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## A Letter to My Congregation

*The following letter was sent by a university student to her home congregation. We feel it has a great deal to say to many main-line congregations, and are sharing it with her permission. Names have been changed to protect anonymity.*

Every time I sit through a church service in my home congregation I wonder why am I here. Why am I putting myself through this? Why do I keep thinking it will be better this time? The trouble is it doesn't get better. Every hymn seems to drag on with less and less spirit.

I don't mean to blast everything that happens. I respect the traditions of the church and am sure that it works for some people. The problem is unless something changes this church is going to die. Twenty minutes into the service I'm looking at my watch and wishing it was over.

### Meeting my needs

If I were to move back permanently I would not attend this church. It doesn't serve my needs. So what are my needs? That is a tough question and one that I have been thinking about a lot lately.

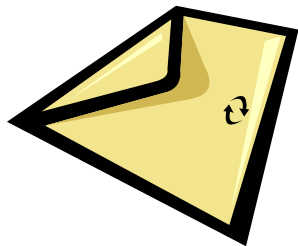
I honestly could not tell you the message of any sermon that I have heard in the last month since I got back. They never seem to be relevant to my life. I can remember distinctly three sermons in the past five years that have been extremely valuable time and my life. I have never heard anything like any one of them at our church.

When I was in grade nine or ten we went to visit my great-aunt in Regina over Easter and visited her United Church. I distinctly remember what the pastor talked about that day. He related the Easter

story, and talked about how the disciples had to rollback the stone on Jesus' tomb to reveal the gift inside. Then he talked about how each of us needs to do this same thing in our own lives — roll back the stone from the entrance to our hearts and reveal the gifts we all hold inside. We need to let our feelings and the love we have to offer out. To me this was very pertinent. It was something I could try and do. And it was something that everyone could understand and relate to, no matter what level their faith was at.

One day at a United Church in the city where I attend university, the ministers were away for some reason or another and a lay person was giving the sermon. He was a veterinarian and talked about how he had struggled with the relation between science and religion — a question for me. He presented the results of several scientifically controlled studies which showed the power of prayer. He talked about science and religion in the same sentence. If this man who obviously believed in science could also believe so strongly in his faith, why couldn't I?

The third sermon I heard just a few months ago at a Baptist church. The senior pastor talked about how to worship in your every day life. He talked about how to pray, about the many ways there are to worship God. This might sound mundane to many, but it was the very first time I had heard such a thing. Through Sunday School, church and confirmation classes, you would think that at some point somebody would have discussed worship. But they never did. Everyone tells you to pray, but nobody ever seems to talk about what praying means, what it entails, or how to incorporate prayer into daily life.



*A Letter to My Congregation—continued***Looking for a Church**

While at university I attend church regularly. At the beginning there were four of us, all from different denominations who rotated churches each week. We went to the United Church, the Baptist Church, the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church. This last year we have settled on the one that suits us, and attend there regularly. We attend the contemporary service. The pertinent question again here is why? What does this particular church do that makes us want to stay there?

There are occasionally sermons that I can't accept, but usually the messages are pertinent — I can relate to them. They are about ways to put religion and faith and God in your life. The pastors are animated. They are passionate. They care about what they are talking about and about every single person in the church. I'm not trying to say that the ministers here at home don't, because I'm sure that they do, but their passion does not show.

The major strength of the church is the music. The hymns are truly inspirational. They are upbeat songs of praise. Time flies when we are singing. Here our hymns are downers. They need to be uppers.

There are other things. They have a strong youth and young adult ministry. Every service is unique and feels like it was made just for me. The staff are personal. When not speaking they sit in the pews with the rest of the congregation. They are one of us. I enjoy the services and take something valuable home out of each and every one.

**Why I Go to Church**

People often ask me why I go to church. For the longest time I could not answer. I have been thinking about this a lot lately and have come up with three reasons.

I want to enjoy myself, to be entertained. To many people this many not seem like an appropriate thing, but in today's world a church has to be entertaining. With all the demands I have on my time between school, curling, friends and volunteer work, I am not going to add one more thing into my schedule if I do not enjoy it, even if it is church. It has to be fun.

