that God has entered human history (John 1:15).

Unfortunately, for Christian mission, believers are out of their comfort zones

when relating to postmoderns. Postmoderns would "rather scan images and emphasize

surface rather than words, splicing disparate sources together in a hip-hop-inspired visual

sampler," explain Detweiler and Taylor.[54] Thus far, Christians seem incapable of

creating any serious pastoral theology for a modern model of the Christian mission. In its

place are experiments subject to the manipulative power of technique. Some of them are

promising, even courageous, but is often not integrated in the full substance of human

existence. The biblical worldview addressing postmodern issues is not merely some

intrusion into the secular world, or a spiritual component that runs alongside of life.

Jesus' pastoral mission was substantive. He practiced a most radical form of mission by

connecting the whole of life involving the whole person in their thinking, feeling, and

living (Matt. 23:37).

A pastoral theology that addresses postmodern issues with its focus on the "now"

must also take into account the tendency to fragmentation, plurality, relativism, and

pluralism. Pastoral theology should recognize that there is a relationship with God

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[53] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 624.

[54] Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 34.

through Christ, but may not be sure why everyday connections of faith include a call to

repentance. It recognizes that the redeemed persons in Christ are called to influence their

culture by being in a particular countercultural mission. The biblical worldview is

relevant to all and its perspectives and character can help the postmodern understand

what life means in the ultimate scheme of things. The challenge facing mission and

evangelism is to effectively communicate the good news of the gospel to postmoderns.

The practical effect is that the present culture is a moral wasteland where no abiding

standard of truth and goodness may be applied. But the postmodern condition is such

that all need to make choices and judgments about all manner of things. This can be done

if one pursues active theological reflection and if one uses the gospel as a reliable

standard by which to address postmodern issues.

CHAPTER 4

DEFINING THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

Church Offers an Invitation into the Kingdom

We trust in God.
We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence . . .
To live with respect in Creation[1]

In the spirit of the United Church Creed, the United Church gathers in God's trust

to honour God's presence and to declare an invitation to live with respect in the kingdom.

Written at the height of the Church's membership boom in 1968, the Creed reflected the

Church's performance as salt and light in Canada, exerting a far wider influence than the

relative lack of numbers would suggest today. Today, the Creed symbolizes the

communion of the denomination as "the overwhelming minority." The national

denomination remains involved with the affairs of this world and is concerned about

aspects of the well-being of this planet as stewards of God's creation. God's presence is

celebrated in solemn responsibility placed upon God's covenant people from before the

Fall (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:15, 19-20).

Yet, the denomination does not use the language of church in relation to the

kingdom or reign of God. The United Church's message of invitation into the kingdom is

more directed toward itself with a view to bringing about congregational transformation

and its engagement with "empire" (that is, capitalist society and culture). Called "Living

Faithfully in the Midst of Empire," a report from the General Council traces the roots of

many of the world's ills to forces of empire. God's kingdom is mixed up, in the mind of

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[1] The United Church of Canada, General Council, 1968 alt.

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the United Church, with the aspirations of capitalist society and culture. Hall explains the idea this way: "Ours is in short something like the situation described by Luke in the sending of the seventy: a clear differentiation exists between the kingdom we are called to announce and the ways of the nations. It is the difference between day and night, between life and death."[2]

An examination of the New Testament indicates that the concrete lived experience of the Church is related to invitation to the reign of God. Kimball asserts, "The Church is God's instrument through which the Holy Spirit moves and expresses his love and as Jesus redeems the world to come under God's kingdom."[3] A Church that is so earthly minded that it is no heavenly good misses the invitation. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the kingdom to come, "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Nothing compares to God's kingdom. Senior and Stuhlmueller write, "The God of the kingdom is also Lord of the universe who rules all peoples."[4] Jesus offers an invitation from the Church deduced from the overall message of his preaching, his lifestyle, and his commitments (Mark 4:26, 30; Matt. 13:44, 45, 47). The Church should have a desire to invite people into God's kingdom, if only in provisional form, and mediate upon the eschatological calling forth of God's particular people.

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[2] Hall, *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death*, 14.

[3] Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 95.

[4] Senior and Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Missions*, 145.

Every Christian Believer Can Participate in the Mission of the Triune God

Mission through the Church involves not just invitation and message, but a participation in what the Church proclaims. A whole group of Christian believers are on a mission with the triune God, doing the work of renewal. If people come to Jesus and are filled with the Spirit, they acknowledge the praise of the Trinity. The nature of personal human life is reconceived in the form of participation in the life of the Trinity. This means that believers are shaped and formed by what they are given to proclaim. Through the Church community the isolation of autonomous individualism is transformed into a chosen vessel giving shape and form to the faith. The New Testament contains a model of communal practice before the Spirit of God is given at Pentecost to be the Spirit of the Church. Van Engen describes this growing community: "The Word-made-flesh created, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, an apostolic band of 12, then 3000, then 5000, then 8000 – a community of faith to whom Jesus says, 'You are the light of the world' (Matt. 5:14)."[5]

The Holy Spirit gives shape to the life of God through personal relationships and personal love. The ontology of communion develops the patterns of prayer and praise in the life of the believer. For instance, the Word and Son of the Father is heard and received in the Spirit. It is:

> With the Church through the ages,
> We speak of God as one and triune:
> Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
> We also speak of God as
> Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer
> God, Christ, and Spirit
> Mother, Friend, and Comforter

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[5] Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, 78.

> Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love,
> And in other ways that speak faithfully of
> The One on whom our hearts rely,
> The fully shared life at the heart of the universe.[6]

In short, Christian believers participate in the mission of the triune God through the Church. The church is where believers "live for the praises of his glory" (Eph. 1:12). This life is actively shared by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit so that all believers may become "dwelling places of God in the spirit" (Eph. 2:22). Augustine approached the ontology of communion with this understanding: "The temple of God, then, that is, of the Supreme Trinity as a whole, is the holy church, embracing in its full extent both heaven and earth."[7] The mission of the Church signifies the shape of life in a mysterious relationship and of the participation in the Trinitarian life of God.

Inagrace T. Dietterich, in *A Particular People,* provides a theological understanding of a believers' community: "When God is perceived as a dynamic community of relation and freedom united in a reciprocal communion of life and work, then Trinitarian theology becomes a relational theology that explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood, and communal life."[8] This missionary concept of believers leads to a Church that is open to a uniqueness of each person in the divine Trinity. This concept also leads to a Trinitarian interpretation of personal existence as relationship with one another. It is vital that every follower of Jesus hears within this

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[6] Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith*, 2006.

[7] Augustine, Enchiridion, XV.56, Ouevres de Saint Augustine, IX, "Rectus itaque Confessionis ordo poxebat, ut Trinitatis subjugeretur Ecclesia, tanquam habitatori domus sua, et Deo tempum suum, et conditori civitas sua." (Paris, Descle'e, de Brouwer et cie, 1947), 202.

[8] Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between Gospel and Culture*, 366.

postmodern perspective of participation in the community of faith and is re-evangelized

into this understanding of being on mission with the Triune God.

Evangelism Offers an Invitation to Enter into Community

Jesus called his believers to follow him in the task of evangelism. The word

"evangelist" means "one who preaches the gospel (good news)."[9] An evangelist wants to

share the joy of conversion and to spread the gospel story to others in a particular place

and community. Jesus was also creating a community of followers who wanted to travel

with him, sharing the gospel in a variety of places. These believers were known as

Christ's "apostles" whose identifying promise runs: "As the Father has sent me, even so I

send you. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any,

they are retained. Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21b-23). These spirit-filled

believers take up his missionary charge, participating in it as Christ's apostolate. An

"apostle" means being "one sent into the world as witnesses."[10] Evangelists are the

community of men and women who are called out from the crowds to preach the gospel,

and apostles are those who will be sent back into the culture on missions expressing

Jesus' message of God's kingdom. The difference and distinction is slight but relates to

the uniqueness of each person in God's economy. This also is in part a reaction to the

rugged individualism of suburban life. Evangelists tend to value spiritual solitude, the

integrity of the personal unit, and the unique spiritual gifts of each believer. Evangelists

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[9] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 409.

[10] Ibid., 120.

tend to develop trust with non-believers who then are more inclined or interested in becoming part of the evangelist's community of faith.

Jesus was called out of a community of faith as an evangelist. He was also sent into the world as an apostle. In order to redefine what it means to belong to a group of evangelists or to stand alone as an apostle, it is helpful to consider postmodernity, the idea of being incarnational, and to living out the message of Jesus. Christian communities of faith should invite non-believers into community. Jesus' responses to those who desired to follow him provide a helpful model. The word "disciple" means "learner." When Jesus radically transformed non-believers, they often wanted to travel with him as evangelists. However, he exhorted them to become involved in God's community and to take on a special and unique part of the mission. In excitement, the new believers wanted to "go," but Jesus usually told them to "stay" in their own communities and to spread the gospel among their families and friends. They had been called out to be evangelists to a particular people in a particular place.

In another example of what it means to be evangelists, Jesus' prayer for the disciples makes clear the invitation that evangelism is connected to a community that follows Jesus and carries out his mission of evangelism to the culture. He said, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. . . . I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17: 15, 20-21). Jesus' invitation to life-giving relationships was also for those who would come to faith through disciples and evangelists.

The United Church of Canada offers this invitation through the inscription on its crest, the official signature of the Church. The Latin words *ut omnes unum sint* that surround the symbols on the crest mean, "That all may be one," taken from John 17:21. They are a reminder that the Church is both a "united" and a "uniting" Church. Jesus' dramatic encounter with a man filled with demons is also evidence that his evangelists would experience a kind of uniting experience with his community, as he instructed the man, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you" (Mark 5:19).

Inner Dialogue between the Culture and the Gospel

Any reflection and analysis on Canadian culture and the gospel needs to include a discussion of the amalgamation of beliefs, values and values of Canadians. Starting with belief, this will survey the emerging ecclesiology as a growing sensibility in the contemporary Church. Culture does convey religious images in dialogue with the gospel that effect how a person sees the Church. Beliefs do have transformative power. The images people are viewing mould and define the inner structures of how they see the gospel. Believers need to open their eyes to see, and having seen the Canadian landscape, to dialogue, to incorporate into their ecclesiology the new story of gospel and our culture. The inner dialogue between culture and gospel, if incorporated into the Church, will broaden one's perspective, enhance one's understanding of what Canadians are thinking in terms of the gospel and transform the Church into a safe place where the dialogue can continue.

We can begin the new story by drawing on well-known words that ring down from yesteryear but still resonate in the culture: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). At the beginning of this new century, that same *logos* (which means, "word") is moving among Canadians and Churches today. As a result, there may be signs of that inner dialogue. An overwhelming number of Canadians are reporting that they believe in God.[11] The connection between this understanding of the dialogue and the desire for the Church to share in the *missio Dei* is clear. When one considers the culture in the sense that "seventy-five percent of adults and seventy percent of teens say that they believe in a God who cares about them personally,"[12] it is natural to be concerned about the inner dialogue between the culture and the gospel. The anticipation of personal growth is in the nature of the gospel that forms the Church. The gospel is, by definition, outwardly focused. It is Jesus, the incarnate word, the one with whom believers dialogue and seek to follow in the culture, who urges the Church to understand the importance of sharing that dialogue with everyone they can (Matthew 9:35-38 and 28:16-20). This is God's good news for the culture. It is both a privilege and a responsibility of the Church to share it.

Despite a strong influence of the inner structures of belief upon Canadian values, unique postmodern characteristics exist based on the things Canadians prioritize (values). Churches are a part of Canadian culture and to some extent share in the emerging postmodern dialogue with the gospel. God has chosen to give culture an important part

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[11] Ipsos-Reid Poll, 2004.

[12] Bibby, *Restless Churches*, 14.

in revealing the good news: "The word became flesh" (John 1:14). The gospel is revealed in particular human words and in what Christians do and value. This is also true of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Every other witness in what believers say or give importance to in this event is also in a sense "incarnational." The good news of God comes to people not directly but indirectly, through human witness, memory, hope and attention of the Church. Overall, Canadians show gospel priorities of personal faith, questing, community, and good works. While personal contentment, spiritual connectedness and questions about God loom large, church is not necessarily the place where people feel their needs are met.

Beliefs and values affect behaviour in what people do or how they act. Canadians have an inner dialogue between the culture and the gospel that affects how they behave toward church. They hear and try to understand the message of the gospel with the help of that inner dialogue. Many also ask for help from the Church in how to interpret the gospel as a guide for behaviour. Like the Ethiopian official, people need guidance in the understanding and application of Scripture (Acts 8:30-31). If believers were to cut themselves off from the proclamation and life of the Church as the medium through which this dialogue takes place, their understanding of how to behave would suffer. The inner perception is that the Church is a telling culture, about being told how to act. The postmodern challenge is to counter the perception that the Church talks "at you" and not "with you." Postmodern Canadians want a flexible approach to ecclesiology that accepts differences in beliefs, values and behaviour that are within gospel boundaries.

Outer Dialogue of Witness among Others outside the Church

Lewis A. Drummond, in his book *Reaching Generation Next*, offers a biblical

concept of church-centered evangelism: "Axiomatic is the fact that the first principle of

church-centered evangelism revolves around the reality that outreach constitutes the

church's *primary* mission in the world."[13] This can be interpreted as the Church

engaging in many activities to meet human needs, but outer dialogue of witness to a lost

culture makes up its essential and primary mission. The state of mission can properly be

called God's mission. The Church shares in the *missio Dei* as it has been called to

witness among others. If the Church reflects upon the *mission Dei*, believers will

understand that it is the Church's responsibility to share God's gospel with the world.

There are three models for sharing the gospel. One is to continue the inner

dialogue already going on between the culture and the gospel. The Very Reverend David

Giuliano, Moderator of the United Church of Canada, explains how to do so in various

ways outside the church:

> I am praying that more of us become concerned with Jesus' call to feed the
> hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. . . . I am praying that our
> preoccupation with getting people into church is transformed by a passion for
> getting the church into the world. I am praying that we welcome strangers with a
> radical hospitality that sees in them the face of Christ – not an "identifiable giver"
> or a "potential committee member"! I am praying that our worries about
> buildings and budgets are overtaken by excitement for the mission of the
> church.[14]

A second model for sharing the gospel is to invite people outside the Church to

come into the life of the Church and then explore the gospel and its invitation to dialogue

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[13] Lewis A. Drummond, *Reaching Generation Next: Effective Evangelism in Today's Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 34.

[14] David Giuliano, *Moderator's Message,* October, 2007.

within the context of an accepting and supportive faith community. This dialogue would include celebrating God's presence in worship, giving generously out of financial abundance and out of one's spirit-given gifts, taking time for prayer, and keeping the Sabbath.

The third model is accepting the fact that secularization is occurring with the appropriate response for the Church to function as faithful remnants. Hall presents the model on biblical grounds: "There is a great deal in both testaments to suggest that God is interested chiefly in minorities – remnants, little flocks here and there, witnessing communities which can help (like salt, and yeast, and little lights in dark places) to keep human life human. Surely the biblical story is about the possibilities of littleness."[15] In each of these models, the evangelism of sharing the gospel among others outside the Church leads to an invitation to enter into community.

Celtic Model for a Missionary Congregation

Communicating the gospel with unchurched non-Christians has a particular history in the Church. In the formative period of Protestant mission, the missionaries brought "civilizing" objectives, scripted by the specific customs of the sending nation, alongside Christianity. R. Pierce Beaver, in his contributing article to the text, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, explains that, in the formative period of Protestant mission, there was never even "debate about the legitimacy of the stress on civilizing function of missions. Debate was only about priority; which came first,

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[15] Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 35.

