



September 2007  
Volume 14, Issue 1

# Congregational Life

Congregational Life Centre — Consultants to Congregations 780 619-0386

## September 2007 Issue Contents

Aging Energetically	1
A Summer of Small Group Ministry	4
Newcomers Feel Really Welcome	5
WEJG?	6
Learning Circles	7
Workshops	8

## Aging Energetically — in the Church

by Ralph Milton

*The following is a portion of Ralph Milton's presentation to the June Central Regional Gathering in Wainwright.*

Most of those around my age have retired. Our children are middle-aged, and many of us have been promoted to the exalted rank of grandparent.

I need one of those lapel buttons that says, "I don't remember your name either." One of the gifts of aging is that you can always invoke a senior's moment. "Hi...ah...I'm having a senior's moment and your name is on the tip of my tongue but I can't seem to get it out."

I tell my grandkids I have a bionic heart. I also have two bionic eyes. Remember Steve something-or-other, the bionic man. He had an eye so powerful he could zoom in and count your nose hairs at a hundred paces.

I'm deeply grateful for the medical technology that's given me the gift of sight. The world becomes bright and new when suddenly

you can see again. The trees have leaves — they are not just a large green blob. You can see the sparkle in your grandchild's eye. You can see the life-lines — some people call them wrinkles — on your own face, and most importantly, on the face of the

ones you love. And you discover, all over again, that there is far more beauty in God's world than you ever imagined.

Moving into old age and retirement is a little like getting a cataract operation — which by the way is really easy and completely painless — because from this somewhat detached perspective we can see things about our church, our Christian community, things we've never seen before.

### A Vision

The vision I see, now that I am retired, is that we tend to be so focused on the problems we don't see the blessings. We are so caught up by what is not happening that we don't see what is happening.

For instance, we are focused on the problem that there are so many gray heads in the congregation and so few younger adults. We don't see the blessing and the power of these gray heads.

We often hear it said that the future of our church is in the young people. That is true. But the future of those young people in the church is dependent on the gray heads who are in the church right now.

Bev and I attend First United Church in Kelowna. Quite often we've been asked to take the service on the Sunday after Christmas. The minister needs a break after the hectic Christmas rush and besides, the Sunday after Christmas is called "low Sunday" because not many folks come to church. The pews are mostly empty so it's safe to ask Ralph to preach because only a few of the old crocks are going to be there anyway.

A few years ago, Bev and I woke up that Sunday to see a foot or more of new snow on the ground. Being Sunday morning, the snowplow people didn't see

*Continued on page 2*



*Seniors —  
they have the  
time, money  
and ability to  
do almost  
anything they  
choose to do.*

### *Aging Energetically—continued*

any reason to get busy because nobody was going anywhere anyway.

So as Bev and I slowly plowed through the snow, we decided that we'd simply take the half-dozen or so folks that might show up into the lounge and just hear the scripture readings, have a discussion on them, a prayer or two, and send the folks home.

But we were astonished. About 50 people showed up. This out of a normal congregation of 200. Except for one grandchild, all the folks were seniors. Not only were they seniors, they were the pillars of the church. These were the folk that probably did 80 percent of the work around the church. These were the folk who probably put 80 percent of the money on the plates. Without these old people, these folks who pushed through the snow on that winter Sunday, our congregation at First United would collapse.

### **Recognizing Possibility**

The gospel reading for that Sunday was the presentation of Jesus at the temple and how he was welcomed by Anna and Simeon. Here were these two oldsters — they didn't have a full set of teeth between them. They were gray. They were wrinkled. They were bent over. They had arthritis. This was before cataract operations so their eyes didn't work all that well. But they could see what nobody else could see — they could see the face of God in the face of a perfectly ordinary child. Their eyes were pretty dim but their spiritual sight was 20-20.

Simeon decided that now he could die with a sense of being fulfilled, but Anna became the first Christian evangelist, running around the temple and cornering anyone she could find to tell them that God's chosen one was in their midst.

So there we were, Bev and I, on that snowy December morning with a congregation of Annas and Simeons. And what a bunch of folk they were. We knew almost everyone of them by name. When we looked at the abilities, the enthusiasm, the experience of all those gray heads, we saw the fundamental strength of our congregation. They are our most valuable asset.

I'm talking about us older folks — the people sometimes called the young-old, people mostly in the 55-85 age bracket. I'm

not talking about a ministry to these people. I'm talking about the ministry of these people.

There were at least a dozen graduate degrees among those 50 people that Sunday after Christmas. They had at least 2,500 years of adult life experience. They were mostly strong and healthy, and they have the time, money and ability to do almost anything they choose to do.

This is something that has never happened before in human history. I am part of a group of seniors who are the first ones to have had relatively modern health care throughout their lives. My mother, for example, made us kids have a bath every Saturday night. Don't laugh. That is one of the main reasons I am a healthy 72 year old. We are the largest, the most highly educated, the wealthiest, the healthiest seniors in history. We are the church's most valuable asset.

### **Death by Retirement**

Barry lived across the street from us until he died two years ago. That was a year after he retired. In our little community, the houses and yards are small, but Barry cut his lawn twice a week, in two directions, and then he would wash the lawn mower. He washed his car at least once a week.

When he wasn't doing that, he watched TV. "It's pretty boring," he said, "but there's nothing else to do." And so he died. He had nothing else to do.

We have a huge number of retired persons living in Kelowna. They sell a farm or a business or start collecting their pension cheques. They move from Alberta to BC so they can take it easy. They hire someone to cut the lawn. They bring in TV dinners instead of cooking. They don't get involved in any organization and they don't volunteer for anything. "I worked hard for 50 years," they tell you. "So now I just want to take it easy."

