



S.O.S – Soil for Our Souls

The Way of Jesus – A Spiritual Path for Today

www.soilforoursouls.com

Uplifted in daily prayer
Nourished through weekly rest and worship
Inspired by daily reading and memorization of Scripture
Testifying about God's love through service and hospitality
Engaged in spiritual friendships and study
Dedicating time, talent, and treasure in gratitude to God

The Long Emergency

Note: The following is based on a sermon given February 24, 2008, at Capilano United Church, North Vancouver, BC; the day of the congregation's Annual Meeting.

Every year for the past 40 years, the United Church of Canada has reported membership declines of 1 or 2% per year. Taken one year at a time, a change of 1 or 2% is not a crisis. But 40 years of year after year declines become a long emergency. (See Footnote 1.)

75% of Members Leave Last Year! (Just Imagine)

Imagine what we would be talking about today at our meeting if - instead of reporting a loss by death of two faithful members this past year, bringing our total membership to 60 - we were reporting 40 years of change in a single year - a decline from 245 in 1965 to the present 60! That would be an immediate emergency.

Reading through past Annual Reports it is clear that the congregation has been very aware and concerned about the changes over the past 40 years. There have been many losses, and also many more creative "rising to challenges." We are not in a crisis today because over the years the congregation has been resilient. (See Footnote 2 for a note of caution.)

Paying Bills Without People

For example. Given the huge loss of Members, one might expect that there would be a huge decline in finances. But over that time the congregation has met the challenge. First with special capital fund raising and the work of the women's catering: C.L.E.A. And later with the use of the Christian Education Centre by various groups: currently the day care; pre-school; and dance group.

The result is that even though our Sunday worship offerings have declined by 62% from \$102,500 in 1965 to \$39,250 in 2007, our income from fund raising and the use of the C.E. Centre has increased by 510% from \$19,000 in 1965 to \$115,500 last year. In other words, our Sunday offerings have declined from 84% of the total amount raised to 25%. (See Footnote 3.)

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the handful of people in our congregation who faithfully and quietly maintain and manage the properties and organize the fund raising events that raise 75% of our income each year. (See Footnote 4 for a note of caution.)

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So here we are once again. The Church, C.E. Centre and manse have once again had some significant capital improvements done this year: the Church entrance and outside stair covering were re-roofed as was the manse; the elevator was completed; and 3 new furnaces were installed in the C.E. Centre. Everything is fully paid for and we still have a surplus of almost \$22,000 in the bank. Not bad. In fact, way better than that.

Spiritual But Definitely Not Religious

And yet, on Thursday night I had a troubling dream about our congregation. The dream began with a memory of the successful family Valentine's Dance that we held for our community. It was well attended. And there were many families that we normally do not see who were there having fun together. It was great to see them enjoying themselves.

And yet, in my dream I was troubled by the question of why do we not otherwise see these families and their children on Sundays? Surveys repeatedly say that over 80% of adults still believe in God and have a spiritual life. And yet, in our part of the country, fewer than 20% actively participate in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. The largest, at over 30%, and fastest growing religious affiliation is, "None of the Above." People are spiritual, but they have a high distrust of religion. (See Footnote 5.)

Perhaps like the past 40 years, we too will agonize over these trends and fail to reverse them in any significant way. I must confess that I do not have a new solution to offer you today.

My Dreamed Conversation With God

But as I tossed and turned in my sleep, my dream became a conversation with God. I don't normally tell others about dreams like this for fear you will think I'm going a bit more bonkers. But this is a church after all. If I can't talk with you about my dreamed conversation with God, where else can I? So I have decided to take a risk today and put aside what I had prepared in order to share my dream with you.

Serenity, Courage, Wisdom

In my dream, as I turned to God with this question of connecting with our neighbours, the first thing God said to me was that I needed to get a firm perspective on the situation. The fact of the matter was that there were huge issues that were totally beyond our control or influence.