Christianization or civilization?"[16] The much earlier period of Roman Christianity's

expansion was an evangelistic method of the Roman world that is not effective in today's

neo-pagan culture. In *The Emerging Church*, Dan Kimball writes, "In past decades,

evangelicals used Roman method of evangelism because we were living in a culture that

had a Roman mindset."[17] Theologian George G. Hunter explains the "Roman method of

evangelism" and the "Roman mindset":

> Bluntly stated, the Roman model for reaching people (who are "civilized"
> enough) is: (1) Present the Christian message; (2) Invite them to decide to believe
> in Christ and become Christians; and (3) If they decide positively, welcome them
> into the church and its fellowship. The Roman model seems very logical to us
> because most (Canadian) evangelicals are scripted by it! We explain the gospel,
> they accept Christ, we welcome them into the church! Presentation, Decision,
> Assimilation. What could be more logical than that?[18]

In considering evangelism styles that might fit the present context, Hunter has

explored Celtic evangelism. He explains,

> In the twentieth century, a number of academic fields have validated what the
> Celtic Christian leaders knew intuitively or from experience. The Celtic
> understanding that you help people find faith and The Way by bringing them into
> Christian community, and into the ministry of conversation, has been strongly
> validated in the field of the Sociology of Knowledge.[19]

The process of Celtic evangelism starts with a shift of focus away from events in the local

church to the social context of unchurched non-Christians. This starts with an

understanding that the community in which the unchurched people live is largely shaped

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[16] R. Pierce Beaver, "The History of Mission Strategy," in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1992), B-66.

[17] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 204.

[18] George G. Hunter, III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 53.

[19] Ibid., 99.

by different pluralistic social values. Another insight regarding the possibility of

conversion is opened up by dialogue and listening to people who live with a contrasting

view of reality. The final hurdle for believers is to acknowledge that Celtic evangelism

requires the unchurched to adopt and internalize the biblical worldview through

resocialization into the sharing community of the local church.

Mission from the Grassroots

Mission is most effective from the grassroots community of the local church.

Here, David Watson is of great help to a discussion of ecclesiology. In his book, *I

Believe in the Church*, he points out that the idea of a two-class Church structure cannot

be justified through the New Testament: "In the biblical sense all Christians are priests

and clergy, and this is a crucial starting point if we are to re-discover the true concept of

ministry and leadership within the church."[20] Mission is more likely to bear lasting fruit

if it is based in and through the local church which has the great advantage of cross-

cultural church membership. Within the grassroots people of God, those that have

internalized the biblical worldview equip other converts for mission. Mission from the

grassroots involves not jut one well-known pioneer missionary, but a whole group of

people on mission with God, doing the ministry in their context. This mission includes

the prophetic, priestly, kingly, and healing ministries in their cultures. Mission also

includes *koinonia* ("love one another"), *diakonia* ("serve one another"), *kerygma* ("Jesus

is Lord"), and *martyria* ("witness") among the grassroots people. By doing the mission

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[20] David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 248.

from the grassroots, the people set the example in serving rather than being served.

Mission as a process of resocialization into the sharing community of the local church

enables early believers to learn and in turn teach others to serve. This is the New

Testament model of grassroots mission. Hunter explains, "The early Christian movement

exploded and developed without regard to any set apart priesthood. God's new People,

as a body, constituted a 'holy' and 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:5, 9)."[21] Therefore

mission from the grassroots is about a way of life that cuts across the grain not only of

culture but the ecclesiological models of therapeutics, management, and control.

Roxburgh contends, "Missional church is about the formation of a people in the

particularity and materiality of real contexts in neighborhoods and communities."[22]

Dialogue and Listening

Mission is a work of developing a congregation to listen and dialogue so that its

members can penetrate their community with the gospel. It involves speaking a peace

and blessing into others' lives (Luke 10:5). In doing so the congregation will discover

and establish a level of trust, allowing people to share with the congregation their felt

needs (Luke 10:8). Canadians are reluctant to sharing their faith so they will respond

better to long and genuine relational evangelism, not a "hit and run evangelism."[23] The

goal is to follow the one who taught that those who seek to save their lives will lose them,

while those who are willing to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel will save them

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[21] Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 120-121.

[22] Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missional Church*, http://www.christianity.ca/faith/theology/2006/02.001.html (accesssed 2 February 2006).

[23] George Barna, *Evangelism That Works* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1995), 152.

(Mark 8:35). Hall reflects on this in regards to the remnant Church as he questions the end of Christendom: "Might it not now, at the end of this experiment in winning, explore with Jesus the way of serving, which has never been very glorious?"[24] In times of listening and dialogue, God needs to be viewed as in the midst of mission.

According to Detweiler and Taylor, in their book, *A Matrix of Meanings*, "There is a conversation about God going on in popular culture that the church is not engaged in and is often unaware of."[25] The gap is widening between the Church and culture because the "grassroots" believers are not listening to the culture and sharing a dialogue of vertical and deep meaning. This dialogue is a process of reaping the seed that God has already planted in the strong and popular forces of the media. The gospels were written for "the people" much like popular media is directed to "the masses." God listened to the dialogue at that time through the culture, and he continues to dialogue the gospel through culture today. Instead of the high-brow form of classical Greek, "the writers of the Gospels preferred Koine Greek, a 'street-level' language that communicated to the masses."[26] Believers need to listen to the dialogue where God has planted the seed rather than rush in to "close the deal" by asking non-believers to accept a series of theological propositions. God will bring about a harvest as the Holy Spirit continues to draw that conversation to faith. Ecclesiology needs to allow people of faith time to pray, discern and act on the gospel and its relevance to the new canon of postmodernity. Perhaps

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[24] Hall, *The Future of the Church*, 36.

[25] Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings,* 23.

[26] Ibid., 23.

believers can hear Jesus' mission dialogue afresh: "No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44).

<center>Community of Prayer, Discernment, and Action</center>

Mission from the grassroots involves a community of prayer. One of the unexplored areas of corporate prayer is "horizontal interaction."[27] It is an appeal to the heart because the Church does not simply require agreement to proposition; rather it calls the community to a mission relationship with God. In this time of postmodern stress, it is important to minister to the hearts and needs of others as well as to the heart of God. As a community, people need time to slow down, quiet their hearts and pray with others. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). While the bulk of prayer should be directed heavenward, there is a strategic linking of community and intercessory prayer. When the Church prays for the community in their felt needs, the Church touches the neighbourhood at the deepest level, the heart level. Allowing time for quiet contemplation in community prayer gatherings creates a postmodern experience leading to explanation. Ecclesiology emerges naturally, but with supernatural characteristics. The community of prayer is a sociological entity with a spiritual nature.

The community of prayer is an invitation to mission from the Church. Ecclesiology requires discernment of internal spiritual characteristics and gifts. It takes time to quiet one's heart and ask God's Spirit to lead and prompt. Although mission in the power of the Holy Spirit is both dynamic and effective, it still requires the

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[27] Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 119.

individual's desire to grow, prioritize, and strategize for such mission. However, this desire is up to the individual because the Church is a voluntary organization and because there are significant cultural and demographic factors. Believers need to allow the Spirit to discern and encourage their hearts. The mission from the grassroots will continue to become a part of spiritual discernment, in the power of the spirit, and even "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18 NIV).

The impact of the community of prayer and discernment on the mission from the grassroots is clear. Having discovered the community ministry of prayer centres on felt needs and spiritual discernment, the implication is that the mission from the grassroots will take action on evangelism. Hunter expresses a paradox of evangelism from church members who have experienced mission from the grassroots:

> Church members, say, who have caught the apostolic vision for people, who experience celebrative indigenous worship, who are involved in pastoral conversation, and in a small group, and in a gift-based ministry, and are involved in ministry with pre-Christian people (and are studying scripture, praying, and so on) are themselves far more blessed and "ministered unto" than if they had their own hired chaplain in a small traditional church.[28]

This is something of the prayer, spirit, and action of mission from the grassroots. It is the responsibility of pastors and leaders as they attempt to lead the Church of God with spiritual authority into fields of mission.

The United Church of Canada Concept of the Pastoral Role

A definition of the pastoral role in the United Church starts with the general by-laws taken out of *The Manual*. *The Manual* is the book of doctrine, polity, and

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[28] Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 33.

procedures that govern the United Church of Canada. The closest concept of the pastoral

role is in the definition of "Ordained Minister" which means "a member of the Order of

Ministry who has been ordained to the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care."[29]

According to the Education and Vocations Congregational, Educational, and Community

Ministries department of the United Church, "This ministry usually happens in a

congregation where the ordained minister empowers the people of God, teaches, leads

worship, preaches, and administers the sacraments and rites of the church. She or he also

ministers to the community at large through her or his representative function and witness

to the faith of Jesus Christ."[30] Aside from being a "professional staff person" in a

congregation as the above quotation implies, there are only a few things that clergy can

do which lay people cannot. Except under special license from Presbytery, only ordained

clergy can officiate at baptisms, communion and weddings. The basic difference

between clergy and lay, are "in orders." In the Manual at least, the presbytery is like a

bishop and can "order" ordained persons where and how to do their ministry. However,

the presbytery's power in giving orders to its clergy is limited, and only affects situations

in which a problem has developed.

    In the United Church, isolation in ministry and an unclear concept of the pastoral

role have contributed to systemic clergy abuse from congregations. Canada's largest

trade union launched a membership drive to unionize United Church ministers. Rev. Dr.

Jim Sinclair, General Secretary of the General Council of the United Church of Canada,

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[29] The United Church of Canada, *The Manual*, 2001, 41.

[30] The United Church of Canada, "Discernment of Ministry," http://www.united-church.ca/
adultlearning/preparing/discernment/ordained (accessed 23 July 2008).

explains that in the United Church of Canada the role of the minister is complex. He

states, "It is based on a covenantal relationship between different parties, under God,

rather than a contractual one between employer and employee."[31] Phyllis, Airhart, a

professor at the United Church's largest seminary, explains the problem of pastoral

relevance in the larger Canadian context: "Do we think it makes a difference whether the

United Church, or Christianity for that matter, survives in Canada? Do we have the

intellectual and spiritual resources to relate the Christian faith to the hunger for meaning

that a secular worldview seems unable to satisfy?"[32] An article in the *United Church*

*Observe*r points to a continued struggle to have the courts of the Church define the

ecclesial role of its pastors. Mike Milne, Donna Sinclair, and David Wilson write,

"Clergy look to the denomination (Presbytery, Conference and General Council) to play

an active supportive role in helping ministers to combat issues of respect, recognition and

persecution that arise in the pastoral charge relationship."[33]

Discipleship and Evangelism: Shift from Vendor-Shaped Church to Mission-Shaped Church

The fuzzy concept of the pastoral role in the United Church underscores what

Bruce Larson suggests in *Setting Men Free*: "That Christians-in-the-making become, in

John Wesley's words, 'people of One Book;' that they live 'in deep fellowship with a few

other Christians,' that they serve Christ by serving people in the world, and especially

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[31] The United Church of Canada, "Press Release," 12 November, 2004, http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/releases/041112 (accessed 23 July 2008).

[32] Phyllis Airhart, "Letter to the Arnprior Assembly on Ministry," (19 October 2005), unpaginated.

[33] Mike Milne, Donna Sinclair, and David Wilson, "Isolation in Ministry," *The United Church Observer,* July/August 2006, 13.

that they turn the management of their lives over to Jesus Christ."[34] This may be useful

in diagnosing the lay ministry of discipleship and evangelism in the United Church

tradition. As a traditionally liberal denomination, the emphasis has been on tackling

corporate sin and organizing food banks. While the United Church has been burning out

and declining in numbers, there has not been emphasis on significant life change inherent

in discipleship and evangelism.

The true strength of a congregation is not measured by how many people attend

worship week by week. Nor is it measured by how many people have been attracted to

marketed programs and activities. The true measure of congregational strength and

vitality is whether evangelism and mission includes the invitation to Christ, to fellowship

(including small groups), and to mission. As indicated, the statistical indicators of faith

are high in Canada, while the social influence of the United Church is down. Gibbs

explains, "The Christian faith has lost its integrity and effectiveness in shaping the lives

of believers."[35] A challenge in postmodernity is the congregational faith needed to be

sent out – week by week – inspired, committed, and equipped to live to the glory of God.

Os Guinness questions whether the Church of Christ is "a social reality truly shaped by a

theological cause, namely the Word and Spirit of God?"[36] The theological cause is to do

the work of the kingdom wherever the life of the congregation takes it. A church's

ability to make disciples and send them into the culture is the true measure of its

effectiveness.

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[34] Bruce Larson, *Setting Men Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 34.

[35] Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 43.

[36] Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 35.

Two further points need to be made regarding the mission-shaped Church. First, pastors cannot send the congregation out equipped and able to live to God's glory if they have not been able to bring them in to evangelize and disciple them. Kenneson and Street expose an underlying problem in the "bringing in" mentality that is incompatible with the nature of the gospel – its exchange basis.

> Marketing seeks to bring out a transaction for the benefit of both parties in the exchange. Marketers ask, 'Does making the exchange process central to the way we tell and embody our story allow us to tell it faithfully?' We don't think so. In fact, we think placing exchange at the heart of our story distorts the church and its narrative in several ways.[37]

The second point is that a good discipleship training process will ultimately prove to be an attractive aspect of the church that draws newcomers in. The shift from vendor-shaped Church in terms of self-interested market exchange is critiqued by Kenneson and Street on its reciprocal basis. They write, "Gift giving establishes and sustains relationships by acknowledging indebtedness."[38] In contrast, the mission-shaped Church does not produce and market the gospel. The missional Church is about a return to the source. Ecclesiology is not about the postmodern mantra that Christians must reject the insular, conforming demands of the past with cultural captivity. The characteristic of authentic discipleship and evangelism shifts from meeting the needs of liberal, middle-class, expressive individuals to daily cross-carrying. Mission must be filled with love for people who do not yet live with a kingdom understanding.

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[37] Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 48.

[38] Ibid., 60.

Discipleship-evangelism Enabled by a People of Praise
who Live with a Kingdom Understanding

A balanced and healthy understanding of discipleship evangelism requires the

people to continue to grow in their understanding of ecclesiology. The corporate

dimension has to do with the understanding of individuals as members of the Body of

Christ, the Church. The Christian faith with a coming kingdom understanding, from

beginning to end (Revelation 21:6), is a corporate and life-giving faith. The gospel is

about salvation of people as individuals, who long for pure spiritual milk (1 Peter 2:2). It

is also about apprenticing themselves to Jesus, and to integrate new followers into a

community of people living under the rule and reign of God. It is about the new

community that God is forming and calling to live to the praise of his glory. The call to

discipleship evangelism is a call to join this community. Learning what it means to live

with a kingdom understanding and to find a personal place of service within it is a

foundational aspect of praise.

Sally Morgenthaler, in her book, *Worship Evangelism*, contends, "When God and

the worship of God are first in the life of a church, growth will follow."[39] It takes time

for lay leadership to share the work of this kind of praise and trust in God with

newcomers. If the leadership identifies the importance of kingdom understanding for

discipleship and evangelism, then God and the worship of God must come first. Worship

and praise requires the creativity and active participation of everyone in the community,

not just the professional clergy. A people of praise can happen only if believers all

recognize that worship is the work of the people (liturgy). Rather than relying on the

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[39] Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 41.

pastor's leadership performance, the courage to sing God's praises is shared by trusted friends, neighbours, colleagues, or relatives. If the congregation can be selfless enough to be a committed community, and a people of praise, then it will play a role in the evangelization of others. Sharing the gospel is more of a process than a worship event. Paul states, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6). When God is the subject, God invites believers to be learners and bearers of good news to the culture. Marva Dawn, author of *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, writes, "When God is the subject, the community has the courage to sing the faith – and then to live it."[40]

Paul's understanding of mission seems to be different from postmodern ecclesiology, which has thus far focused on the harvesting aspect of evangelism rather than the planting part. God will bring about a harvest as the Holy Spirit brings the spiritual community to himself. Postmodern ecclesiology approaches the beginning of a new viewpoint that holds together both sides of the Church's nature – the culture on the one hand and the *a priori* kingdom on the other. For the Church in Canada this means a renewal of its personal and corporate spiritual life through a people of praise and practice of kingdom disciplines.

