

It's Thanksgiving this weekend, which gives us the opportunity to offer gratitude for the good things in our lives. Is there anything that you are particularly thankful for today?

I would echo much of what is said and add one more: I am grateful that on Saturday, September 19th I arose early (for me) and drove to Palermo United Church. The next 5 hours were spent with Horseshoe Falls Region staff members Greg Smith-Young and Brenna Baker and about forty folks from Munn's and the other Oakville United Churches as we explored Toward 2035.

Who has heard of Toward 2035? Who recognizes the logo? How about this brief statement of its ultimate hope? [NEXT SLIDE] Who has made use of its insights or vision? You are forgiven if you have not. Most of us are focused on "toward the Beef Dinner" or "toward the next Senior's Lunch" or "toward the Marketplace" or "toward figuring out how the shared ministry agreement with our neighbours at Trinity that we voted on last week will work in practice" or some combination thereof. Who has the time or energy or even inclination to think about a decade from now when we have so much to do RIGHT NOW?

Toward 2035 isn't just about the future. It includes some very helpful information about where the church is as we speak, and how that might guide our next steps. That's what I would like to talk about today.

Last week Munn's members and adherents overwhelmingly decided to enter into a shared ministry agreement with Trinity, as did their congregation. I am sure that there were mixed feelings in both buildings. Of course we are celebrating the new collaboration and looking forward to the possibilities it offers. We feel a sense of relief that our financial concerns have been addressed, at least for the moment. But we also know that there will be changes ahead, and that some things we value may no longer be possible. I might compare it to entering a marriage or acquiring a roommate after you have lived on your own for a long time – it is exciting, there are the benefits of companionship and sharing expenses, but you will likely have to adjust some of your habits and preferences. And what if you don't like their music or they leave their socks on the floor? Mix in the awareness that if our church was the way many remember it, whether that was 10 or 30 or 50 or more years ago, we wouldn't likely be doing this, and that there will be more changes and decisions ahead, and the situation becomes far from simple.

In three Sundays, we will welcome our friends from Trinity. I expect that we are looking forward to hosting them as it means the extra energy of more people and a combined choir in a familiar space. In four Sundays, Munn's will be closed, not for the first time, but for the first time because of an ongoing shared ministry agreement. We will be the guests in a space that we know well but is still not "our own." There will be friendly faces and increased energy, but I'm sure that many Munn's folk will feel some trepidation.

It's not unlike Thanksgiving. Many of us will enjoy festive feasts with family and friends, but we are also aware that not everyone will be enjoying an abundant meal and fellowship. Also, we know that virtually everyone around us is dealing with one or more challenges. Still, we celebrate as we are able and give thanks for God's goodness.

And this was basically the vibe of the Toward 2035 workshop. Let me share with you a taste of what we learned. [NEXT SLIDE]

Here is the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras, shortly after it was built in the late 1980's. The builders knew that the region was frequently hit by hurricanes, so they ensured that the structure was designed to resist high winds and heavy rain. For years it was a busy and essential part of its community, but in 1998 Hurricane Mitch struck. The bridge survived with only minor damage, but the storm washed away the highway on both sides and substantially redirected the course of the river. [NEXT SLIDE] The structure, now nicknamed "the bridge to nowhere", is intact if diminished, but it no longer fits the environment around it. This is a great metaphor for what has happened to the church. Our environment has shifted around us, here at Munn's and in the larger United Church, perhaps leaving us feeling disconnected and dislocated, even if not as dramatically as the bridge.

"How did this happen?" you might be asking. Well, it didn't happen overnight. For 1500 years, European and European-derived cultures fell under the umbrella of Christendom. Christianity shaped how most people understood themselves and the world around them. It infused civil institutions as well as religious ones. Churchgoing was a part of life, whether a matter of sincere belief or because it was obligatory or offered social or financial benefits. Even when church attendance dropped people often maintained a connection to a congregation or denomination. Not now, at least in our part of the world. We can no longer comfort ourselves that youth who wander off will return when they have children; they and their families have never been here.

For the vast majority of people with “Christian ancestry”, church is not even on their radar. Most have little or no experience with church. They know very little about Christian practices, Christian stories, or Christian beliefs. What they do “know,” they’ve picked up from the news, tv, movies and social media. Across generations, most don’t see a need to belong to a church. They don’t know what churches are about, and they generally don’t care to find out.

To many of our neighbours, Christianity and our congregations feel obsolete. Obsolete does not mean useless, failed, abandoned, or extinct. It means that alternatives have emerged which many people perceive as preferable. [NEXT SLIDE]

This is a story we’re part of. But always remember this.

This is part of the story.

This is not the whole story.

We live in God’s world. God is with us. We are not alone.

What might God be calling the people of Munn’s to do in this time and place? Here’s a silver lining: previous generations often had negative church experiences which needed to be overcome. When most know very little about church, Christian faith, or Jesus, we have an opportunity to introduce ourselves for the first time. Through our life together and our work for others, we can show them Jesus.

To continue: who hasn’t noticed a breakdown in community life: widespread experiences of loneliness, social fragmentation heightened by technology and digital media, the loss of solidarity among people, and increasing alienation from the natural environment. People are steadily disengaging from civic and community life. Volunteerism has declined, and traditional forms of communal involvement are less common. We are experiencing a crisis of isolation and loneliness that affects both older and younger generations. People are more connected globally, but more disconnected locally. Society is more segmented and marked by growing mistrust. We separate ourselves into echo chambers and interact less with people unlike ourselves.

But again, remember this!