The next reason — I am searching for

something I can believe in. I am searching for a way to believe. I go to church because I want to hear something or see something that makes me understand, that makes me believe. I want something to grasp onto that will hopefully one day let me believe in God, in religion, and in faith.

The final reason I go to church is very simple. For the hour or two that I am there I can sit and just be. My mind stops racing about all the things that have to be done, about what school work is due soon, and about all the things that I wish I had time for. For that time I just am. I am there, I enjoy the company, the music, and hope to learn something along the way. In my hectic university student life a value can't be placed on this. In those few hours I can relax without feeling guilty about it. I can enjoy myself, take a deep breath, and just be human.

The church is like a theater. There is an audience, and if that audience is not pleased with what they see they will not keep coming back. The audience needs to enjoy themselves. They need to appreciate what they see and hear. They need to be entertained. Any good theatre production creates characters that the audience can connect to. They need to be able to relate the characters to their own daily lives. They need to feel as though they and the characters have traits in common. And when the show is over, the audience needs to come away with something — they need to have learned something pertinent about life in the course of the show.

I hope that this little rant is valuable to you. It has been valuable to me. It has allowed me to put down in words the questions I have been contemplating and struggling with in life lately. I hope that these same questions will help to move my home church down the road of transformation and into the future.

**An Effective Congregation?**

We are looking for stories of effective congregations in action. Are you part of a congregation or do you know about one that has lessons to teach around how to reach people today and meet their spiritual needs. Send us an e-mail with their name — or a full story if you have one.

[Clair@congregationallife.com](mailto:Clair@congregationallife.com)

*I want to be entertained.*

*I am searching for something I can believe in.*

*For an hour or two I can sit and just be.*

# Beyond the Box

## Innovative churches that work

Bill Easum and Dave Travis have captured in a simple image something many church leaders have been trying to define.

Some of us thought the answer to church decline was in moving outside the box and introducing new ideas. Something like colouring outside the lines. It has not been enough.

Bill Easum and Dave Travis begin their book with a short vignette:

A small group of Episcopal priests, wanting to explore the world of Gen-Xers, became engrossed in a dialogue. One of the priests said, "I guess if you want to reach Gen-Xers, you have to think outside the box."

Without hesitation, the Gen-Xer facilitating the discussion replied, "What box? We don't have a box. You have to think *beyond* the box."

Easum and Travis say we have to "believe, act, and live as if the box never existed." Congregations In-the-Box they note are stuck and dying, doors open but more concerned about protecting their heritage than inviting new people. Those thinking Beyond-the-Box are radically innovative, pursuing opportunities, and multiplying their effectiveness by developing teams. They no longer think in terms of clergy and laity or staff and volunteers — but of everyone in ministry, whether paid or unpaid.

For most of Christian history, the stage has been dominated by the institutional church. Loren Mead, retired director of the Alban Institute, called that the period of Christendom, and brought our attention to the fact that we were living in a new era that for want of a better name he calls post-Christendom. The problem, according to Easum and Travis, is that we have still brought too much of the cultural baggage of Christendom with us. Our understanding of the church, they claim, "is shaped more by Christendom than by Scripture."

They have four solutions. The first is shifting leadership from the one to the many. Congregations need to move away from the idea that clergy do ministry, while the role of

lay people is to support them with their contributions.

Second, we have to move from the situation where a core group runs the church, to an emphasis on equipping every member for ministry.

In fact, our minds need to get out of the church box and see ourselves — and this is a little more difficult — as "church-in-a-city" .

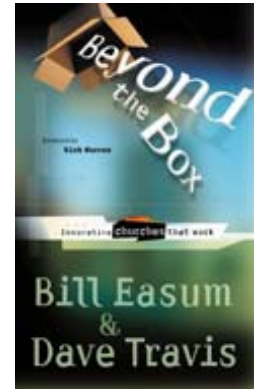
Inside-the-box churches, say Easum and Travis, "focus on institutional survival and keeping the church doors open." Beyond-the-box churches ask the question, "How can the churches and the people of God transform this community?" They are open to working in harmony with other congregations and faiths.