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[40] Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 161.

CHAPTER 5

THE MINISTER'S ROLE IN TAKING POPULAR CULTURE CAPTIVE

The Minister's Role as Pastor/Poet

Ministers in the United Church of Canada, and the churches they lead in a postmodern context, need to create new leadership model. A shift from a *sola pastora* model to clarifying the specific theological, political, and social leadership must take place if the Church intends to elicit a new community.

The first shift is a change of label from "minister" to "pastor." This is significant in forming new capacities for the minister's role. As mentioned previously, evangelism in the United Church is more caught than taught. Addressing the real-life challenges of the congregation will be influenced by the perceptible change in image of the pastor. This includes the postmodern emphasis on experience, modeling and living out of a pastoral identity. There is agreement in the denomination that the *sola pastora* model of leadership is contributing to ministry isolation and unclear leadership expectations. The Moderator of the United Church, Peter Short, addressed some of the leading causes of discouragement and loneliness in his 2004 pastoral letter to the Church: "Ministers often find themselves carrying the work of ministry in an isolation that can have geographic, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Few people understand."[1] Few people know what to do about it. But Jesus was known to his flock as "Rabbi" and "Lord." He touched the lives of the people in the community with creativity, and his disciples changed their

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[1] Peter Short, "Pastoral Letter from the Moderator," in *Moderator's Messages, The United Church of Canada*, November 2004, unpaginated.

perceptions of him. They were able to ask questions and articulate a new experience, and they became the poetry of God.

If the leadership can change the pastoral role in The United Church with a change of metaphor from "minister" to "pastor," then it will be possible to change the congregation's expectation of the minister in pastoral roles. Roxburgh contends, "In this sense, pastors must reinterpret their roles not primarily as caregivers but as poets."[2] Poets tell the story and communicate the tradition in the light of the whole story of what God has done, is doing, and has promised to do. The metaphor may be extended a bit in Ephesians 2:10 when Paul writes, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus" (NIV). The word translated "workmanship" is *poiema*, from which comes the English word "poem." God is the poet, and the members of the congregation are his poems.

People enjoy hearing, listening to, and sharing others' experience. To the postmodern culture, the personal nature of experience is important. The pastor/poet imagines and symbolizes the experience of God taking the chaos that was "without form and void" and creating a universe of spectacular, infinite, and intricate beauty. The pastor/poet listens and observes the process of turning the twisted, fallen mess of humanity into beautiful poems. The pastor/poet senses the experience of the congregation in chaos and gives that experience a voice in this great creative task. The pastor/poet needs the skills of pastoral care, but also the desire to serve an environment that allows people to have experiences, tell their stories, and hear the story of grace and beauty at a deeper level.

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[2] Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, 58.

N.T. Wright, in his book, *Simply Christian*, relates the dreams of a postmodern people: "It's as though we can hear, not perhaps a voice itself, but the echo of a voice: a voice speaking with calm, healing authority, speaking about justice, about things being put to rights, about peace and hope and prosperity for all. The voice continues to echo in our imagination, our subconscious."[3] The pastor/poet hears these dreams at a deeper level. The United Church of Canada spends so much of its time administering a heavyweight organization designed to make laws and implement them. In spite of this, the pastor/poet senses that justice slips through one's fingers and recognizes that poetry is born out of pain and darkness. The pastor/poet can create a work of beauty from the injustice, the fragmentation and alienation of lives coping with sorrow, hurt, and bitterness. For this reason, pastor/poets seek to know, embody, and help proclaim the gospel out of the darkness. Out of a love for God, the pastor/poet lives into the congregation's dream and gives voice to the gospel of transformation and renewal. Out of a love for God, the pastor/poet serves that creative power of God.

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The Minister's Role as Pastor/Prophet

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According to Roxburgh in his book, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, the minister's role "addresses the Word of God directly into the specific, concrete historical experience of the people of God."[4] The second shift in the minister's role as pastor/prophet is that of standing with individuals or the congregation as a corporate body in the experience of being lost in the postmodern culture. In biblical

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[3] Wright, *Simply Christian*, 3.

[4] Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation*, 60.

parlance the pastor/prophet has godly standing as being raised up from among the chosen people (congregation), and as conveying the word of God. By being enabled to speak all that God commanded and maintaining the authority of God's word which he or she would speak, the pastor/prophet helps the members of the congregation reflect on their experiences. The prophetic imagination frames and reframes the experience of the postmodern world in terms of the gospel. The prophetic imagination encourages people involved in mission to share their stories and explore responses to them in ways that express their Christian identity for them in the world at this time. The brokenness of the present cultural situation calls for a healing and prophetic response. The pastor/prophet encourages the biblical witness as Christians share stories of disobedience, repentance and marginalization. The pastor/prophet can then publicly exhort those involved in mission to declare to the world and to the Church the gospel contained in God's final revelation, Jesus Christ. With prophetic, poetic leadership, the sharing of stories places the attention on God's heart on behalf of Jesus, "as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20, NIV). The prophetic heart of Jesus addresses the hard side of discipleship which upholds the gospel side of Christ and is rooted in the biblical worldview.

The pastor/prophet should help the community overcome fear of authentic missional engagement. The prophetic word cuts across the assumptions in the culture regarding perceptions of the authority, dignity, and sovereignty of God. There are doubts and fears in the congregation absorbed from the ideologies and structures of the world. The pastor/prophet overcomes that fear with confidence of salvation. This includes overcoming the self-centered, self-fulfilled agendas of many popular contemporary

churches. The pastor/prophet overcomes that agenda with the mission agenda of the cross. Paul's reinterpretation and reframing of the cross as the foolishness and weakness of God is wiser and more powerful than that of mission, social ideology, and political structure (1 Cor. 1:25). Pastor/prophets come in the name and authority of Christ the Lord. Many believers find it difficult that God would want to use them in sharing the gospel. Strobel writes, "Many Christians feel like 'Lone Rangers' who must stumble through the evangelism process on their own."[5] Pastor/prophets emphasize the alternative community using the cross-resurrection theme as the central symbol of Christians' experience. The prophetic word is a powerful example of meaning interpretation. Paul addresses this issue by enabling the early Christians to celebrate the foolishness of the cross.

> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

The pastor/prophet reframes the community's life experiences in terms of Jesus' death and resurrection in ways that energize them for mission. Pastor/prophets need to consider these words of Paul said so that their message will give God the glory.

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[5] Strobel, *Inside theMind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 169.

The Minister's Role as Pastor/Apostle

The third shift in the minister's role requires an apostolic leader who has the capacity and willingness to map the needs of the congregation and community. Traditional ministers find it difficult to stand in the midst of the congregation and speak as apostles to their communities. Mainline ministers often suffer from a failure of confidence because they have assumed the role assigned by others. The "paid accountable ministry" model of the United Church takes too many cues from its audience who often are still captive to modernity. Timid apostleship denies the nature of the One for whom ministers speak and denies the life of the people of God in the culture. Jesus has a way of describing the role as organizing the interface between the Church's gathered and scattered life: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It is the character of his word to equip the congregation to stand in the culture. This is no simple or easy task. Without the roles of equipping and discipling, it is difficult for Canadian Christians to speak with the language of faith or act in accordance with their Christian identity in the secular culture. Mapping the needs of the congregation include the identity of spiritual gifts and equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). The pastor/apostle needs this role as a guide in order for the kingdom of God to emerge.

It is no simple task for clergy to discover ways of asserting the power and relevance of equipping and discipling. In a context that generally excludes the relevance of religious speech and behaviour, one wonders how ministers equip and disciple. A bold and explicit profession of the pastor/apostle's faith and its implications with the culture is

required. The living word goes out in power and strikes human hearts in ways only the pastor/apostle can begin to imagine. The word of God is sharp and powerful, and it never comes back empty (Heb. 4:12-13). How much more this is true as the pastor as apostle tries to map out the complex, difficult issues of both the congregation and community.

In a broad sense of the role, the pastor/apostle maps out the past, present and the future with those who are united by faith. The ministry of proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God is no easy task. The fear of rejection is very real among the pastor/apostles as the meaning of church is subsumed in its gathered life to the recruitment of new members. In a Christendom model, one can expect that some in the congregation will be offended or confused that the minister is not "in the church" often enough. But the pastor/apostle's response should emphasize the life of the people of God in the world as the primary arena for mission. If one can see ministry from the past history of the United Church engaged in the social gospel, then the role of pastor/apostle can lead the Church from the past to the future. If ministers heed Newbigin's call for missionary leaders, then the apostolic function of the United Church will silence the fear of rejection: "Ministerial leadership for a missionary congregation will require that the minister is directly engaged in the warfare of the kingdom against the powers which usurp the kingship."[6]

Bruce Sanguin, in his book, *Emerging Church*, writes, "There is no metaphysical future out there waiting for enough time to elapse before it (the kingdom) is realized. God doesn't have a blueprint that we're all just following, and which given enough time

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[6] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 240.

will come to pass."[7] Sanguin deepens the definition of the pastor/apostle, recognizing

that pastoral leadership is that part of God's presence with the congregation – the body of

Christ. In simple terms the pastor/apostle belongs to the *laos,* meaning "God's people in

the culture." The image of the pastor/apostle is important to the gathered life of the

Church. However, a more powerful image for the present culture is the vital and

important role in the broader community, modeling what it means to live in a kingdom

understanding in public life, rather than just acting as a symbolic representative of God's

action in the culture. Such images of the pastor/apostle are needed in order to move away

from the restriction of the clergy role to the internal life of the Church. The nineteenth-

century invention, or the view of ministers as enculturated professionals pervasive in

United Church, limits the congregation's role (including clergy and laity) to the private

sphere.

The change involves implications for ministers to remember who they are and

stand in a pastor/apostle leadership model in the name and authority of Christ. Without

apology or wavering the minister's role in taking popular culture captive cannot function

in a *sola pastora* model. We must stand as a team, as Christ's apostles and evangelists to

do God's work. Roxburgh writes, "Pastoral care, worship, proclamation, and

administration are part of the work of the whole people of God, not the designated

territory of someone with a seminary degree and an ordination certificate."[8] By God's

grace ministers will move congregations into mission shaped by the identity of the

minister formed by tradition and by encounters with the gospel in the culture.

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[7] Bruce Sanguin, *The Emerging Church* (Kelowna, BC: Copperhouse, 2008), 138.

[8] Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation*, 64.

The Minister whose Identity Is Formed by the Tradition

The United Church must have a clear written purpose that shares the values of the denomination and is clearly inclusive to the members of the congregation. The United Church must have a common connection and be able to communicate that to the community. The members must know that God has called them to engage in the culture. The titles of "pastor" and "reverend" have been used during different eras, depending on the generation the minister is addressing. "Reverend" is preferred by the older generation and "pastor" is acceptable to a younger cohort. The image that primarily defines the minister has been formed by the tradition of modernity. That image is seen as a teacher and a professional, "unfolding the concepts of God's Word to those who come faithfully to the church."[9] This teaching role is based upon the cultural assumptions of the United Church of Canada that are theologically and culturally inclusive.

Historically known as the Union Church, the United Church brought together in 1925 the founding traditions of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational identities. God called them to form a new national Church. It was the Church of identity for many Canadians whether new and old as they presented themselves and their public lives for spiritual instruction. A tradition of liberal-evangelical consensus combined with a comprehensive Canadian inclusiveness created congregations that were consumers of official professional services. The combined strength of the founding traditions created large seminaries to meet the demand of a growing Christian Canada. Despite the changing roles of women, newcomers to Canada, and the laity in the Church, a discussion of clericalism never took place.

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[9] Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 321.

But the image of the minister formed by tradition no longer has meaning in a culture that is rapidly changing. No longer is the model of caretaker or chaplain adequate to function in the new postmodern culture. Dwindling, aging congregations with an Anglo-Saxon mindset have created an identity crisis for ministers. Creative, young ministers with the passion and skill to recognize identity are needed to navigate mission for today's congregations. The lack of a fixed identity has created various polarities that ministers have to navigate. In a culture that lifts up success, the United Church seems unable to find and identify missional leadership. White introduces and quotes a United Church pastor named Ed Bentley, who speaks of his story in leadership:

> The Rev. Ed Bentley has been in ministry at Eastminster United in Belleville, Ontario, since 1983, and has taken it through periods of strong growth, including a brand new building. Bentley feels strongly that the United Church view of leadership has been skewed over the years. "The problem is that there is absolutely no focus on outcomes," he states. "It's as if no one is responsible if churches do well or fail. We need to have job descriptions that are performance based, with annual goal setting, including a built-in evaluation process. Bentley believes that we have not only come to tolerate mediocrity, but "we actually celebrate it. If you are successful, you get shot down," he states. We need to celebrate success and seek it out so that we can learn from it.[10]

As the culture changed, it seems that pastoral identity in the United Church has not kept up with literature in the field. Moving beyond the tradition, one can read about "change-agents," "missional leaders," "pastor-teachers," "spiritual directors," "player-coaches," and "emerging pastors," among many other models for ministry identity. Roxburgh notes that there has been an increase in counseling and clinical/pastoral models of ministry identity. He writes, "In this approach pastors respond to people's needs and receive identity by becoming caregivers and clinicians. Soul care becomes self-discovery

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[10] White, *Seismic Shifts*, 38-39.

with a loss of a larger horizon."[11] A paradigmatic model of pastoral leadership,

especially through programs like Clinical Pastoral Education, Diaconal Ministry and

Parish Nursing, has become popular in the United Church. In this model of leadership, a

vision of pastoral identity is passed on through agents of expressive individualism and

brokenness. Henri Nouwen considers what it means to be a minister in today's culture in

his book, *Wounded Healer*:

> The minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and
> make that recognition the starting point of his service. Whether he tries to enter
> into a dislocated world, relate to a convulsive generation, or speak to a dying man,
> his service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a heart
> wounded by the suffering about which he speaks.[12]

For some churchgoers, the congregation is their "sanctuary" from the world, and

they do not see the pastoral identity as part of public life. In a post-denominational era

congregations are resisting a top-down appeal to live beyond themselves. The hidden

power of electronic culture is further breaking down and fragmenting the connection to

the larger culture. United Church congregations prefer a private spirituality of inner,

personal happiness rather than having the pastor bringing in external political tensions.

Property, the United Church pension fund, and creating a group of one's own kind are

community identities formed by the tradition. The role of ministry in the Church and in

the community apparently has no biblical or theological basis. Pastors are expected to do

certain things simply because that is what the tradition indicates. Few people are willing

to discuss the biblical identity of the pastor, scrutinize worship traditions or deal with an

underlying question of emerging church worship.

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[11]Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church between the Gospel and Culture*, 322.

[12] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1972), xvi.