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For example, suppose that as well as changes in Membership we had also experienced these other changes from 1965 in one year:

- How many families in 1965 had only one person working outside the home? And that person only worked 40 hours per week - no evenings or weekends. How about today?
- How many families in 1965 had 3 or 4 or more school age - or younger - children? And how many of those children played outside for hours unsupervised with any of the 20 to 40 other kids who lived on their street? How about today?
- How many families in 1965 all sat down together for supper and stayed there until everyone was finished? How about today?
- How many families in 1965 had only one TV (with only 3 or 4 channels), only one telephone (which was hard wired to the wall), and only one stereo (with speakers and no earphones)? And of course there were no cell phones, no voice mail, no email, no internet, no video games, no computers, no iPods, no DVD's. How about today?
- How many families had everyone home on Sunday, and had all day Saturday to get chores done and take a break from the week? How about today?
- In 1965, how many stores were open on Sundays? How many organized sports? How about today?

These and other broad social and economic trends have had a huge impact on church attendance. And as we know from our own experience, we have not found an effective response.

And so the first thing God taught me in my dream was a new version of the "Serenity Prayer:" (See Footnote 6.)

God, grant me
the **Serenity** to leave in your hands
the things that only you
can take care of;
the **Courage** to take responsibility
for the things that you
are leaving in my hands
to take care of; and
the **Wisdom** to know the difference.
Amen.

As we face together the problem of the disconnect between our neighbours and our church, we will need constant and careful attention to separating what we need God to take care of, and what God is needing us to take care of. Confusing those two things is a recipe for burn out and disaster.

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We Are God's Plan "A." (There Is No Plan "B.")

However, just as I was taking great comfort in this prayer - shifting all my anxieties into God's care - God then said:

I hope you have a lot of courage, David, because as you may have noticed, your church is the only church in your neighbourhood.

I need you to be my church, on my behalf, in your neighbourhood. And I do not have a backup Plan "B." You are it.

I need you to "own" your area. To take personal responsibility for the spiritual care of everyone in it. Well, not everyone, since some are already connected with some other faith group. But most are not. And I need you to be there for them on my behalf.

"Yikes," I said. "God, I do not have the foggiest idea of how to do that." And so God taught me a second prayer:

Dear God,
Show me / Tell me / Touch me / Lead me /
Reveal to me / Command me ...
 what to do and how to do it,
 on your behalf,
so that our neighbours
 may have the relationship with you
 that you desire for them.
Amen.

Our Neighbours Are Not The Solution to Our Problems

Notice a couple of things about this prayer.

First, we do not all learn or pray the same way. Some of us prefer seeing, some hearing. Some just want to get moving. Some have a strong intuition. And some just want the person who knows what is needed to order the rest of us to do it. That is why the prayer begins with 6 different options. Read them all, pick the one that you are drawn to, and use that for your prayer.

Second. Notice that the prayer does not ask to be shown what to do, and how to do it, so that our neighbours will come to church. It may indeed be the case that our neighbours will come to church. But that is not what God is asking us to pray for. God is asking that our neighbours have the relationship with God that God is desiring for them. As we think about our neighbours, we need to

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stop thinking of them as the solution to our problems - we need more volunteers, more money, etc., etc. - and start seeing them as God sees them: as beloved children with whom God desires a deep intimacy.

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I still do not have the foggiest idea what to do or how to do it so that our neighbours might have the relationship with God that God desires for them. But I do indeed trust that there really is a God who does desire to have an intimate relationship with our neighbours. And I do have a prayer. And so I trust that God will indeed show / tell / touch / lead / reveal / command us what to do and how to do it.

But we do need to pray.

And that leads me to something that I do have a foggy idea about.

Namely, since **WE** are here in church already, why don't we spend some time deepening **OUR** relationship with God - opening ourselves more fully to have the have the relationship that God is desiring to have with us?

Turns out that for at least 1,900 years, followers of Jesus have developed 5 or 6 practices intended to help ordinary people like you and me, begin and deepen our relationship with God. They called it, "**The Way.**"

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- **D**edicating time, talent and treasure in gratitude to God.

*(Thanks to Richard Bott, Saint Andrew's-Haney United Church, for the acronym: **U.N.I.T.E.D.**)*

Exactly what we do and how we do each of these six practices is something we'll need to explore. But that we need to do them is not.

Given the excellent shape of our property and finances, I will suggest to you and to the Board, that we re-new our efforts to deepen our own relationship with God, and take up the prayers so that we might be the church God needs us to be so that our neighbours might have the relationship that God desires them to have.

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Let us pray these two prayers together ...

David Ewart
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Footnotes:

(1) "The Long Emergency," is the title of a 2006 book by James Howard Kunstler. His book is about oil, but I thought the title was an apt description of the United Church of Canada's past 4 decades.