Denominational staff may be uncomfortable with this book. Easum and Travis feel they are often a major impediment to congregations thinking beyond the box.

The fourth solution is for congregations to expand their area of influence by going multi-site. At one point Canadian churches moved into new areas by establishing Church Schools or other ministries. A separate congregation could come later. It is that kind of thinking that Easum and Travis are talking about. "At a time when many churches are beginning to think outside the box by adding worship services to an already crowded Sunday agenda or expanding their worship space ... beyond-the-box churches are expanding their areas of influence by becoming churches in more than one location."

They see churches that meet in many locations but have the same core values, mission, administration, budget and staff as a single-site church. They add, "Although multiple sites and venues may not be right for everyone, we're convinced their time has come."

They give many examples from congregations they have observed that illustrate their insights. It is a book that will make people think about what it means to be church in our time, a book worth reading and talking about in groups.



### Book Review

Bill Easum & Dave Travis, *Beyond the Box. Innovative Churches that work.* Loveland, Colorado: Group publishing, 2003. ISBN 0-7644-2536-6

# Worship Beyond the Box

by Clair Woodbury

*Get rid of the box — leave it and all the baggage that comes with it, behind.*

I've just returned from a worship beyond the box. When my colleague at the Centre and I volunteered to do a worship "that would not be boring" for a congregation we are working with, the first thing I did was create an "order of service." After all, isn't that the way 99% of clergy plan a worship. Fortunately, my colleague is a lay person. "Not so fast," was her response. "We need to start with what we want to say."

It was that simple. The result – some sweat and labour later, a worship "beyond the box."

We have been reading the book by Bill Easum and Dave Travis which is entitled ... wait for it ... *Beyond the Box*. It has stirred our thinking and released our creativity. In the process, I have begun to see the light of what can happen in worship when "beyond-the-box" type of thinking is set free.

Bill Easum's thesis is that most clergy think inside the box – the boundaries set by denominational practices, the expectations of the congregation, their own fear of attracting criticism, or worry about alienating a matriarch or patriarch in the congregation with the resulting loss of congregational income.

A few adventurous clergy venture just outside the box with their thinking – like colouring outside the lines in kindergarten. There may be some opposition and a little criticism, but it can be managed.

Outside-the-box thinkers start alternative services, but using much the same worship formula. They launch new groups, but ones much like already existing groups. They import new programs, as long as they have someone's stamp of approval. They start using projectors in worship, but always within the standard "hymn sandwich" format almost universal to main-line denominations. (The usual hymn sandwich service is more like the Dagwood Bumstead multi-layer creation: hymn, call to worship, hymn, scripture, hymn, sermon,

hymn, offering, hymn, prayers, and a final ho-hum-hymn.)

Bill Easum says the decline of main-line congregations and complaints about being bored have reached the point where nothing will save us but beyond-the-box thinking. Get rid of the box – leave it and all the baggage that comes with it behind. Start afresh. Here's our insight how to do that.

The steps are theme, message, team, and package.

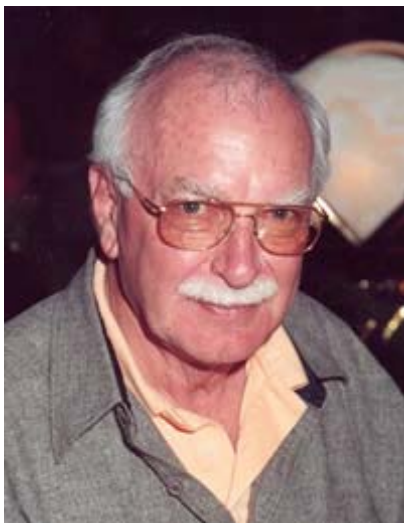
First decide on the theme. More often than not, a theme is apparent. New Year's, Mother's day, Father's day, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, church anniversary, Dominion Day, Thanksgiving, Remembrance Day, Advent, Christmas – you can probably add others. A theme may come from the lectionary. It can be the joy, peace, hope and love themes that go with Advent. Whatever – get *absolutely* clear about your theme.