Emerging Church Worship in the United Church of Canada

For much of its history, the United Church of Canada has felt the need to update the worship service, including tradition, to ensure that it is meaningful to the people. Donna Sinclair, in her article, "Worship Traditions under Scrutiny," offers her observations: "Sunday morning: hymns, a sermon, an anthem. Maybe tears or smiles or both, at the bright faces of the junior choir or a phrase in a prayer. Those who come here may feel disturbed or healed or both. For the 255,000 people on average who make their way to a United church, that's worship."[13] However it is a tradition under scrutiny. Because of the speed of social and cultural change, and a heightened sense of the urgency of making worship relevant, those changes appear to have accelerated since the early 1970s. A book, *Songs for a Gospel People,* became available in 1987 as a supplement to the denomination's standard hymnal of 1971, which had been jointly produced with the Anglicans. The hymnal, reflecting more ecumenical and cautious times, had carried the title, *The Hymn Book.* In 1996, *Voices United* was published as the first "United Church" book, addressing the specific needs of the particular denomination and the present era. It continues to be the primary resource and support for worship. In 2005 it was supplemented by *More Voices* to further enable faith communities to unite in relevant and uplifting congregational song. In a mix of ritual and rhythm, some congregations are drawing on what is known in the United Church as the Ancient Culture movement, mixing together mystery, sacrament, wonder, and ancient styles of worship and music in contemporary formats. In some settings, worship draws on diverse sources, such as

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[13] Donna Sinclair, "Worship Traditions under Scrutiny," *The United Church Observer*, January 2004, 16.

Native spirituality, Celtic Christianity, and the *Taize* Catholic community in France.[14]

Labyrinths have known a rise in popularity. A local United Church has one formed in the

tiles of the sanctuary. There also is no lack of experimentation with praise bands, drama,

screens and PowerPoint.[15]

Although it took over seventy years for the United Church to produce its own

hymn book, *Voices United* was created out of a need for its own identity. Such changes

have been only the tip of what congregational expert Lyle Schaller has described as a

major transformation of worship. Schaller says it is characterized by "the arrival of a

new era in church music" and "the change in public worship" in thousands of churches

"from dull and boring weekly obligation to an appealing and exciting worship

experience."[16] Schaller raises some issues of needed resources, recovering worship

tradition, and attention to the hopes and yearnings of a new generation.

A lack of resources may make it difficult to follow the emerging church route just

described. In situations where congregations have a high concern for pastoral care, many

United Church churches take the position that it is going to have to be one style of

ministry or the other, or one activity or the other. In postmodern parlance, the posture is

an organizationally masochistic "win-lose" rather than "win-win." A gulf exists between

have and have-not congregations. In the case of worship and music, some congregations

have opted for peace over war by choosing to examine the roots of the tradition.

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[14] Cf., Donna Sinclair and Christopher White, *Emmaus Road* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake, 2003), 175.

[15] Cf., White, *Seismic Shifts,* 83-84,

[16] Lyle Schaller, *The New Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 13.

Good preaching remains a high value in emerging Church worship. The United Church has a historical precedent set by its Methodist roots in an environment conducive to intimate singing, informal readings of the Scriptures, close prayers, and sermons that have a more direct and personal impact on those gathered. From these roots, the minister could ask, "What did you hear, see, feel, or experience through the reading of Scripture and the sermon?" The people then turn to one another and respond. This kind of interaction and participation in today's postmodern culture would get people involved in the spoken word in more than an incidental way. As uncomfortable as it might seem at first, this response to the word would help worshipers focus on their need for change and make a resolve that results in spiritual growth and maturation.[17]

Instead of getting caught in the rocky ground between the phantom of novelty and a language so outdated that it is no longer accessible, it would be better to research how different forms impact different generations and design worship accordingly. As Posterski and colleagues have noted, "A worship service that tries to incorporate too many diverse elements may blend like oil and water. In trying to please everyone, a church leader may end up pleasing no one."[18] A compromise may be to provide services that are flexible, being responsive to the religious tradition and also being accountable to the creed of the United Church of Canada.

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[17] Cf., Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

[18] Don Posterski, Brett Grainger, and Karen Stiller, "Spiritual Styles = Leadership Challenges," *Envision* (Autumn 2002): 3.

The United Church of Canada's Creed and the New Statement of Faith

While the denomination created a creed in the late 1960s to express its faith in a contemporary statement, most United Church churches are not using the creed in worship regularly, except in rare instances of baptism. The United Church is not a doctrinal Church. Much like the ancient Nicene or the Apostles Creed, *The New Creed* could be proclaimed as a doxological burst of faith. Its simple Trinitarian form easily lends itself to being sung to express an emotional postmodern content of the congregants' faith:

Although formally begun in 2000, the development of a new statement of faith for the United Church has been over twenty years in the making.[19] The "Confessing Our Faith" project in the 1980s began a process of study and conversation that envisioned the eventual development and adoption of a statement of faith. The studies and reports on "Authority and Interpretation of Scripture" and "Reconciling and Making New," undertaken by the Theology and Faith committee from 1988 to 2000, also helped prepare the way for the current work. The result is called "A Song of Faith."

The first paragraph of the "Preamble" provides the context that has shaped the process:

> This statement of faith seeks to provide a verbal picture of what The United Church of Canada understands its faith to be in its current historical, political, social, and theological context at the beginning of the 21st century. It is also a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its convictions in relation to the world in which we live.

As indicated previously, "A Song of Faith" may be a contradiction in terms due to the paucity of use of "A New Creed." But the United Church of Canada may not have a clear enough an understanding of its own faith at this point in time to be captured in a

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[19] The United Church of Canada, "A Song of Faith," a Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada/L'Eglise Unie du Canada, Executive of the General Council, April 2006.

statement. And even if the Church has been successful in drafting an adequate statement, it may not be put to good use. Although many in the Church do not use *The New Creed* regularly, they still believe it is part of the Church of Christ and continue to pray for its reformation and renewal. Given the theological diversity that currently jostles for a platform within the ethos of the United Church of Canada, it is doubtful that an orthodox statement of faith would emerge from this sort of process at such a time as this.

That said, "A Song of Faith" does give those who hold to a more orthodox form of Christianity some cause for guarded optimism that the denomination might be coming out of the wilderness. A statement of faith is not a creed, a statement of what the Church believes, but more of a description of where the Church is at the present time. That in itself is a daunting task given that the "Preamble" describes a misleading impression of the United Church of Canada in this first decade of the twenty-first century. As John Webster Grant remarked back in 1990 as the United Church celebrated its sixty-fifth anniversary: "There has been a widespread impression that the United Church comes in two editions, a hard-cover official one expressing decided opinions on a great variety of subjects and a loose-leaf one with which almost anyone can be comfortable."[20] Describing "the faith" of the denomination while citing theological voices of "the market economy" and "climate of terror," the document is challenging to read. With the United Church's stance on social and economic questions, the committee charged with writing "A Song of Faith," intending to replace earlier statements of faith, have made a valiant

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[20] John Webster Grant, "What's Past is Prologue," in *Voices and Visions* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990), 137.

attempt. In an appendix of the "Song of Faith," the authors explain who the statement is

intended for:

> Much of the statement of faith is written in the first person plural, which naturally raises the question, Who is the "we" who is talking? Sometimes the "we" is a reference to the entire human race (e.g., "Nothing separates us from the love of God.") Occasionally it indicates the larger Christian community ("We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth.")[21]

The statement also speaks of a universal sense of "the Divine," which is found in all

persons and in Jesus as a man especially tuned into "the Divine." This may be a new

strategy of encounter with the postmodern culture; however, this follows the tradition of

modern liberal Protestantism rather than the revelation of God in the Scriptures.

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[21] "A Song of Faith," Appendix D.

CHAPTER 6

STRATEGY CONTENT AND IMPLEMENTATION FOR TAKING POPULAR
CULTURE CAPTIVE AT ST. STEPHEN'S

New Strategy for Giving the Gospel Away to the Spiritually Hungry and Thirsty

The gospel is not about a war against the market economy, or the contemporary

global climate of fear, or political captivity of the Church. The gospel is good news for

St. Stephen's. The gospel forsakes the Church's seductive ideological fixations on the

economy and politics with an invitation for the body of Christ known as St. Stephen's to

live in God's story. The gospel shifts the church to enter into a relationship with God.

The gospel shifts the church to live under God's rule and reign, known as the kingdom of

God, and not under the "charge" of a professional clergy. The gospel is about a shift into

mission in the culture around the church and not about membership. The gospel is about

a shift in leadership under the absolute authority of Jesus Christ who forms, embodies,

and represents a new kind of community. Jesus said, "I have not called you servants, but

friends" (John 15:15).

The first strategy for "taking culture captive" will begin with active listening,

researching the community, and focusing on the lives of the members of St. Stephen's as

a community of disciples. The emphasis is on being sensitive to the voice of God in the

"active" part of listening and giving people feedback. When a person is able to

understand and also repeat the words of another who is describing how he or she feels,

that conveys the unconditional love and empathy of God. Sharing stories will help St.

Stephen's give the gospel away naturally as its members hear needs from people that may

have not been met by a church program. Richard Mouw, in his book, *Consulting the*

Faithful, contends that the Church is called to help people understand "God's day-to-day dealings with us in the midst of our practical uncertainties about, for example, our health, our financial resources, and our intimate relationships."[1] Talking to the local school principal, the strip-mall retailers, the local councilor and librarian, members of St. Stephen's will discover who people are, what they think, why they live in North Oshawa, what media they enjoy, and so on. Just sitting in the local coffee shops around the church will help the congregation embody the light, salt and seed that mirrors the love of God and emphasizes the ministry of a two-way conversation.

The second strategy will involve a shift from committee to communal team. At St. Stephen's, as in many churches, "the primary way that a member actively participates in the church beyond attending worship is serving on a committee."[2] The committees spend their time making rules and dispensing permission. All the hierarchical, pyramidical, super-structured, top-down, brick and mortar way of doing church has to change to an emphasis on ministry. Biblical leadership is shared leadership. St. Stephen's has a strong heritage and practice of one-man ministry. As the church discovers its own particular mission in its unique context, the local pastor autonomy becomes the local church autonomy. Ministry should be led and carried out by teams. When ministers are true servants, the only distinction they see between themselves and lay leaders concern giftedness, calling, and employment. Where a spirit of equality rules, community develops.

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[1] Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

[2] Hunsberger, "Sizing Up the Shape of the Church," in Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture,* 344.

The third strategy will include a shift from recruitment to mission. Missional identity should be clear, rehearsed and reinforced out of clarity around core values and bedrock beliefs. The vision, values and goals that flow out of mission need to be communicated to programs and activities that give the gospel away. Postmodern businesses long ago identified the hunger in the culture for connection, meaning, and friendship, especially in an age of isolated suburbia. There is a deep longing in the culture for friends (as the long-running success of TV series, *Friends*, makes clear). Big business and media have been active and proactive in selling connection and getting into the mini-fortresses that many suburban homes have become. In other words, the media tries to package what St. Stephen's should be offering. The Church offers the ultimate relationship – communion with the Three-in-One, the Great I Am. St. Stephen's has an opportunity to exercise a mission sensibility through the media, and by doing so the church will engage in the rituals of self-transcendence.

Popular Film, Television, and Music

Instead of asking where a mainline church might have a good chance of succeeding in the church "marketplace," believers might ask instead the mission question: Where is the need for a healing presence of a Christian community in North Oshawa? St. Stephen's needs to think about new ways of doing church. One innovation at St. Stephen's that will help the church re-form itself as a missionary community is to consider the local mission field. The local mission field, which is the postmodern culture, speaks fluent "Hollywood." If St. Stephen's wants to maintain a strong ministry in the neighbourhood, members need to learn the language of Hollywood themselves.

There are several reasons why popular films make it possible to give the gospel away to the spiritually hungry and thirsty.

First, movies reveal how postmodern people see the world: the battle between good and evil; struggles with suffering and sin; the deep longings of the human heart; and the search for meaning. Engaging films and other forms of popular culture open people up to what God may be saying to both the world and the Church and reminds believers of the public dimension of theology.[3] Second, movies reveal what unchurched and dechurched people think of Christians. One example is Kevin Smith's *Dogma*, which displays "the cumulative effect of religion, faith and spirituality, filtered through the pop culture maze."[4] Third, movies reveal how people who do not know God talk and think about him. These movies need not be explicitly Christian in their themes to be theologically significant. In *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston writes, "As a means of telling our stories (and even hearing God's story pseudonymously), movies have the potential of helping us to hear God as God's story and our stories intersect."[5] Fourth, movies present some revealing signals of what is happening in North American (and even specifically Canadian) culture. Movies often reveal the hopes and fears of people trying to make their way through these confusing times. Fifth, movies are popular culture, the heart of postmodern belief, values and behaviour. The present culture is an increasingly narrative one and, much like Jesus illustrating the kingdom with parables, the culture is shaped and expressed through its stories.

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[3] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality,* 65-74; and Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings,* 15-17.

[4] Kevin Smith, "The Marvin Borowsky Lecture on Screenwriting," lecture given to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California, 7 December 2000.

[5] Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, 85.

When looking around the neighbourhood of St. Stephen's late at night and seeing the flickering glow of televisions reflected in most of the windows, there is no questioning the ubiquity of television in the lives of the church's neighbours. The cultural presence of the screen has become such that most people have come to depend on video as major form of mass communication. Broadcast television holds educational value for giving the gospel away to the spiritually hungry and thirsty. Under the guise of entertainment, television teaches the hidden curriculum of the culture. As a result, television "has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience."[6] While television appears to have a monopoly on storytelling that functions as a blueprint for living, simple and uncomplicated themes of the gospel appear repeatedly. Walter T. Davis, in his book, *Watching What We Watch*, explains, "These themes include praise for good works, especially service to the poor; the virtue of tolerance and the vice of intolerance; condemnation of hypocrisy; warnings against false prophesy; and the merits of an inclusive, pluralistic community."[7] It tells us much about our God and the culture.

Those in St. Stephen's who are already on a journey with Christ need to join the mission of giving the gospel away. There are many people in the neighbourhood raised on popular music who are also on a metaphorical pilgrimage; they discuss theology as humanity's ongoing discussion about God. Detweiler and Taylor write, "Pop music offers at least three glimpses into elements of the nature of God and faith, the role of pain and suffering in life and faith, and the integration of body and soul in contrast to the

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[6] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 87.

[7] Walter T. Davis, *Watching What We Watch* (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2001), xiii.

dualistic approach of modernity."[8] The focus will usually be on the music, but these glimpses may goad and invite members of St. Stephen's into seeing gospel ideas through a new lens and giving them away afresh. When believers think about the beauty of this universe and how it came to be, or the hostility that can be allowed to exist in such a beautiful place, these Christians are also on a journey of theological thought, and discussion of the gospel could occur with new pilgrims.

Leadership Development in a Post-Christendom Context

St. Stephen's must ask the Lord for the gift of leadership. When a pilgrim comes knocking on the church's door, effective leaders are needed that will recognize them. Identifying the needs of the post-Christendom context of Oshawa also means investing in reliable people who will be qualified to lead (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). Many pilgrims will be receptive to greater involvement. However, the key to engaging them lies in being able to provide effective leadership. The writing of 1 Timothy is an example of a leader providing continuing leadership in the Church.

Challenges

If St. Stephen's is going to emerge in the post-Christendom context, it will have to address five particular leadership challenges. First, few members of the church are sharing their spirituality with other people in the congregation. Asked directly by the minister, about half say, "I keep my spirituality pretty much to myself." About a third of the members indicate that they share their spirituality with "some people who are close to

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[8] Detweiler and Taylor, *Matrix of Meanings*, 151.

me, usually a family member, who is outside the church." According to Bibby's research, only 12 percent report that they can relate their spirituality "to others in my religious group."[9] Spirituality in the present post-Christendom context is a highly diverse, elusive, and private phenomenon. The lack of evangelism at St. Stephen's is directly a result of failing to provide the right kind of leadership development in which leaders could reflect on spirituality. The members of St. Stephen's need to believe they have something to bring to the spiritual conversations of pilgrims. They need to develop creative ways of opening up the communication lines on spirituality – beginning among people within the church then moving outward.