(2) The caution about the successful resilience and creativity is 5 fold:

First. The successful resilience has addressed only two of the three crucial ABC's of congregational life: **B**uilding maintenance and **C**ash. It has failed to respond to **A**ttendance.

Second. The result is that many congregations now have buildings and budgets that are way out of proportion to their actual attendance. When this happens, buildings and budgets become burdens instead of assets. They require a disproportionate amount of the congregation's volunteer time and effort. Fewer and fewer resources are available for supporting and developing attendance.

Third. Since this has been going on for 40 years, we now have two generations of leaders whose only experience has been adapting to decline. Many of these leaders have made sacrificial commitments. They have desired growth but have experienced only decline. Over time, repeated experience become habit and expectation. We have become habituated to decline and disappointment and expect it. It is our "normal." Our structures enable it. It is our familiar feeling; our comfort zone.

Changing systemic, ingrained habits and expectations is hard, painful work. The shift that is required will be experienced more like death and catastrophic disruption than like "emerging."

Four. No one intended this, but the truth is we have come to value our buildings more than we value attendance. That is, most congregations would vote to stay in their building rather than leave their building to reach new people. Everyone wants new people of course. But only within the existing building. Congregations will stay in their buildings and allow

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attendance to decline to the point of closure rather than change habits and expectations, and leave the familiar in order to risk increasing attendance.

Five. As someone who is in “paid accountable ministry,” it is difficult for me to acknowledge this, but we are part of this inherited problem too. Individually, we too have only experienced decline; it is our habit and expectation and training. We too have no effective ideas, expectations or training to reach new people. And because our livelihoods (i.e. food, clothes, housing, etc.) are at stake, it is difficult for us to be real risk takers. Given this “damned if I do, damned if I don’t” bind, it is no wonder so many of us are experiencing disabling stress.

- (3) All dollar figures have been adjusted for inflation and are shown in 2007 values. Of the \$121,500 Total Raised in 1965, \$56,200 was spent on Capital Debt payments. The Total Raised in 2007 was \$154,800 of which \$22,600 was spent on Capital projects.

For the national United Church of Canada the data are: Membership was 1,064,000 in 1965 and 558,000 in 2006, a decline of 48%. And roughly speaking, the Sunday offerings have declined by 16% from \$330,460,000 in 1965 to \$277,044,000 in 2006; while property and investment income, sales, and fund raising have increased by 266% from \$30,556,000 in 1965 to \$111,822,000.

- (4) The caution in the good news about the success of fund raising and property income is 3 fold.

First. The burden of this work often falls to a handful of people. The majority of us are not aware of how much time, effort, inconvenience, and practical knowledge and skills are required to manage and repair property. Who will take their place when they are ready to step down? This question reveals the fragile financial context for many congregations. Fewer and fewer people have these skills and knowledge or the willingness to spend their time doing these jobs. Imagine what would happen if next year, everyone who now looks after property stopped doing that.

Second. Congregations do not exist to rent space. As needful as this ministry is to those who use our space, and as crucial to our financial health as the income is, the fact is that property and finances are to serve the purposes of being a church, and not the other way round. However, when the congregation becomes so dependent on this income that its very existence is threatened without it, it is very natural for the leaders to devote their time and energy - and shape their decisions - around property and finance concerns and have little imagination, energy, or zeal for the actual purposes of the congregation. Indeed, it is not unusual for

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congregations to fall into a pattern of conflict between those who are responsible for property and finances and those who "have imagination, energy, and zeal for the actual purposes of the congregation." This pattern is dysfunctional and deadly since both groups need each other.

Third. Managing property - dealing with tenants, angry neighbours, plugged toilets, vandalism, parking, caretaking, windows left open, doors unlocked, heat left on, broken pipes, etc., etc. take the fun out of being part of the congregation. This is not why people come to church. This is hard work and those who do it, do it with dedication and a good heart. But it can also be discouraging when others do not respect the history and sacredness of the space, and when the hard work does not result in a thriving and growing congregation.

(5) While the participation rates are higher in the USA (almost double that of Canada), a recent survey by the Pew Forum, <http://religions.pewforum.org/>, reports similar trends.

(6) Now commonly associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, the Serenity Prayer was written by the American, Rev. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

(7) Check the Rev. Richard Bott and Saint Andrew's United Church - Haney, BC, web site here: www.standrewsuc.com/index.html

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