Then say what you want to communicate about that theme in one sentence. We may have hated those grammar classes in grade school, but the humble sentence is the best friend a worship designer ever had. Clarity about the message does two things – it helps to maintain your focus on the one aspect of the good news you want to communicate, and it enables you to create a clear message that the congregation can remember and take with them into their daily lives, the place where real ministry happens.

Next, and this is Bill Easum's idea too, get a team together. We applaud that at the Centre. One of our core values from the very beginning is that "we work as a team, in order to demonstrate that teams work."

The task of your worship team is to decide how to package the message in as many ways as possible. Any worship experience should use at least five media if you are going to truly reach the diverse group of people that constitute most congregations today. Here are a few:

➤ **Scripture:** Choose a passage that clearly communicates the message, and create a context that points it out even before the scripture says it again. Then present the



scripture in a dialogue or a play or just call upon that person with stage experience to truly communicate what it says.

➤ **Meditation:** Create a talk built around your message that is short, direct, and holds people's attention.

➤ **Video:** Shoot a five or seven minute video, or select a video clip from a movie.

➤ **Music:** Pick music that underlines both the substance of your theme and the emotion behind the theme.

➤ **Skit:** Have a group develop or locate a five minute play or skit that underlines your message.

➤ **Slide show:** Work up a pictorial presentation that you can project using photos or a pictorial montage that creates an emotional environment for hearing the theme.

➤ **Prayer:** Choose from many ways to pray, one that creates a sense that we have responsibility along with God in a partnership to "make it so."

➤ **Art:** Choose an art display that captures the emotional and pictorial essence of your message.

The final step is to assign the task of developing each of the elements you have chosen to your worship team members. The only limit is their imagination.

Worship outside the box can be the answer to your prayers. It may well be the answer to the prayers of congregational members who have suffered through far too many boring "worship in a box" events that give the illusion of worship, but without ever enabling people to encounter the God who always meets us beyond the box.

There is only one danger. The box you call your church building may be too small to hold the people who are hungry for a real experience of God's presence.

### *Quotable Quote*

**Energized hearts  
and awakened minds  
cannot be contained.**

Donald Postersky & Gary Nelson,  
*Future Faith Churches.*

## Contribution Month

What an exciting year! We had the opportunity to deliver our Small Group Ministry program over the summer with nine very interesting and diverse people. We continue to work with a couple of congregations exploring how to be the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are learning as we facilitate Learning Communities on behalf of the Faith Formation and Education Unit of the United Church of Canada, and we are doing a major research project for Edmonton Presbytery of the United Church. In between major projects we continue to connect with congregations providing customized events.

The research project we are working on has both of us reading extensively and that, of course leads, to questions and reflections. The question of how can we be the church today continues to be a challenging one. As we read, learn and experience worship and life in congregations we are aware of how separate the church seems to have become from the cultural community we live in. And that cultural community is evolving faster than most of us can keep up with.

2006 is the year we discovered blogs and learned to appreciate how helpful they can be for sharing ideas and questions. We are still a long way from video streaming or pod casting; keeping up with technology is a challenge!

We continue to try to be as available as possible for those who have questions or require help. Sometimes they are close at hand and sometimes they live in other centres, which requires travel or long distance communication.

This is where we find your donation so helpful. It enables us to be available for those who can't afford to pay us, it helps us keep our website current, and provides us with the resources we need so we can continue to produce our newsletter.

We are a not-for-profit charitable society, and every donation will be issued a tax receipt.

Clair Woodbury and Joyce Madsen  
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*Help us  
provide  
congregations  
with  
assistance  
and the  
resources  
they need to  
be truly  
effective in  
their ministry.*

## Small Group Ministry on the Job

*It was wonderful to hear responses that spoke of being energized, excited, blessed, connected, and led by God.*

*Ten people spend four days in the Athabasca Lodge this August both being a small group and exploring the dynamics of small group ministry for their congregation. What surprised us was the speed with which they put what they had learned into action. Here are four reports of "Small Group Ministry" dynamics at work.*

### **Cold Lake United Church from Sandy Godel, October 2006**

When I left Athabasca, I thought that I would slowly have a few conversations with our minister and some members of the congregation about my idea for a healing ministry. Well, that didn't happen. At the first meeting of our Session the members decided that they wanted to focus on pastoral care issues this year. I thought about pastoral care and small group ministry and a healing ministry, and I thought that they must have something in common.