The second challenge for leadership development has to do with ability of St. Stephen's to contribute to individuals and their relationships. St. Stephen's, in its post-Christendom context, is not presenting itself as a direct resource for Oshawans during times of personal need. Every city is unique in its problems, hurts, and pains. However, while few of the unchurched are looking to local churches (in this case, St. Stephen's) as a source of help, most are turning to family members, friends, God, and prayer.[10] The leadership development must include awareness of such needs and the leadership must be trained to respond to what they find. Improved leadership development to the personal needs of the unchurched must start with the church's own leadership needs, and then move outward.

The third challenge for leadership development relates to the importance of having young people involved in St. Stephen's. Leadership development in St. Stephen's

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[9] Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 201.

[10] Bibby, "The Future Families Project," Vanier Institute, 2004.

particular context should include stimulating youth interest, seeing them embrace Christian faith, and having them work alongside leaders of all ages in mission. Post-Christendom leadership development for youth ministry would feature friendship, music, and freedom. For St. Stephen's to deal with young people in its context, features of authenticity and significance should be added. Reaching young people will continue to be one of the greatest challenges of leadership facing St. Stephen's.

The fourth challenge facing leadership development is how to provide worship and music that can be meaningful for both active members and the unchurched. It is a particularly important issue for leadership development in giving the gospel away to the spiritually hungry and thirsty. For many people in the post-Christendom context, the public service of worship is a primary point of contact. While the music ministry of St. Stephen's has meaning for the present congregation, leadership development must incorporate music that is evangelistic when unbelievers are invited into the presence of God. St. Stephen's must develop leadership that chooses music that reflects clear awareness of the presence of pilgrims, while at the same time serves the active church membership.

The fifth challenge of leadership development is its need for reflection upon how the controversial issues surrounding the denomination may affect the ability of St. Stephen's to give the gospel away. The current leadership at St. Stephen's does not recognize how these controversial issues may be barriers for further development. The present leaders are trying to be decent people, are characterized by integrity, and are trying to live life and carry out the mission of the church according to typical Canadian values. Positions that the denomination has taken on the sexual orientation issue, for

example, in the post-Christendom context do no seem to be barriers to Oshawans being
more involved at St. Stephen's. The main problem is theological. Milton J. Coalter, John
M. Mulder and Louis B. Weeks explain in their book, *Vital Signs*, "The danger of
secularism is its capacity to erode the vitality of Christian faith by relativizing and
neutralizing Christ's claims on our individual and collective lives."[11] These are central
areas of leadership development in a post-Christendom context where effective response
is giving the gospel away to the spiritually hungry and thirsty who come knocking on the
door.

Clarifying the Response

St. Stephen's is in trouble. The crisis is one of leadership development. The
present leadership often resists change for fear of loss of status, loss of being an opinion
leader or holding a hierarchical position in the organization. The conception of
leadership in the post-Christendom context is changing. The old dualistic and
hierarchical models are disintegrating in favour of egalitarian and holistic models. The
crisis is thus an opportunity to rediscover the nature and calling of the church. Harold
Percy, in his book, *Your Church Can Thrive*, "clarifies the response" accurately for St.
Stephen's. To discover authentic community and a missional people in a hostile land:

> Many congregations would realize great benefits if they were to devote the next
> year in its entirety to teaching their current members what God calls the church to
> do and to be. Many of our most faithful members have had their understanding of
> the church shaped by the expectations and assumptions of a "Christendom"
> worldview. Because they assume (incorrectly) that we live in a Christian society,
> they have a rather truncated understanding of the church's mission in our

[11] Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: the Promise of Mainline Protestantism* (Grand Haven, MI: Faithwalk, 2002), 127.

contemporary "post-Christendom" situation. This desperately needs to be corrected if we are to be effective in the current cultural context.[12]

St. Stephen's must give high priority to mission to the spiritually hungry and thirsty. The issue has been stated well by Jeff Woods in his book, *Congregational Megatrends*: "I strongly believe that today's churches need to reach people who know nothing of God or the church."[13] Seekers are hungry to see evidence of God at work, and if this effort is linked to the personality of St. Stephen's they will encounter God and experience the real thing. In order to give priority to this mission, the church has to first find them. The only way to know for certain about their needs for spirituality is to speak with them. St.Stephen's needs to learn what specific interests and needs are prevalent in North Oshawa. The purpose of mission is to minister in response to what is being learned. It means listening to the experts and doing something for a specific group that communicates the presence of St. Stephen's in a caring way. For example, Barna listed suburban Boomers as one of the groups having the greatest ambivalence about church attendance.[14] Mission to the spiritually hungry and thirsty is important to break down unbelievers' post-Christendom skepticism of Christianity. St. Stephen's has an opportunity and responsibility to respond to God's call to mission and ministry.

Leadership development can also be engaged in a conscious ministry to marginal and inactive affiliates that may have dropped out in the 1990s. Church attendance dropped during that time, especially for Boomers. Religious identification as a line of affinity may offer St. Stephen's an opportunity to relate to other inactive affiliates or

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[12] Harold Percy, *Your Church Can Thrive* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 40.

[13] Jeff Woods, *Congregational Megatrends* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1996), 124.

[14] George Barna, *The Barna Report 1994-95: Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1994), 147.

disaffiliates. Dormant Boomers in the mainline Protestant family, such as Presbyterians,

Anglicans and Lutherans, for example, may relate reasonably comfortably to the church.

In a small church like St. Stephen's, the leadership can offer value that an entertainment-

driven church cannot. Leadership will have to rely on lay involvement if St. Stephen's is

going to find the human resources to carry out effective mission to the marginal and

inactive.

St. Stephen's will have to move beyond the model of leadership development

provided by John the Baptist to Herod. "Herod was greatly puzzled, yet he liked to listen

to him" (Mark 6:20). The key to success in mission for St. Stephen's is for the

membership itself to be healthy. A healthy St. Stephen's will have leadership that is

aware of the need for the church to minister well to the committed core, yet also respond

to God's mandate to go into the culture, beginning with the people of Oshawa.

Where to Start: Recruitment and Needs of Leaders

St. Stephen's needs good leadership development and a reconnection to organic

and communal life. The first place to start is to locate leaders. The method involves

canvassing the congregation in order to determine the leadership identification of the

membership. To lighten the workload and add credibility to the project, this is ideally a

collaborative effort involving all the standing committees, social networks, and groups in

the church. Potential leaders could be asked about skills to cultivate three new kinds of

awareness in the congregation. Roxburgh, in his book, *The Missional Leader*, explains

what this awareness would include: "First is an awareness of what God is doing among

the people of the congregation. Second is awareness of how a congregation can imagine

itself as being the center of God's activities. Third is an awareness of what God is

already up to in the congregation's context."[15]

A Spirit-given gift inventory, such as the *Three Colors of Ministry* by Christian

Schwarz, could also be used effectively to help the members of the congregation identify

their gifts for ministry and where they intend to serve within St. Stephen's. Another

prototype of this method for finding leaders is the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-9).

Here Jesus tells the story of a woman who lost a valued silver coin. Rather than

frantically retracing her steps in the neighbourhood or rushing off to see if she dropped it

at the market, she stayed put, calmly turned up the lamp, pulled out her broom, swept the

house, and eventually found the coin – right there at home. In this parable is a model for

being on the lookout for and celebrating the hidden leadership right in the community of

St. Stephen's. Lists of mature teenagers rehearsing in the praise band at the church might

also provide some leads.

Another model that can encourage leadership development is found in the Epistle

to the Hebrews. The author has a complaint about those he is seeking to nurture. He tells

them that solid food is for the mature, but they are not ready for it yet. He can only offer

them milk because they are still infants. Although they should be capable of teaching

others by now, they are still in need of elementary teaching themselves (Heb. 5:11-14).

In another place that may encourage potential leaders, Paul informs the Philippians that

he prays constantly for their continued growth toward spiritual maturity. "This is my

prayer," he writes, "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth

of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless

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[15] Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, 31-32.

until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus

Christ – the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11).

Once leaders have been identified, their needs and interests should next be

determined. Personal face-to-face conversations should touch on personal, relational, and

spiritual issues. They should be asked about their life experiences. An experience that

stays with an individual is an indication that there is spiritual gold to be mined and

lessons to be learned. The next step is to ask whether they can think of a Scriptural story

or teaching that reminds them of their experience. This sets up the experience within the

context of the narratives of Scripture and helps to point to a possible small group

reflection.

These conversations initially would be done by a minister and could be extended

to the laity when they are ready. These conversations should be positive, productive, and

even enjoyable. By determining the needs and interest of potential leaders, the pastor can

learn more about how St. Stephen's might better serve not only its leaders but also the

needs of small group development. It is important to communicate that the church cares

enough to ask and reflect on what is being learned from the conversation.

Small Group Evangelism

Once potential leaders have been identified and initial conversations have taken

place, the next component of leadership development is to assess what is being learned.

Taken together, the conversations add up to an extensive survey of the potential

leadership. The information gleaned from these conversations with potential leaders can

assist in releasing their gifts in interest-based or needs-based small groups.

Potential leaders who are interested in small group evangelism need to do an individual evaluation, asking the following questions: 1) What is exciting for me about the idea of small group evangelism? 2) What might it mean for the congregation? 3) Is this worth trying to pursue? Are there any obstacles to going ahead? 4) Am I willing to take up this challenge? Do I have the energy? and 5) Am I willing to pray about this?

Interest-based Small Group

These groups could function as resource groups, leadership groups, outreach groups, or as evangelism groups. The label would be affixed by the group itself. Each group created should reflect on the types of needs and interests being uncovered, and should assess St. Stephen's ability to respond to the needs of leaders, now and in the future. A resource group would work closely with the minister and others involved in St. Stephen's ministry. These groups would function like the research and development wing of a company, carrying out post-Christendom research that in turn influences credibility in the culture.[16]

Intentionally encouraging small group evangelism begins with the minister or perhaps a few people hearing about small groups and getting excited about them. The idea of small group ministry will resonate with different people for different reasons. To this end, it is important to highlight practical ideas for effective evangelism. Some are existing programs at St. Stephen's, while others are potential programs.

There are six programs that fall into the category of existing programs that can be avenues for evangelism. The first is existing Bible Study Group, Seniors Group, Choir,

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[16] Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus Entrepreneur* (New York: Three Rivers, 2001), xiv.

United Church Women, Serenity Group, and Praise Group (known as the DiscipleShip).

The second is task-force groups for special occasions. There are several occasions that

the church could celebrate with flowers, receptions or decorations: Mother's Day,

Father's Day, Christmas and Easter. The third program is the Cradle Role Group,

dedicated to sending birthday cards to children and youth. The fourth is the

Transformation Steering Committee with more of an emphasis on evangelism. The fifth

program is the Sunday School Opening Group. This would plan to use music, videos and

handouts at a display table in the church hall at the start of the secular school year. The

sixth is The Anniversary Sunday Service, which could be expanded to include a

"Homecoming" theme. It would be an opportunity to reach some of the affiliate

members in the neighbourhood.

Beyond existing programs are several ideas for potential programs, small groups,

or ministries that could be avenues for evangelism at St. Stephen's. One idea is an

evangelistic businessmen's breakfast for local and retired marketplace leaders. Another

idea is holding a new adult member's Sunday school class. The church could publish a

newsletter with content geared for families of children at St. Stephen's or content geared

for a direct-mail newsletter to the unchurched in the neighbourhood. The church could

launch a Nursery Group that advertises the facilities to the young families in the

neighbourhood. The church could form a small group to plan a special "Bring-a-Friend-

Sunday" would encourage members of St. Stephen's to send an invitation to a friend

without a church home. A Single-Parent Group could target other single-parent families

with an invitation to a Single-parent Sunday. According to the 2006 Census there are

over 15,000 single-parent households in Oshawa. A small Outreach Planning Group

could be established to sit down and work out what the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) means in terms of evangelism for St. Stephen's. A "Saturday Night for Skeptics" group to help the congregation begin to consider how it might usher small group evangelism into its congregational life. The church could form an Outreach Luncheon Group. St. Stephen's has a good reputation in the church community regarding its high standards of food offerings. This group could enhance that reputation by offering a theme speaker with a cultural topic. The entrance ticket would be $5.00 each and free to those members of the church who brought a new friend. St. Stephen's could become involved in community fairs, Christmas displays, or parades. The church could join service organizations such as the Kiwanis or Rotary Club. The church could host an awards banquet for sports or academic achievements. Gifts for new mothers/fathers or new residents in the neighbourhood could be delivered by a group from the church. An evangelistic Christmas event could be held. Church events could be made community events, such as music nights or Easter breakfast. The church could seek opportunities to speak at the local school on topics such as bullying, vandalism, and the like.

The key is carrying out the small group function. The change to a new biblical paradigm of giving the gospel away will run into problems within the organizational makeup, overall polity, and entrenched church values. It is important to recognize that small groups already exist, such as the Session of Elders, the Seniors Group, and the Choir. Outreach, then, is simply and expansion of that participation. All members should participate in a small group in regardless of their talents and gifts.

Another important step will be evaluating the interests and needs of the current leadership of St. Stephen's, which is comprised of members who are all over sixty years

old. These individuals can inform the pastor as well as new leaders regarding what St. Stephen's is doing, what they (the current leaders) are able to do, and what the church should do to transition its focus to a more current paradigm. This current leadership still focuses on serving the needs of church members rather than serving people outside of the church. They have found significance in church involvement and are providing human and financial resources. However, in order to help St. Stephen's process the biblical values and accept a new post-Christendom paradigm, openness to modifying mission leadership will be required.

The new small groups will be led by the minister, and the teaching focus will be on the biblical value of giving the gospel away. In the process of launching these small groups based on needs and interests will assume several start-up group sessions for the minister. One session will focus on post-Christendom contemporary spirituality. Holding the group meeting in a local restaurant or public library would be best since these are neutral places for unbelievers to feel at home. A relationship-based small group doing evangelism needs immediate training and context to make it intentional, reproducible, and sustainable over time. Giving emphasis to small group leadership and training gives both the minister and potential new leaders the opportunity to deal with personal interests and personal problems. Good existing ministries of St. Stephen's will not be abandoned. Doing small group evangelism will become better known and, as necessary, supplemented and diversified out of the context of the neighbourhood.

Content Relevant to the Neighbourhood of Oshawa[17]

Paul cared deeply enough to become culturally aware. His speech in Athens brilliantly illuminates the theological nature and purpose of building bridges from culture to faith (Acts 17:26-28). "He was literate in his faith and had invested himself in the process of discovery, having studied Athens in some detail. Now Paul was ready to build the bridge connecting the Athenians' obvious spiritual needs and the good new of Jesus the Christ."[18] Similarly, St. Stephen's must become familiar with the content that is relevant to the neighbourhood of Oshawa.

People in Oshawa are hungry for a bridging of situations between their media-saturated lives and a living, Word-made-Flesh God. As an expression of this longing, people are desperate for worship that will blend a spiritual passion for God with the real world. God is calling St. Stephen's to look for his footprints. In late night talks with young students in dimly lit cafes and pubs, one hears the craving for the living mystery of Christianity. The punk skateboarders and BMX riders of Oshawa could be drawn out of their experiences of pain and instead enter into long sessions of passionate, weeping intercessory prayer or heartfelt charismatic singing. Oshawans in their forties or fifties find more relevant spiritual challenge and hope at an eclectic music rave, a drum circle, a U2 concert, or in a yoga class that might take place at St. Stephen's on Sunday morning.

