

# David Ewart

## Resources for Worship, Leadership, and Congregational Health

### Letter to a Colleague

I recently received an email from a colleague who wrote:

*We certainly are in challenging times. Do you have opinions about the future? I know that I find ministry very challenging. Caught between the faithful members for whom church has been lifelong and they like traditional ways, a few people angry and frustrated that society no longer supports the church, and I get a sense from them, if I only was better, music was better, I was more creative, then we would just turn this all around. There are others who want a progressive liberal theology. I find it very hard and it takes too much energy to keep it all together and satisfied.*

*You document the demise; do you point people to any signs of hope?*

Below is my response (I've changed the name):

Hi Kirk,

My nick name is "Hero of Doom" so be forewarned when you ask me for my thoughts about the future.

The good news in the bad news is: It's not your fault.

The bad news in the bad news is: It's not fix-able.

The bad news is this: People are not going to church like they used to, and for the foreseeable future the numbers will continue to decline, and the reasons they are not going to church have nothing to do with anything the church can do anything about. The reasons are all based in the wider culture. I'm going to write a more coherent piece about this one day, but in the meanwhile here's my first rant on this topic:

[Imperatives for Change](#).

I believe the number of people going to church will not reach zero. So there will still be congregations. The problem is that there are too many congregations to economically sustain the number of congregations we have. In cities, this means we are headed for a decade of closures / amalgamations. Same thing is likely for your area of towns and smaller cities, but the options for amalgamations with other United Churches is far more limited. A more likely scenario would be amalgamating Presbyterian-Lutheran-United-Anglican in each town. But the chances of that are pretty slim given people's commitment to their particular building and practices. Amalgamations take an enormous amount of volunteer time and energy precisely from groups that have little of either – and take energy away from what is actually needed – getting on with connecting with the few folks still interested church. Sadly, many congregations would rather close than attempt changes that would give future generations a chance to worship.

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But the changes I am talking about are not sprucing things up: new music, a better minister, new paint. All of these things are changes that the people in the pews do NOT have to make. And I am talking about changes that the people in the pews must make.

The iron-clad rule of evolution is: When the environment changes, the organism must change its form or die.

And in our case, the “organism” is the people in the pews.

The kind of changes you have suggested are being asked for are all based on the false assumption that the environment has not fundamentally changed – that we can fix our problems with a new coat of paint, a new musical instrument, a new minister.

But it is the form of being church that has to change.

There simply are not enough people going to church to have 10 congregations in each town. This is a reality that each congregation CANNOT solve by itself.

Yes, yes, I know there will be that evangelical church down the road that everyone holds up as an example – except that no one is actually willing to follow their example. And even they cannot avoid the realities I am talking about – they too are mostly drawing on the last remnants of Christendom and have very low ability to actually attract truly secularized, non-churched folks. They too are in for a tough decade.

50% of active United Church clergy today are 55 or older, so the wave of retirements (combined with the lower numbers, and older ages of replacements) should allow everyone to find work regardless of declining attendance – but unfortunately that work will mostly be hard and without many “successes” in the usual sense of growing numbers and easily balanced budgets.

But as I said in a previous piece of writing: Our church was founded by people in the pews who left their beloved familiar for the desired unknown. Where that spirit can still be found there is still hope for the future.

Whatever else you take from this note Kirk, please take this away: It’s not your fault. So enjoy your sabbatical and don’t spend even a nanosecond trying to fix yourself so that this problem will go away.

All the best,

David Ewart,

[www.davidewart.ca](http://www.davidewart.ca)