So, fresh from the workshop at Athabasca, I met with our minister and shared some of what I learned, my idea for a healing ministry and the thought that because this pastoral care ministry was a new group that it could start as a SGM (Small Group Ministry). So, after many conversations with him and several others we decided to host the meeting in a small group

format.

The chairperson from Session, our minister and I provided the leadership. We used a lot of the ideas from the Athabasca SGM course starting with making it an open meeting to anyone but sending specific invitations to people that we knew had been the recipients of pastoral care, to those who we thought had an interest in being a resource to meet pastoral care needs and to those who we thought had some good leadership skills. We also made sure that we had input from people who were interested but couldn't come to the meeting that night.

Before we started I introduced the idea of a covenant and introduced the importance of confidentiality, being open to the guidance of the Spirit and listening to the ideas of each other. For our opening we read a devotion that told the story of one family's experience with good pastoral care, an appropriate scripture passage and then a prayer. Then we asked the question, "Why did you come tonight and what asset do you bring to the pastoral care ministry?" We intentionally asked this question to move people into resource based thinking instead of just overwhelming ourselves with needs.

Then we broke into groups of three to discuss what should be the focus of our pastoral care ministry. After a break we came together as the full group and presented our small group findings, placing them on large pieces of paper under the headings 'practical care tasks', 'hospitality and welcoming', and 'active listening'. We stuck these papers to the walls around the room and asked people to stand under the heading that was the most important for them. Well, it was pretty clear where the interest lay. We will be focusing first on 'hospitality and welcoming'!

We closed with the question, "How do you feel after participating in this gathering?" It was wonderful to hear responses that spoke of being energized, excited, blessed, connected, lead by God. I felt so alone with my ideas before I went to the workshop in Athabasca. By the time I left I felt empowered



to begin however I could. This is a beginning that I never expected and it certainly required a great deal of courage. My dream of a healing ministry is still there but now I know more about the steps that we need to take as a congregation to embrace such an idea. And as a result of the pastoral care gathering I think that I have found another person who will journey with me along that road. And you know, "where two or more are gathered", the impossible does happen.

### **Cold Lake Follow-up — November 2006**

I continue to be amazed how meeting in a circle, spending the time to plan in detail what we want the end result of the gathering to be, and having shared leadership, creates energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

We had the first meeting of our new Hospitality and Welcoming Team and managed to develop our mission and goals. Our mission is to learn how to be hospitable and welcoming so that we can model hospitality and welcoming to the greater congregation of Trinity United Church. We want all who enter to feel welcome and comfortable and part of our church family.

Our three goals are to provide an information package about the church to newcomers, to find ways to identify newcomers, and to connect with newcomers. We managed to accomplish this in two hours with seven people. I plan to do an exercise during the next meeting that will get us to decide which values will guide us as we do our work.

### **St. John's Anglican Church, Olds**

*from Rev. Inez Hannett*

I approached the three people who had expressed interest and asked if they would agree to studying small group ministry as a small group for six sessions. In view of our small congregation and people's general busyness we agreed to meet once a month. Then I issued a couple of invitations and we have two more people. We are going to study *Rooted in the Divine* by Anne Martin as soon as the books arrive, and see what happens.

### **St. George's Anglican Church, Stettler**

*from Rev. Mark Osborne*

I met with the vestry as a small group. I

emphasized that we'd just try this for the next while. I got four smaller tables and arranged them in a square around a card table centre that held a candle, a couple of small sunflowers, a talking stick and a bible. I opened with a lighting the candle, a passage of scripture, a short statement about why I thought we should do this, and a prayer. A few raise eyebrows, but everyone participated with the talking stick, sharing a little about what was going on with them over the summer. Then we went into the formal part of the meeting. There was a lot less anxiety. We closed with a hymn ("Seek ye First") and the Grace. It was interesting that using this form in vestry went so smoothly.