A place to interpret faith in light of cultural insights can be found in the neighbouring university. Connections between Christian faith and spiritual practice drawn from the culture can guide the leadership of St. Stephen's as they converse with

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[17] Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 167.

[18] Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian,* 167.

the campus church up the road at the UOIT/Durham campus. In spite of the advanced

technology, the frenetic mobility, and the notorious partying, the students are eager to

discuss spirituality. Celtic Christianity could inform the students to seek the presence of

God in the midst of everyday life and to practice wise stewardship of the environment.

Global warming is an important issue for UOIT students, and conversations could take

place regarding taking care of the earth as God's creation. The environment and

pollution are high on the Oshawa cultural radar, so much so that parables, stories, songs,

or analogies would help to make St. Stephen's gospel claims clearer.

The Power of Context: Peer and Community Influence

Through the process of dual listening, St. Stephen's can identify points of

agreement and disagreement between the gospel worldview and the Oshawan popular

worldview. Armed with knowledge of the culture, St. Stephen's can take into account

the challenge of peer and community influence.

The stories and experiences of unchurched people in the neighbourhood may be a

bridge to showing how their present beliefs relate to the gospel truth they need to know.

Rather than inviting people into a strange Christian sub-culture that alienates, people may

be invited into a deeper fellowship of conversation, ministry, prayer and worship. The

language, symbols and stories of culture may be an open door to establish community in

deep ways to build trust. This peer and community influence practiced by the ancient

Celtic Christians is known today as mentoring. William R. L. Haley, in his article,

"Roots for the Uprooted," writes, "One of the disciplines that was central to the Celtic

Christians, which emerged from the druid culture that preceded Christianity, was what we

would today call mentoring, where a believer would provide a range of spiritual and

practical advice to others."[19] St. Stephen's has an old but lapsed tradition of choosing

people in the church for their wisdom, caring, spiritual discernment, and other gifts of the

spirit to serve as Elders with the community. With proper leadership development,

members could be trained to be "soul friends" or mentors to welcome seekers in the

neighbourhood. The members of St. Stephen's may not know the content of Oshawa's

objects of worship, the Athenian idol inscribed "to an unknown God" (Acts 17:23), but

they should be able to make the connection between God's identity as creator, and the

holy text, honest question-asking and their daily lives. The span of control of the

minister is limited. Leadership development would include a proposal to train elders to

be soul friends to help peers and community to grow in their relationships to God and one

another. By offering more dialogue and listening in regular and confidential direction,

members of St. Stephen's can build trust with the neighbourhood.

The Power of Context: Redefining Evangelism

St. Stephen's has gotten used to worshipping in certain ways, and members feel

awkward about evangelism in thinking that that the mission field is "way over there

someplace." But evangelism may take place when believers simply tailor their style and

content to specific conversations that are already happening. Shared cultural events,

experiences, music, television program, or video games provide a wealth of conversation

starters. The challenge for leadership development at St. Stephen's is the change of

paradigm from thinking that evangelism happens only at church events rather than in

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[19] William R.L. Haley, "Roots for the Uprooted," *Re:generation Quarterly,* undated, unpaginated.

everyday life. The leadership at the church cares deeply for lost individuals. What is

missing is adequate training to help members provide a clear, well-crafted explanation of

the gospel in a variety of situations. Much like the Athenians in Paul's day, the people of

Oshawa are going to react individually.

Dick Staub, in *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, writes, "Our job is to be clear

communicators of truth; ultimately, individuals will make their own decisions. We are

called to faithfulness, not coercive persuasion."[20] Staub accurately describes the themes

of discipleship-evangelism. The sign on the front lawn of St. Stephen's proclaims,

"Welcome to a caring community." What is missing is drawing out that caring

community into one that is focused on relationship evangelism. If St. Stephen's is true to

its legacy as a caring community then its members must step up and communicate their

understanding of kingdom living with Oshawa. If members of the church do not

organize, provide contextual leadership, meet nonbelievers, communicate on the complex

media matrix, pray for God's direction and calling, they are failing in the task of

evangelism.

The challenges at St. Stephen's have little to do with "contemporary worship" or

"seeker-sensitive marketing." The challenges have more to do with a denominational

ethos that emphasizes the social gospel, the residual frustration left by the frequency of

past short-term ministers, and the burden of caring for the "bricks and mortar." The time

is right to prepare the current leadership to lovingly and intellectually speak about their

trust in God. Since the Oshawa context does not have an explicit biblical worldview, but

rather it has a liberal, humanist tradition and is middle class, it is challenging to point to

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[20] Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, 172.

the cross as redemptive. As a radical community, the Church subverts the dominant

context because it worships, serves, and prays to a different God that redeems the culture.

St. Stephen's needs to communicate through an important place for its creative

endeavors: popular culture.

Implementation Strategy

Now that the "why" of evangelism has been surveyed, the "how" of

implementation will be discussed. Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you also

should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). Like Jesus, the minister will serve as an

example to St. Stephen's by going first into this new creative endeavor. Since both the

minister and the congregation have long followed the model of *sola pastora*, a new tool

for evangelism must be implemented. That tool will be small groups. Some leaders in

the past have facilitated good Bible discussions or prayer meetings. However, the

leadership needed today at St. Stephen's is one that will implement change. The mindset

that the clergy does it all is one change that must take place. To accomplish this, the

minister will have to become a different kind of leader. Another needed change is the

focus of the church from serving church member's own needs to serving the needs of

people who are not yet believers. New small group leadership will help their group

members embrace this change: they will demonstrate compassionate leadership that is

needed in the culture, apply the gospel to real life, model healthy relational patterns, and

share the small group's mission with the church.

The minister can walk with the small groups to higher levels of growth, maturity,

and mission in several key areas. The first is humility. James says, "Therefore confess

your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16,

NIV). Being real is significant in popular culture. Leaders should be the first to confess

that they do not know everything, to speak the truth in love, and to confront sinful

patterns in the culture. This will help the group get through some key relational barriers.

Another characteristic that should be modeled by small group leaders is genuine

friendship. Paul writes, "My goal is that they will be encouraged and knit together by

strong ties of love" (Col. 2:2, NLT). Similar to James, Paul knew that spiritual maturity

barriers could not be overcome unless people became connected in healthy, caring,

encouraging, confronting, and unconditionally loving relationships with one another. At

St. Stephen's, leaders will continue to build relationships with group members outside of

normal group meeting times. In addition, Jesus' command to make disciples (Matt.

28:18-20) and Paul's admonition to Timothy to pass on leadership (2 Tim. 2:2) means a

more relational approach to leadership. Along with more relationship building, it means

asking others in the group to step up and begin to offer their perspectives on the culture

from a biblical worldview.

A third action that should be modeled is evangelism via offering invitations to

church. Kimball contends, "As Christian leaders, we face the tremendous challenge of

earning our right to be heard and respected and trusted."[21] Some aspects of Kimball's

statement may be true in the postmodern Canadian context. While the church minister

may have lost a voice in the culture, the task of inviting new people into the church

usually falls on the minister. This reality provides an opportunity for others in the church

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[21] Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 228.

(in this case, small group leaders who are modeling evangelism) to reach out and invite new people into the group, showing that this is a normal part of group life.

Another characteristic is focusing upon multiplication. Once a media model has been selected by a small group, there is an opportunity to multiply or birth a new group if there is also interest in a different media model. The leader must cast a vision early and often that group multiplication is a part of God's overall plan for expansion of the kingdom.

An important key area in the implementation plan is the ongoing growth and training of the leaders. The culture is rapidly changing and the leader as messenger of the kingdom will need to adapt skills of discernment in translating the gospel for this emerging culture.

Selecting a Media Model: Movies, Television, or Video Games

From the glittering hills of Hollywood or the office towers of Bay Street (Toronto) to St. Stephen's, people are talking about religion, Scripture, church history and Jesus thanks in large part to popular mass culture. The large Pentecostal church down the street reserved their auditorium to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*; people are returning to bookstores to research the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene after reading Dan Brown's best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*; TV viewers are tuning in weekly to see Global's *Supernatural* to communicate with the other side; and Tim La Haye/Jerry B. Jenkins' *Left Behind* series was so popular that it spawned a video game called *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*. All these media models reveal that the entertainment spotlight is shining on the Church.

Selecting a media model will ultimately be discussed and decided from the wisdom and affinity of each small group. Everywhere one looks in Oshawa, many sides of this questing may be seen alongside themes of wisdom, immaturity and energy that often clash like discordant cymbals. All forms of media, including movies, television programs, video games, music raves and music video, which dissect a slice of contemporary life, synthesize insights from diverse academic fields or present an individual response to the current way of life. Movies, television, or video games may not seem on the surface to have great deal of sophistication, but for the purpose of taking popular culture captive at St. Stephen's, they offer very down-to-earth and perceptive insights. Also relevant for discussion are other areas such as popular radio, sporting events, magazine articles or newspaper cartoons. Popular Christian writings should also be embraced. According to Newbigin in his book, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, cross-cultural mission starts as encounter between the gospel and the strange popular culture. The encounter takes place in the contact between the wisdom of the cultural group to whom they come and the church mission already organized around a story that is told in a book. Newbigin writes, "At an early stage they will begin to translate the Book into the language of the people and commend it to them as the Word of God calling for their response."[22]

Recruiting a Fan Base: Small Affinity Groups

No matter how sophisticated a missionary is, the delivery of the word in postmodern culture will need to be a communal experience. Small groups provide that

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[22] Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 42.

communal experience, in which members hopefully share a transformative experience with others. With a focus on a particular form of media, each small affinity group can draw in people with common interests and who may not otherwise relate with a group of believers.

For St. Stephen's, recruiting people to a movies fan base is one more way people can "be the church" to each other and can see God work in practical ways. More particularly, hosting a film night at St. Stephen's would provide an opportunity for a biblical narrative survey. Films attempt to describe humankind, God, where people have come from, what their lives are about, what their destinies are, and how they should live. Figure 1 provides a list of questions that could be used for launching a conversation after viewing the film together.

Table 1. Questions for Film Night Discussion

What is your first response to the film?
What struck you, touched you, spoke to you?
Which character was the most important to you? Why?
What did you learn about yourself in watching the film?
What did the film say about people, about Canada, about culture?
How did this film help you to better understand the people around you?
What kind of symbols did you see in the film?
Do you think the film had a particular message?
Were there any overtly religious themes in the film? If so, what did you think of them?
How did the film affect your thinking about God or other theological ideas?
What does your understanding of God and theology have to say to the characters and narrative of the film?
How does your theology interact with the responses of other viewers at the film night?

Detweiler and Taylor discuss the spirituality of movies:

> But how spiritual can a film be? Can a relationship with God be as thrilling as
> *Star Wars*? Can the Holy Spirit move us with the ferocity of *Run Lola Run*? Can
> Jesus Christ be as revolutionary, tough, and inspiring as Rocky? When *Raging
> Bull* ends with a quotation from the Gospel of John, "Once I was blind, but now I
> can see," for many it can be an epiphany. Today, it isn't always a choice of
> movies *or* religion. Audiences can find God in movies *and* religion.[23]

The church deals with ultimate concerns, the great heights and depths of existence

and it can welcome a fan base that has the same perception of television. Davis writes,

> Some programs examine the full range of human hopes and fears at profound
> levels, given the constraints imposed by commercial interruptions every twelve
> minutes. Even if we grant that television only rarely rises above the uninspiring
> concerns of everyday living, however, many viewers claim to find as many
> "highs" on television – for example, the ecstatic moments of the NBA finals or
> the NFL Super Bowl or the season finales of *Ally McBeal, NYPD Blue,* and
> *Homicide: Life on the Street* – as they do in services of worship.[24]

A non-church member attracted to a television affinity group would sense that St.

Stephen's truly depends on the power of God to work through the culture.

According to the Statistics Canada 2007 Census Tract, children and teenagers

comprise a large demographic group around St. Stephen's. If God has surrounded the

church with many youth, then St. Stephen's can excel in reaching out using the narrative

of the video game. In his book, *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske writes,

> The players can participate in video games even more actively than they can
> participate in television, a pleasure that Greenfield (1984) has found is
> particularly important to young children. Other video players see that the dog-
> eat-dog world of the game, in which they eat the monster or the monster eats them
> is an accurate metaphor for the society "out there." Video games are relevant and
> functional because their structure can be related to the social system, and playing
> them can therefore enact the social relation of the subordinate with the one crucial

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[23] Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 156.

[24] Davis, *Watching What We Watch*, xiii.

> inversion – in the video arcade the skill, performance, and self-esteem of the subordinate receive rewards and recognition that they never do in society.[25]

It will require a passionate evangelist to recruit a fan base of gamers. If St. Stephen's wants to create a communal experience devoted to activities specifically connected with video games it will have to reach beyond its doors. The passion to reach beyond the present level of engagement at St. Stephen's must reveal the pulse behind the church's heart.

<div align="center">Identifying Goals for Evangelism</div>

In the course of study, the small affinity groups may discover that the structure of Canadian culture and synergistic media monopolies run counter to the interests of St. Stephen's. However, the study gives the church a language and a place to speak about the slippery, near-incomprehensible legacy of a bold new electronic information age. St. Stephen's should be involved with popular culture in a meaningful way. Searching for a way to assert involvement will involve a strategy of evangelism. In this effort, the church seeks the space to express its reality, its gospel truth, and its exile-ridden hopeful intention of God.

There is no easy recipe for identifying goals for evangelism. It begins with a fundamental realization that evangelism is God's intention for St. Stephen's. God has placed the church in the context of a postmodern Canada which requires a "made-in Canada" approach. Multiculturalism, as set out in official Canadian government policy, is a static mosaic of indivisible cultural communities. The first goal envisions St. Stephen's growing and interacting with those outside of the church in dynamic

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[25] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London, England: Routledge, 2004), 140.

community. Paul's speech in Athens, mentioned above, illuminates the theological

nature and purpose of evangelism (Acts 17:26-28). Migrations of people to the suburbs,

whether of individuals, families, or groups are ultimately coordinated and orchestrated by

God.

The second goal for evangelism is to grasp this God-given opportunity to reach

out. The suburban area around St. Stephen's, like many of Canada's centres, is becoming

home to the unchurched whose journeys, as seekers, frequently intersect with a more

spiritual one. Once again, in Acts 17:26-28 (NIV), there is a mysterious qualifying

"perhaps" before the words "reach out for him and find him," which provides an

incumbent answer for the church. If the members of St. Stephen's reach out to all the

different groups that God is drawing to the city, then there is a chance that they may find

God at St. Stephen's.

The third goal for evangelism draws a crucial distinction between non-committal

friendliness and the unstinting friendship that characterizes Christ's love. St. Stephen's

will seem to do everything right in implementing a small group strategy, but will lose

these people later on if they do not feel fully involved or represented once inside the

church. When the church invites people of different cultures to serve and lead, it will

send a powerful message to the neighbourhood.