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What might God be calling the people of Munn's to do in this time and place? Churches create opportunities for meaningful community. We can meet people where they are, through shared interests and common needs or simply as gathering places. We can be intentional about radical inclusion, especially of those who find themselves pushed to the fringes elsewhere.

Through these relationships we can introduce people to meaningful community.

Now, let us reflect on our own lifetimes. For members of the dominant society, the post-WWII era in Canada has largely been a golden age of prosperity, growth, middle-class stability and social progress. We believed that we could shape the world into whatever we wanted it to be because we trusted our knowledge, our ability to problem-solve and our technologies and our innovations. We grew accustomed to being right, to winning. The world was ours for the taking, and the future looked even brighter for our kids. One problem: in this worldview, people did not really need God. Sure, believing in God was fine, if that worked for you, but God was not considered essential to how things happened or how decisions were made. Even in churches, where corporate-speak became more common than God-talk.

These days, this story is unravelling. Younger generations especially do not think things will get better. We can see how this decades-long story has been catastrophic for the environment, and its main beneficiaries are fewer and fewer.

Of course, none of this is new to those who this story left out and ignored. But now, many of us who did trust in it are mourning its ending. Our confidence is shaken, even as we continue to see ourselves and the world through this lens.

Still, we remember:

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What might God be calling the people of Munn's to do in this time and place? As our cultural, technological, managerial, and economic confidence is unravelling, we in churches do not have to live by that story anymore. We can turn in new directions. We can loosen our grasping and stop trying to be in control. We can hold our plans lightly, and be open to uncertainty. It's okay to be lost together. We can open ourselves to mystery and the mystical and rediscover placing our trust in God. We can practise prayerful reflection and active listening for God's voice instead of rushing to create a plan than meets our preference but may not be what God is calling us to do.

It's not easy. Our world is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, brittle, anxious, and incomprehensible. Crisis is piled upon crisis.

Many of us worry whether we have enough for today. Others worry that we won't be okay tomorrow. When the future feels uncertain, we often delay major decisions and avoid taking risks. We cling to the familiar, seeking reassurance, stability, and security. We tighten our spending, protect what we have, and become cautious about change. Living in this strange, chaotic, and frightening world with its confusing mixture of competing voices and conflicting realities.

But, we also know

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We need to hear these perspectives because they describe the environment in which Munn's and the wider United Church are functioning. What's happening to us and among us is much bigger than us. Sure, churches could have made different decisions along the way, but the challenges we're facing would likely still be happening. We might feel like we're failing. But that assumes we could have done something that would have changed everything. And we couldn't – nobody could. So let's not suppose that we can stop these stories we're part of, or that they don't affect us.

Are we sometime worried, confused, disoriented, discouraged, tired? Why wouldn't we be? Let's not be hard on ourselves for feeling this way.

But curling up in a ball of denial will not help us. What might help?

Here's something that won't help (although it's often our go-to approach): **DO BETTER, TRY HARDER**

That response belongs to the 75-year-old story of control and confidence. The challenges before us are too large and too complex to be solved by greater effort, better strategies and plans, or improved techniques. There is no magic formula, no quick fix, that will return our church to the way it was half a century ago.

Instead, we might seek to recover practices, postures, and wisdom that have sustained God's People through other upheavals. We can draw from traditions of mysticism. We can learn from earlier generations who lived through times of disruption. We can take time to grieve together and acknowledge openly that some things that are changing or lost were valuable to us.

The challenges facing The United Church of Canada are part of broader patterns visible throughout Europe and North America. These trends affect mainline denominations rooted in European traditions and, increasingly, many evangelical denominations as well. [NEXT SLIDE] The numbers are not encouraging. Here are some charts. They use statistics reported by congregations in 1992 (brown) and 2023 (blue) and projections for 2035 if current trends continue (red). I'm going for an overall impression here so don't panic if you can't read the headings...top left, membership, below it, givers, top right Sunday attendance, below it Sunday School participation. Not to put too fine a point on it, the red is, well, in the red. But what do you notice when you look at the bottom graph? Much more red, right? That's the number of pastoral charges across Canada. It is expected to decline, but not as dramatically as the other categories. Two things come to mind: how will we resource all of those buildings given the shrinking human and financial resources – we're already spread pretty thinly? What if a key volunteer moves away, a significant supporter dies or something major breaks?

But also, this data also highlights the reality that communities of faith continue to work faithfully and accomplish remarkable things, even if we feel vulnerable, tired and uncertain.

Again, the answer is not: **DO BETTER, TRY HARDER**. That won't help us.

Maybe we need to do less. Do differently. Remember older things. Focus on new things.

Remember, God is inviting us to receive God's future rather than attempting to manufacture it. God keeps on calling the church, and God remains committed to being with God's people.

We are travelling in unfamiliar lands. But the one eternal God, the Three-in-One who is wholly love is with us. We are not alone. God offers us the gift of lament, allowing us to face reality honestly rather than denying our pain or pretending that difficult things do not hurt. At the same time, God also gives us the gift of hope.

Toward 2035 is an invitation and a direction. It is about looking ahead toward what God may be calling us to become. We are travelling through unfamiliar territory without clear maps. No one has gone this road before. We cannot simply plan our way through it. But we can ask what steps we can take now so that, whatever lies ahead, we will travel well.

We are still called to be the Church. God continues to call us. [NEXT SLIDE]

Let us conclude by saying these words from *A Song of Faith* together:

*We sing of a church
seeking to continue the story of Jesus
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.
We are called together by Christ
as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
loving what he loved,
living what he taught,
striving to be faithful servants of God
in our time and place.*

(A Song of Faith)