

Drawing Sustenance From What There Is More Of In Our Environment

Below is my response to my colleague, Bruce Sanguine, as part of an on-going email exchange within Vancouver Burrard Presbytery.

*> What I hear you saying, David, when you say we haven't done anything wrong,
> is that there is a systemic dimension to this that you've alluded to.*

That is correct Bruce. If the statistics were that everyone else was doing fine, then that would indicate that indeed there was something specific to **US** that needed to be looked at. However, the data (and I am reporting on news that comes via the Christian Century) is that there is now an across-the-board decline in worship attendance (though more severe in Canada than the USA) - and in many other "old-line" volunteer organizations.

However, you are also correct in that **WE** do have problems in how we have responded to this change in our culture - in our environment.

Instead of adopting ways of drawing sustenance from what there is more of in our environment - we have adapted - maladapted, actually - to what there is less of. Worship attendance (i.e., people's participation) has steadily declined for 50 years, and we have responded **NOT** to the loss of people - but to the loss of their offerings by adapting relying on rental income.

This strategy has worked. We are still functioning even though we are dramatically under-peopled relative to our building capacities. But this is a mal-adaptation that is beginning to bear its unsavoury fruit.

For one. Many of those buildings that provided the excess rental capacity are now 50 to 60 years old and in need of major capital repairs (roofs, boilers, drainage, etc.). But many congregations no longer have the people, the skills, the money, or the hope for the future to undertake these demanding / draining projects.

For another. We have developed an ethos that is adept at decline. We sometimes even laud decline as "the faithful remnant." And we have become experts at critiquing our culture - pointing out what is wrong in it.

And. We have had a catastrophic failure of imagination - failure to image that God is actually also present in the culture - even in the changes we most harshly critique. If we cannot figure out how to be church with sports and shopping on Sunday and everyone connecting via online social networking - then we are dead.

And. Like many others, I'm prepared to lay some of the blame for our maladaptation onto unforeseeable consequences of the 1925 formation of our church.

Creating a nation-based church meant that we cut ourselves off from organic relationships with other nations and nationalities, and so we have no natural connections with subsequent immigration. We are mired in a white-bread, middle class milieu.

And the mish-mash decision-making structures that were adopted have left us with an impossible to manage organization where those who have authority have no real liability for the consequences of their decisions; and those with responsibilities have no authority.

We give authority only to groups - some of which exist only for a week every three years - and all of which have revolving membership and therefore lose institutional memory / focus / purpose. Long-term strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation is nigh-on impossible in this scenario.

Meanwhile, those individuals who are the front-line workers have no authority.

Every level of our church is riddled with case studies of in-the-trenches folks frustrated because they can do nothing without the approval of a GROUP who do not have the passion / commitment / experience / knowledge to be fully aware of what's at stake, and who will not have to bear the consequences of their decisions, and so can - and do - make terrible, real-world decisions for fantasy-world reasons. (And I stress the word "group" because the issue is NOT the goodness of the individuals in the group. I myself am often part of such groups and am frustrated by the stupidity of me being required to make decisions like this.)

I love the life that is embodied in our church. And I believe that life is worthy of continuing into the future.

But I am very aware that life continues from one generation to the next only when the **FORM** which embodies that life adapts itself so as to draw sustenance from what there is more of in its ever-changing environment. And for reasons I've named above, I'm not optimistic that we have the structures for such adaptive change.

But as I near retirement, I must say that I am committed more than ever to continuing to discern how to align my life with God's presence in our environment, and be sustained by that - even though the form of it feels alien and strange, I believe the life found there will feel strangely familiar.

Sincerely,
David Ewart, Minister
Capilano United Church