The fourth goal of evangelism is the requirement of love. It is agape love,

unconditional, God-like love, which can only come from the Holy Spirit. To demonstrate

that love, St. Stephen's will need to actively respond to newcomers' needs. Eddie Gibbs

and Ryan K. Bolger, in their book *Emerging Churches*, explain, "Social service is

integral to the church's understanding of discipleship. Members of emerging churches do

not separate the Great Commission (to make disciples of all peoples) from the Great

Commandment (to love one's neighbor as oneself)."[26]

The fifth goal for evangelism is to cement the importance of cultural diversity

within St. Stephen's. According to the vision in Revelation 7:9, people from every race,

tribe, culture and language stand united around God's throne. It is a vision of the future

of evangelism that should inspire St. Stephen's to take popular culture captive to

communicate the gospel. It is also a vision for the church to incorporate new worship

experiences that affect the heart directly. Robert Webber, in *Planning Blended Worship*,

writes, "The old methods need to be supplanted by new communication modes that

generate atmospheres of warmth, love, and healing (methods of communication aimed at

cultural transmission."[27] God cannot be restricted to one language and one culture.

There is a beauty of the Christian faith for the church's missional actions in a new world.

The Church today should maintain the historic message of the faith. The form in which it

is communicated can speak through different accents, different styles of dress, different

names, but it is still people's hearts that are converted.

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[26] Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 149.

[27] Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 28.

CHAPTER 7

STRATEGY ASSESSMENT FOR TAKING POPULAR CULTURE CAPTIVE
AT ST. STEPHEN'S

Desired Outcomes: Theological Reflection and Prophetic Action

"We are not alone, we live in God's world." The words of the United Church's

"A New Creed" begin with these most assuring of sentences for St. Stephen's. White

puts the Church in perspective: "In the vastness of space, in the midst of the

incomprehensible distances of the universe, we – who inhabit this small, blue planet, as

far from the centre of our galaxy as Nazareth was from Rome – are not all there is. God

is with us."[1]

For many of those who are in the congregational setting these words may be

perceived more as a promise than prophetic action. Many feel alone and alienated,

confused and uncertain as to how to combine theological reflection and prophetic action

at St. Stephen's. The church has missed the importance of biblical narratives for the

formation and functioning of a missional community. St. Stephen's must, in Roxburgh's

words, "live in continuous engagement with the narratives as it addresses, convicts, and

converts God's people as missional agents in the specific cultural context."[2] Following

Jesus inevitably insists that the social, environmental and personal stories in popular

culture are responded to with love, justice, and stewardship in the Christian sub-culture.

Jesus' followers consider the economy and technology in the world, as the congregation

of St. Stephen's sacrificially.acts on personal concerns, communities, and ecosystems.

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[1] White, *Seismic Shifts,* 113.

[2] Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader,* 170.

Theological imagination can be learned from the Exodus story of geographic and cultural displacement (Exodus 16). The congregation of Israelites wandered in the wilderness and complained to Moses, "If only we had died by the hands of Lord in the land of Egypt . . . for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly" (Exodus 16:3, paraphrased). The Israelites could not go back to Egypt because God had called them out of Egypt to be less conformed to this world. After God called the Israelites out of Egypt, only a few weeks had passed before they started complaining. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years as strangers, pilgrims, and exiles. God provided for them in this wilderness, but they did not like what God provided. They did not recognize manna as food, and some of them started hoarding this bread, not trusting that there would be enough for the days to come.

St. Stephen's is caught in this story, wishing things could be the way they were – the way that the older members remember them. The challenge to theological reflection and prophetic action is knowing deeply that "we are not alone, we live in God's world." Whether it is by God's judgment or God's beckoning, St. Stephen's is called to prophetic action as exiles and aliens. Roxburgh explains the importance of a church's missional imagination: "This imagination is birthed out of a willingness to be theologically informed and ask difficult questions about what God might be doing in the neighbourhood in the Scriptures."[3] The desired outcome is a missional theology that transforms an alien church community into a set of engagements with the imagination of non-Christians as to the nature of the gospel. The results are reflections and prophetic action based upon membership in God's kingdom.

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[3] Ibid.

The first desired outcome is for the members of St. Stephen's to create a

connection between biblical narrative, "where God draws both Israel and the church out

of their established comfort zone for them to rediscover their true purpose in being the

people of witness and mission in the world," explains Roxburgh.[4] The second desired

outcome, modeled after Jesus, is for the members to embody poise, self-control, and a

confident presence in every situation. Staub lists some of the societal corruptions in *The

Culturally Savvy Christian* that require an authentic Christian presence:

> Society suffers from the ravages of divorce, family dysfunction, environmental
> degradation, war, consumerism, the trivialization of the sacred, the loss of
> innocence, gender confusion, ageism, lust, drunkenness, substance abuse, fiscal
> irresponsibility, sloth, obesity, vulgarity, incessant quarrelling, violence, anger,
> disrespect for parents, rebellion, ruthlessness, gossip, pride, triviality, coarseness,
> covetousness, and more.[5]

The third challenge for prophetic action is for members to live in contrast to these

societal corruptions. The challenge for the congregation is to exhibit a winsome

alternative way of life. The fourth challenge is offering hope, experimentation, play, and

encouragement to connect the biblical narrative with their own inner stories. The fifth

challenge is an outcome of faith. Faith is a prophetic action that serves as evidence that

the *ekklesia* of *koinonia* (being called out for fellowship) can form the church to pursue

God in the company of friends.

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[4] Ibid., 180.

[5] Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, 149.

Prophecy, Vision and Dreams: Measured by a 15 Percent Increase in Church
Membership

If St. Stephen's stays within one primary cultural religious silo, it will fail a

critical test of theological reflection: the test of prophecy, visions and dreams. Exercising

prophecy that preaches and teaches and informs the church about which issues matter

most may or may not help to fulfill an increase in membership. It requires the deliberate

building of links both within and outside of the church in order to reflect the spiritual role

filled by prophecy. There are two possible outcomes of bringing the circle of St.

Stephen's gifts and the educational role of popular culture together. One is that the

leadership of St. Stephen's will be more grounded in its own story and appreciate that

popular culture is where beliefs may be explored. Much theology is derived from

popular culture, and one theme of prophecy that is prevalent in the culture is

countercultural resistance and the consequences of speaking out.

If prophecy is taken seriously as part of the gospel journey – Jesus the prophet, on

the cross; the members of St. Stephen's gifted with moral insight and powers of

expression; and seekers looking at the church –St. Stephen's must be willing to accept the

consequences. There are three possible outcomes in the tradition of the United Church of

Canada. One possible outcome of prophecy is to split the congregation. Sinclair and

White describe this phenomenon: "Prophets are resisters of the status quo in which most

of us are securely embedded."[6] A second outcome is that prophets become predictable.

Poverty, environmental issues, peace crises and the issues that provoke them spoken

repeatedly from the denomination are often heard as hectoring or scolding. Third, if

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[6] Sinclair and White, *Emmaus Road*, 60.

leaders or the whole congregation of St. Stephen's is afire with social issues, they may

eventually consume themselves. The conflict prophecy arouses may get beyond a

manageable level with members leaving in a rage. There are consequences of prophetic

action. Sinclair and White explain,

> In fact, simply existing as a community of faith in a secular society is a subversive act: "Feed my lambs," said Jesus. Some feel the lambs should hustle out and find a job, even if there are none they can do. While the story of the Emmaus Road teaches us that Christ lives on, the only way we will see him is if we have the courage and intuition to invite him, the prophet "mighty in deed and word before God and all the people," to stay.[7]

Vision will also be a significant piece of the puzzle as St. Stephen's seeks to

achieve its desired outcomes and grow. Rodney Clapp, in *A Peculiar People*, has a

vision of the Church as a culture rather than a philosophy or a worldview. He states that

in his vision, "Christian worship, evangelism, use of the Bible and politics would all look

considerably different from the way they do now."[8] Paul's vision expressed to the

church in Ephesus offers a picture of church that looks quite different from St. Stephen's.

It is a powerful vision of the type of church that believers are called to create. It is a

community that transcends individuals' "peculiar" differences. Paul writes, "You are no

longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints in the household of God . .

. with Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined

together and grows into a holy temple" (Eph. 2:17-22, paraphrased). Most believers

experience that sense of moving towards a household. They are going towards a city on

their way home. In today's media-saturated, virtual world, people are with other

strangers but the church offers relationships that go deep and a place where people can

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[7] Ibid., 61.

[8] Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 187.

pursue God in the company of friends. Part of the vision for St. Stephen's is to transcend

that experience of alienation from other people, and to enter a fellowship that is

intergenerational, incarnational and multicultural.

The story of Jesus and the woman with the flow of blood that Luke combines with

the story of Jairus and his daughter has some qualities of a dream. Luke writes, "She

came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes. . . . Then Jesus asked, 'Who

touched me?' . . . When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came

trembling, and fell down before him. . . He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made

you well. Go in peace'" (Luke 8:40-56, paraphrased). This passage reflects upon God's

desired outcome for a church that could be intergenerational (daughter), incarnational

(Jesus), and multicultural (the crowd around Jesus). The crowd around Jesus is not

unlike a local church. They are heading somewhere as a motley fellowship of sojourners.

If St. Stephen's looks at this passage as if it is one of its own dreams, the experiences of

the main characters could be similar to the experiences of those in a small group Bible

study within the church. Outcomes of bonding, joyful friendship, and a network of

communication emerge. Soon a core of 15 percent of the existing congregation will be

involved; new enthusiasm, funding, and impetus for a 15 percent increase in new church

membership growth. A virus may break out in the staid old church and, within a few

months, new members may be joining, new groups forming, and a sense of revival

emerging in the church's psyche.[9]

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[9] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2000, 2002).

Beyond Pentecost: Acting Out God's Unfinished Drama through Establishing
an Experiential Bible Study Group

This peculiar dreaming community has another desired outcome from theological
reflection and prophetic action: to go into the world with a message of universal
importance. The church's mission to take popular culture captive to communicate the
gospel does not mean that the story is over. This mission does not consist simply in
retelling the story up to the point of Pentecost in the history of Church over and over
again to the same people. Rather, the outcome of the newly formed small groups of
Jesus-followers continues to open up its fellowship and is set on a new challenge. It is a
new path of continuing to live out the story.

Acting out God's unfinished drama takes St. Stephen's back to the first challenge
that the early Church had to face: deciding who could be in its community and on what
conditions. Specifically, there was much discussion and disagreement about whether
Gentiles (that is, newcomers, who had no roots in the covenant story of God and Israel)
could indwell this story, and if so, on what grounds. Like St. Stephen's, the early
Christian community continued to struggle with this problem throughout much of the
New Testament. Like St. Stephen's, they had no script. Acting out God's unfinished
drama is the outcome of improvising faithfully. The strategy for St. Stephen's is to
discern a path of the Spirit through establishing an experiential Bible study group. The
people involved initially will be the existing Bible study group. They already recognize
that the vision of this path is not for private consumption of a localized and secluded
community of faith. Since the path of the Spirit does not legitimate Christian tribalism,
eventually nonbelievers will be involved. The minister will initially lead the group as
one having more awareness of the drama of the great deeds of God that transformed the

first Pentecost believers. "Experiential" Bible study uses a blend of factual biblical information with the participants' own experiences and their understanding of the Bible's relevance to present-day life. (An example of Bible study questions for this group is found in Appendix A.)

Beyond Pentecost at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the early Church struggled with the issue of inclusion. Their final decision, their methodology, and the way they act out God's unfinished drama are instructive. First, they listen to the stories of what the Spirit has been doing among the Gentiles (vv. 4, 7-12), and then they reflect on the biblical story and how it will guide them in assessing and responding to the stories they have been hearing (vv.15-18).

For St. Stephen's this means listening to the group of small group members (Gentiles) who feel a commitment or sense of loyalty to the church because of what St. Stephen's is doing in mission. This sense of commitment through the evangelism goals should have visibility among members of the established Bible study, prayer group, and church school teachers. It can be seen as a tie that binds established groups to the specific mission program of an experiential Bible study group.

The attempt in this "experiential Bible study" model is to be both faithful to the biblical tradition and sensitive to popular culture. The goal is to tickle the group with engaging experiences and build relationships within the group. The desired outcome is in finding that subtle intersection between the text and people's lives. It is here that insights are born, corners are turned and where, in short, people may encounter the living God addressing them at the point of the church's and the culture's need. Under the direction

of the Spirit and equipped with gospel prophecy, visions and dreams, St. Stephen's

moves forward to act out this unfinished drama.

The Risk of Discipleship: Invitation into the Plot of the Biblical Story through
Inaugurating an Evangelism Workshop

The biblical story that is explored through the experiential Bible study should help

to mobilize St. Stephen's for evangelism. One cannot read this story without being

caught up in its drama. Believers cannot claim to have genuinely understood the Bible

without taking the risk of discipleship. The present times are dangerous and the members

of St. Stephen's have an important invitation into the plot of the biblical story through

inaugurating an evangelism workshop. Since St. Stephen's is a small church, the minister

and people of the church need to understand the importance of their calling to

evangelism. They also need to see the advantages and strengths in which St. Stephen's is

better equipped for outreach. What follows is an outline of an evangelism workshop for

the church to live a life of faithful, yet risky, discipleship in a postmodern Oshawa. The

desired outcome is to encourage, motivate and offer a number of practical ideas for

outreach that may be applied at St. Stephen's.

Effective Evangelism: Seeing the Potential and Addressing the Hindrances

God is at work in St. Stephen's in four areas. The first is the attitude of the

minister who is convinced that without faithful indwelling of the biblical story and

improvisation, the church will fail to respond redemptively to its cultural situation. The

second is the fact that God is one who provides vision for his people along the way,

reminding them of the biblical story. God sheds light on the paths of his followers,

showing what they can do through the local church. The third area is the openness to

evangelism at St. Stephen's. God is at work as the membership bears witness to their

faith in the course of their daily lives, within their natural spheres of influence. The

fourth in which God is at work is the vision and calling that the members of St. Stephen's

have to witness in a straightforward, inoffensive manner as opportunities arise.

Three hindrances to evangelism at St. Stephen's also need to be addressed. The

first area is that chronic budget problems have led to a sense of apathy rather than a sense

of urgency. The lack of a dialogue between God, God's people, and the culture in which

the church lives has impoverished the sense of neighbourhood. The second hindrance is

the lack of long-term thinking. Due to its history of short-lived ministers the church

thinks in terms of short-term pastoral relations which in effect limits the budgeting to a

yearly basis. However St. Stephen's would do well to budget for an extended period of

five years. The third hindrance is the lack of sharing resources, such as seminars,

workshops, and weekend retreats with other churches in Oshawa that have successful

evangelism programs.

Aiming for Long-term Results: Goal-setting and Creating an Evangelistic Attitude

While St. Stephen's has been part of the streetscape for over seventy-five years, it

is still virtually unknown in the neighbourhood. The building stands on the busiest

corner of Oshawa which gives us an opportunity to be creative about visibility. A local

and regional bus-stop is at our corner, yet people are still fearful of entering the church.

The single most important aspect of the process of evangelism is creating within the

congregation the expectation of growth and nurturing a congregational climate within

which growth can occur. St. Stephen's needs to think, pray, brainstorm and experiment with optimism. The vision should never be static.

Foundational to this change is a fresh appropriation of the New Testament teaching on spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:11 in particular invites the reader into the plot of the biblical story by describing a unique set of "leadership" gifts Christ gives to the church. By setting goals defined by each person's particular calling and aptitude, St. Stephen's will be able to invite others to join the story. This basic New Testament teaching is crucial to realize that the unique gifting of the Church in mission is not simply to attract new members in order to perpetuate itself, but rather to share the gospel with people who need to know the story. This includes the leadership of the traditional existing groups at St. Stephen's. The purpose of existing groups as they relate to evangelism is the ability to see that this evangelistic outreach is for the sake of people who matter to God, not for the sake of the church. If released to utilize the unique gifts in concert with other gifts in the Body of Christ, St. Stephen's will benefit.