### **McDougall United Church, Calgary**

*From Alison Demeter*

I have one and maybe two mother-daughter teams to lead Mother-Daughter Wisdom discussion groups. When I arrived back our lead minister was away so I took the initiative to start a daily spiritual practise with the staff.

We gather in the circle, check in using the talking stick, read a devotional, spend a few minutes doing centring prayer, and have a spoken prayer or chant. I have a set of little angel cards that have a word on each. People choose a card and meditate on the word that day. We have since invited anyone who is around to join in and it is becoming quite well attended.

When our chapel is finished we will set up a place to do this there – right now we do it in my study. Oh – our lead minister loves it! I have been using this format with task added into it with committee meetings and with teachers training and it has been quite amazing. I did my evening small groups training session on Wednesday night and it went really well. This stuff is fabulous! My next adventure is to introduce it to Executive Council.....stay tuned.

### **Carry on the Sharing**

We invite you to share your experiences of small group ministry in your congregation. Log onto our web site

[www.congregationallife.com](http://www.congregationallife.com) and contribute to our Small Group Ministry blog. If you have never blogged before, there is a whole new experience waiting for you. We will be offering our Athabasca Small Group Ministry program August 7-10 (Tues-Fri). If you are interested, send us an e-mail.

# Putting a Blog to Work for You

by Clair Woodbury



What is a “blog”? The simple answer is that it is a weB LOG. The Internet has spawned a number of offspring, and the Blog is proving to be one of the most ubiquitous.

We read somewhere that there are 80,000 new blogs created every day. Judging by the rate at which the word is appearing in newspapers and magazines, not to mention on the Internet, that number cannot be far off.

What does this mean for the church? The answer is again simple — an opportunity to engage people directly in a conversation about something they are passionate about.

Previously, if people wanted to put a comment up on a web site, they had to send that comment to a web master, the only person with the password that would allow changes to the site.

The blog bypasses the web master and allows anyone to place a comment directly on the blog site, a comment which is available now to anyone anywhere in the world.

## Getting to be Friends with the Blog

Admittedly, last spring we did not know what a blog was. Now we have at least ten of them on the go at any one time.

Last summer we introduced a blog into the history course we teach on line. The result was quite spectacular. The ten participants not only placed their assignments up on the history blog as a comment, but began to engage each other in a conversation. This class, spread from Florida across four State and five Provinces started to chat with each other like they were in the same room. They supported one another and shared insights, not only into what the history course was about but what was going on in their lives.

If you want to be overwhelmed, just type the name “blog” into a Google or Yahoo search. I just did and the search yields one billion, one hundred million references.

More manageable, check out the blogs on the “Discussion Lounge” in the United Church’s Wonder Café site. (<http://www.wondercafe.ca/>) There are some 72 topics, some with a number of comments, other with none, but most of them viewed (and read) by 20 to 60 people.



## Creating Your Own Blog

It used to be you had to have access to a database on your server to put up a blog, and that costs an extra \$10 per month. Now there is a simple solution. The Google people let you post your blog on their server for free. The good news — there is not even any advertising to distract.

Here’s what you do. Go to

<http://www.blogger.com/start>

Just follow the instructions on the screen. You get to pick a blog format, enter an initial posting, and you are in business. You can create links to the blog on your church or personal web site. You will want to go into the “Settings” for your blog and review those.

In particular, check out the “Comments” tab and indicate whether you will permit anyone, only those registered as bloggers, or only people you authorize to add comments. You can edit comments before they go up, or edit them after. You can have an e-mail sent to you anytime someone adds a comment if you wish. You can have your blog advertised on the Google blog index, or kept private. There are almost no end of options. Review them carefully, and choose the set that meet your needs.

The important thing is to keep your blog current. Add topics and questions. Respond to comments that people make. Most of all, enjoy the freedom of a whole new way to engage people about meaningful issues.

Let us know how you make out, and if you put up a blog, send us the URL web address. We would love to hear from you on our blog at [www.congregationallife.com](http://www.congregationallife.com).

## Congregational Life

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The Congregational Life Centre is a not-for-profit charitable organization dedicated to assisting congregations to be more effective in their ministry.