Tools for Assessment

In assessing the strategy for taking popular culture captive at St. Stephen's, three areas provide information on the church's evangelism: 1) individual evaluations of church programs; 2) biblical narrative survey in the minister's ministry, and 3) feedback forms in the life of the community. Individual evaluations of church programs would be completed by each participant. The survey would be administered and tailored to the end of the program by the ministry team leading each program. The information gained will help the leadership evaluate the impact of popular culture on the congregation.

The biblical narrative survey would be completed by participants of worship, faith

formation and Bible study events. These would be administered and fine-tuned by the

ministry teams of the existing Worship Committee, church school teachers, and Bible

study leaders. The information gained will hopefully evaluate the level of prophetic

discernment on an aspect of the church's ministry goals.

Feedback forms in the life of the community are given to attendees of evangelistic

events as strictly voluntary input. These would be discretely administered by the ministry

staff at the end of the event. The demographics and information gained would hopefully

help the minister see an alternative vision and dream of a kingdom that captures the

postmodern imagination. (This survey may be found in Appendix B.)

These three assessments give all participants an opportunity to offer their opinions

and air their views. It also insures that all are aware of the biblical story and each

individual's own personal story. Members of the groups will be invited to tell their

stories of where they understand the church is now. By using questions in small groups

and bringing back the most important biblical insights from the stories, the congregation

can share a down-to-earth gospel vision with the Session of Elders. The minister will

also ask the Transformation Steering Committee to name three or four people in the

congregation who represent a variety of views who could be invited to tell the biblical

story from their perspectives. In *ChurchNext*, Gibbs explains that "leading a church

beyond a 'strategic inflection point' requires a clear sense of vision for a desired future

that is significantly different from the present. It also requires an equally clear

understanding of where the church is now. For the only place to start is where we are."[10]

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[10] Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 34.

Two possible measurement yardsticks for measuring efforts against the desired goals to evaluate the impact of popular culture on the congregation and participating groups have become clear.

The first is that taking popular culture captive to communicate the gospel will not happen by accident. Becoming a healthy congregation is the result of paying attention to the popular themes and using them well, day in and day out, over a long period of time. Being an alternative vision and dream of a kingdom that captures the postmodern imagination requires affirmation, trust, new beginnings, a realistic timeline and patience. It is more hard work, dedication, prayer, and commitment than it is glitz and glamour.

The second is that the ministry objectives presented in this ministry focus paper involve a lot more than adding a new emphasis to the ministry at St. Stephen's. Strategy assessment is more than simply questioning, adding to, tampering with, and tinkering with what the church already has. Percy contends, "The change required in becoming a church that is able to attract and keep new members from among the currently unchurched amounts to nothing less than changing our spiritual DNA!"[11] It requires that members change from the inside out in terms of how they think, what they value, and what it is that drives the congregation. Such radical transformation can never be accomplished by manipulating, coaxing, or nagging. It requires leadership, leadership development, and discernment. Only God can change hearts of St. Stephen's, causing key influencers in the congregation to be willing to question the present outcomes and change the focus of the church for the sake of connecting with outsiders.

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[11] Percy, *Your Church Can Thrive*, 109.

The process of assessing the transformation begins with the work of fellowship. Fellowship means being open to change and to hearing new potential. Fellowship leads to discipleship and the potential to be facilitators who absolutely believe that God wants people to come to faith through the ministry of St. Stephen's. Existing fellowship groups do not need to be "converted." They simply need to become aware of the link between gospel and culture and excited about the possibility of seeing this happen.

CONCLUSION

A review of the hugely successful Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* stated the following in *The United Church Observer*: "After its much-heralded opening on Ash Wednesday, the film broke box office records for the next three week-ends. Not bad for a religious movie about the head of the church. What needs serious scrutiny is why more people are going to *Friday the 13th*-type movies than to the United Church."[1] In spite of advance publicity and a run at the movie houses for several weeks, the film presented Jesus in a modern perspective, while the culture demands a postmodern view.

Leadership in the Church is still interpreting Christianity through modern categories of reason and science. A transition from modernity to postmodernity is demanded. Gibbs and Bolger explain, "This shift represents a challenge to the main assertions of modernity, with its pursuit of order, the loss of tradition, and the separation of the sacred and the profane at every level. More often than not, the church has found itself taking the side of modernity, defending its project against all viewpoints."[2] This is called the "modernization theory,"[3] and it explains the present relationship between religion and culture. "As societies modernize, they divide life into discrete units. Culture becomes more fragmented into life-compartments: work, family, play, religion. This helps to explain how some aspects of Canadian culture – like arts, entertainment, media –

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[1] Scott Boughner, "Leave it to God," *The United Church Observer*, June 2004, 3.

[2] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 18.

[3] Peter Wyatt, "Keeping the Faith in Tough Times," Address to Dufferin-Peel Presbytery Pastors' Retreat, December 2005.

can be secular and yet have religious movements and religious institutions that thrive."[4]

In this model, churches would need to define themselves as distinct from the surrounding

culture. In fact, in this model, these churches are precisely the ones that thrive – since

they accept the necessity of being a social fragment, a sub-culture.[5] This side of

modernity keeps the Church in discursive communication related to print and logic.

However, Christianity in Canadian postmodern culture is moving to cultural

communication of convergent broadcast and mass media. Robert Webber, in his book,

Ancient-Future Faith, contends, "It happened in Scripture, it happens in tribes that are

illiterate, and it happens in our culture today through the values that permeate our social

institutions."[6] Therefore, an appropriate response of the Church is to recognize the

demise of Christendom, a culture dominated by Christian standards. In a post-

Christendom postmodern Canada that is tribal, ethno-centric, and biblically illiterate, the

Church must recognize the role of cultural transmission in social institutions.

Interestingly, while Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks understand the logic of cultural

distancing in modernity, they call on the mainstream churches not to succumb to the siren

song of social fragmentation. Their calling is to attest the biblical truth that the world

was created good by God and that it has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Central to

mainstream Protestant identity has been this understanding of the Christian life: "By

refusing to withdraw from the world or compartmentalize religious faith, [Christians]

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[4] Ibid., 6.

[5] Coalter, Mulder and Weeks, *Vital Signs*, 17.

[6] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 133.

engage the complexities of culture with the conviction that God's love and redemption in Jesus Christ will transform them and the creation itself."[7]

One of the demands of post-Christendom culture is that the Church as a social body communicates in a culturally relevant manner. Christians have lost their confidence that the gospel still speaks good news. One of the key characteristics of a missional church is that it is articulate. The Church today, and St. Stephen's in particular, must understand the need to present the gospel in ways that enable listeners to connect with the message. In this way the Church transmits its values. Webber explains, "It hands down spirituality through interaction with authentic lives marked by integrity, honesty, faithfulness, and servant-hood."[8]

When considering how St. Stephen's can make its message culturally relevant, it is important to first ask whether this is the wrong focus. The starting point has to be that the message believers are called to preach – the good news of Jesus – is by its very nature the most timeless, culturally relevant message of all time. Also, becoming culturally relevant is not so much about finding techniques that will make the message relevant as it is about removing techniques that make it irrelevant. Part of that solution is a process involving setting a context where hearers feel welcome. The missional church is fearless and forthright in "empowering people by way of letting the biblical narrative ask their own questions of our social context."[9]

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[7] Coalter, Mulder and Weeks, *Vital Signs*, 18.

[8] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 133.

[9] Roxburgh, *Missional Leader,* 176.

The way to be relevant is to be real. The solution for the members of St. Stephen's is to tell stories of their own failures, problems and dysfunction. The solution is creating a welcoming gracious community where people feel they can come as they are and "belong" even if they do not believe or behave the way that the church members do.

St. Stephen's is living in an age in which people are spiritually open and curious. Even in a new, changing and emerging culture the public is looking for transcendent moments in their lives. Weddings, baptisms, funerals, and public worship offer spirituality in life-changing events. The Session of Elders whose responsibility is the spiritual maturity of the congregation has an opportunity to look beyond the somewhat cynical veneer of politeness that the culture shows to religion. If the leadership can move beyond a barrier of traditionalism and nostalgia, all can find new ways to follow Jesus in this emerging context.

Cultural relevance was something that Jesus and Paul dealt with as well. Jesus taught the parables of the kingdom by using the visual illustrations of his day – a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31), yeast (Matt. 13:33), or a vine (Matt. 26:29). Paul quotes a secular inscription on Mars Hill in Acts 17:28 and praises secular art (Philippians 4:8) in the inspired scriptures. St. Stephen's can become culturally relevant while seeking to bring back those who have not attended church since Sunday school or for those with no church background. The unchurched culture is perfectly natural about the supernatural. One of the most popular television programs on Global TV is called *Supernatural.* People resonate with this subject matter and thus, spirituality is already relevant to the culture.

More particularly, there are people in the congregation, not in leadership roles, who are quietly longing for truth and hope. The leadership needs to discretely listen to and learn from them. Somehow, the leadership also needs to listen to and learn from those people who attend worship services for a few weeks and then do not return. And finally, the leadership needs to encourage those people who have stepped out of the neighbourhood and offered their gifts of leadership to St. Stephen's. These individuals need to be encouraged and built up in their identities and purposes as Christians in the emerging culture. These folk will engage the neighbourhood with creativity because of their sensitivity to North Oshawa culture and a willingness to shepherd the congregation. A solution lies in the relational and biblical approach.

To this end, this ministry focus project will not be critiqued or received well unless it is reframed in relational and biblical terms. The largest stained-glass window in the sanctuary has the scene of Jesus holding a lamb with the inscription: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). The leadership of St. Stephen's needs to be reminded of the relationship to the Lord of the Harvest whose promise is to fulfill people's wants. The harvest is every bit as plentiful today in North Oshawa as it was when Jesus addressed the need for workers in his day. The aging congregation of St. Stephen's needs to move beyond its modern mindset of ministry in which it compartmentalizes outreach into charity that is provided to numerous parachurch organizations. The postmodern, post-Christendom world is hungering for real eldership that connects their spiritual needs with the deep well of orthodox faith. The pivotal solution will be in motivating the church's older folks to make an honest connection

between the legacy of the church and the creative translation of the gospel truth to the culture around them. The problems are great, but there is hope in our Lord.

Using communication technology and popular mass culture in innovative ways is not enough. Leading communicators in the congregation may agree with that statement but the solution lies in having enough people put it into practice. An important aspect of taking popular culture to communicate the gospel in a manner that will effectively engage Oshawa is integrity. St. Stephen's can have all the bells and whistles, the minister can be as polished and "cutting-edge" as possible, and yet still be ineffective if he does not embody the integrity of Jesus when communicating. On a positive note, Jesus' communication sounds postmodern: fearless, forthright, gentle, non-manipulative, and fun. Chuck Smith, in *There Is a Season*, makes this connection storytelling and integrity:

> Other than the technical writing of intellectuals and academics, postmodern literature is imaginative, playful, humorous, and ironic. Nevertheless, postmodern communication requires a lot of thought, work, and – for our purposes – integrity. A postmodern audience will not buy the same tired, old answers of modern-era Christianity in repackaged form.[10]

A solution may be suggested by appreciating that elementary-age children are watching and reading the *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* series. They are delving into the layers of meaning, looking at symbolism, identifying metaphor. Many adults might be surprised by their wisdom and insight. Listening to these young people make connections between this "cool" literature and biblical literature is a rich and rare opportunity given mostly to St. Stephen's church school teachers.

It may take a while for the church to see a solution on so precise a mission as "We are here to listen to and serve the youth of this community," but it is a good start. There

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[10] Chuck Smith, Jr., *There Is a Season* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2005), 173.

is a bigger picture of mission lying behind this specific focus, without which there could be no specific commitment. Suggesting the purpose or mission of the St. Stephen's is another way of asking what authentic followers of Jesus have to offer the culture. The clarity of a statement of Johannes Hoekendijk offers a solution: "The Church is set in this world with the sole purpose of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth."[11] He also states: "The Messiah is the subject of evangelism" and his role is "to establish shalom."[12]

For those who demand action, suggesting solutions, we can offer some predictions. If St. Stephen's is able to join these discussions that young people are having, not bashing Hollywood for churning out trash but genuinely contributing perceptive insights, then we can plant seeds of peace and truth in other people's minds.[13] Regarding the sphere of influence from the culture, the challenge is formidable, the work is hard, but the rewards are great, and the joy indescribable. St. Stephen's could never do everything there is to plant this truth. However, the fact that the church cannot do everything should never keep it from doing something. The fact is that St. Stephen's can do something. Everyone can commit to knowing who the church's neighbours are, listen to their stories, and inviting them into the fellowship of St. Stephen's. Everyone can engage in conversation and offer an invitation into the kingdom. A prediction is that most will commit to making the next step.

The key to this prediction comes down to connection points with the culture. The members of St. Stephen's need to learn to communicate to the culture in a language they

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[11] Johannes Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1966), 14.

[12] Ibid., 21.

[13] Smith, *There Is a Season*, 192.

understand: mass media and the popular creative arts. The filmmakers and writers of today (including the celebrity tabloid publishers) are feeding young minds with images, symbols, ethics, stories of good and evil, heroism and challenge. The challenge at St. Stephen's is to link our stories of faith in a real way to the mythologies being presented. What relevance do our sacred stories have for children facing a bully in the playground or on the television news? If our members say they believe in educating children and youth, how is that belief communicated through budgets, programs, the aesthetics of classroom space, and the continuing education and support for the church school teachers at St. Stephen's?

It is risky to predict how St. Stephen's will communicate the eternal truths of God in a language that the culture understands. Mainline Christians are quick to reject the teaching of the fundamentalists concerning the authority of the Bible, that it is verbally inspired and inerrant. But they may not be too sure why the Bible is authoritative for them. It is authoritative because it is the source of the knowledge of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.[14]

May the church know the joy of being involved in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a hurting world. May many come to know Christ because is members know why God placed this old country church in the heart of the suburbs. May the neighbourhood come to thank the church and thank God for taking popular culture seriously. And may the congregation grow from strength to strength.

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[14] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 110.

APPENDIX A

EXAMPLE LESSON FOR THE EXPERIENTIAL BIBLE STUDY

Eating with Sinners – Mark 2:13-17 and Romans 14:1-4.

1. Who are the tax collectors? Why are they considered disreputable? Who else would be considered "sinners" back in Jesus' day?

2. Why did the religious authorities not eat with sinners? What does eating together imply? What is the mental or emotional basis for the fear of defilement?

3. Why does Jesus associate with such people?

4. Why do we not?

5. One of the most radical aspects of Jesus' ministry was his association with those who fell outside the legalistic circle of the religion. Although we are free to make personal choices, how do we use our freedom in a way that causes other believers to lose their faith?

6. In Canada, we exercise individual freedom and personal discretion and yet we quarrel over religious opinions. Why are Canadians sometimes afraid to associate with Christians? How might non-Christians begin to relate to Christians?

7. Can you get in touch with the "sinner" the "tax collector" or "the weak in faith" part of you? What keeps it from "coming to the table"?[1]

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[1] Questions adapted from Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 121-122.

APPENDIX B

SURVEY OF ATTENDEES OF EVANGELISTIC EVENTS

St. Stephen's United Church

We're doing a very brief religious census of the community to find out something of the makeup of the neighbourhood. We are not trying to persuade you to do anything as part of this survey. We would like to ask you three quick questions.

1. Do you have a religious preference, such as Protestant, Catholic, or some other faith?

Yes, Protestant
What denomination might that
be?_____

Roman Catholic

Other
Faith_____
–

No, I don't have any religious preference

2. What is your favourite movie, television program or music?

_____

3. May I please have your comments or recommendations from participating in this event:

_____
____

name and address:

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