The MacArthur study, an in-depth, longitudinal study of aging undertaken in the United States, had some interesting findings. Seniors who were like my friend Barry, who just wanted to take life easy, who wanted nothing challenging, who didn't want to be bothered with any decisions — these folks tended to have their health start to deteriorate almost as soon as they retired. And their health would go steadily downward. They tended to have major, life-threatening health

issues from the moment they retired. They were most likely to spend significant time in a nursing home.

Those seniors who retired well, who welcomed new challenges and opportunities, who had a sense of community and a sense of vocation – these seniors enjoyed vigorous health usually into their mid-eighties, until cancer or heart would take them to their death fairly quickly. They were unlikely to see the inside of a nursing home. And they would live five to ten years longer than the seniors who retired into couch-potato hell.

So what we have with seniors in the church is a symbiotic relationship. The church needs us seniors to survive. We seniors need the church because through the church we can live active, challenging lives, in a community where we can find people we care about and that care about us.

The church can provide the challenge and the community that is so essential to the well being of us seniors. The church is a major health-care provider for these young-old people. And these young-old people are a major health-care provider for the church. That is happening already but it needs to happen a whole lot more. To do that, we need to open a few spaces in our thinking – open our hearts to new possibilities.

### Open to New Ways

It is true, some seniors can be pretty intransigent. There's the story of a young minister who is new to the community. She goes to visit one of the old guys in the nursing home. "So you are 90 years old," she says. "You must remember many changes in our church."

"Yep," says the old guy. "And I've been against every one of them."

One of the ideas we need to set aside is that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Recent research on the human brain shows that our brains don't lose their plasticity, their ability to learn new things except when some form of dementia sets in. That doesn't usually happen till people are well into their eighties.

Another idea is that us old people are against everything new. Sure there are some of us like that 90 year-old codger in the nursing home. They are more the exception rather than the rule, but we tend to focus on

those kinds of people – we focus on the problems.

We've got a few study groups in our church in Kelowna. They are studying resources such as Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, and looking at the United Church's initiative to be more welcoming to younger folks. The participants in those forward looking study groups are, for the most part, seniors.

We are in the process of installing a high-tech video projection system in our church. It will involve two screens and two high-powered projectors suspended from the ceiling. The only person under 65 who was involved in this was the video technician we hired to do an estimate.

You see, Old Age is not a disease. Our wrinkles are the record of our lives. They are our curriculum vitae.

I have an amazing program called Photoshop on my computer at home. I took a photo of myself and removed all the wrinkles. I didn't look younger. I looked embalmed. I had been baptized in Botox.

Here's the kicker. The United Church is absolutely on the money in its initiative to make congregations more welcome, more friendly to younger people. It's absolutely crucial that we do that.

If this is going to happen, if our congregations are going to be more welcoming to younger adults, ***the key to making his happen are the seniors.*** We can either make that change happen, or we can stop it dead in its tracks.

It's not a choice. It's not a question of whether we minister with the seniors or with the younger people. It's either both or nothing.

*If our congregations are going to be more welcoming to younger adults, the key to making his happen are the seniors.*



\* \* \* \* \*

## A Summer of Small Group Ministry



Eight very enthusiastic people participated in the Guelph SGM four days hosted by Dublin Street United Church.



The favourite Athabasca SGM leisure activity was creating diamond willow talking sticks around the fire. There were six in the Athabasca group, the majority Anglican.



The weather in Athabasca was a bit cool this year, but the conversations around the fire in the lodge were as warm and as rich as ever.



Each day began with a small group circle, then continued with presentations and lots of time for discussion.



Joyce Madsen (left) is our expert on Adult Education, and made sure every session in the agenda was lively and engaging. Plan to join us in Athabasca next August, or invite us to your congregation for a Small Group Ministry weekend with your key leadership.



# Newcomers Feel Really Welcome

By Clair Woodbury

The Sunday we walked in the door of St. Paul's United Church on the east side of Saskatoon, the first thing we saw was Esther Edmonds offering us a cup of coffee. It was good coffee too, and yes, we could take it into the worship with us. About eighty others brought their coffee in with them. There is something going on here, I thought.

Esther was one of a group of four from the congregation, including their two clergy, who had taken our Small Group Ministry training in Athabasca the summer before. We'd been invited to do a Saturday workshop to share some of the SGM ideas with more of the congregation. That is where we heard about Esther and the newcomers luncheons. We talked to Esther later, and were very excited by what we heard.

During the service, Esther sits in the back pew and takes note of people who have the temporary name tag that identifies them as a visitor. At some point, she told us, "I just go up to them and say, 'I haven't met you before ...' and have a conversation."

She tells people about the newcomers luncheon she hosts and asks if they would be interested. The majority of them are, she told us. The ones she had held take place for an hour after church on three successive Sundays. She likes to have another person from the church share the leadership with her.

She uses a Small Group Ministry format. They light a candle on the centre table. There is a check-in where people get to know one another, a time for the theme of the day, then a closing. She makes soup for the lunch, Esther told us, "and if I think of it, they get dessert."

The first session deals with people's life story. They light the candle and say grace, followed by an ice-breaker, sharing "the funniest thing that has happened to you." It is kept light. Esther talks about the congregation's mission and vision, then invites people to tell their life story, starting herself so they feel comfortable and know what is expected. People have been told ahead of time what will happen, so there are no surprises.

The second session deals with people's faith stories. We wondered if folks would be hesitant to share so soon at this level. "Some tell a little more than others. Again, I start off with my faith story. They have been told the week before to think about their faith story." It's not a problem.

The theme of the third session is the gifts they would like to bring to the congregation, and the gifts the congregation can offer them. They share their expectations of the congregation, then their gifts. "Then we talk about Small group Ministry." Esther gives the participants a list of the small groups they have, and ones they would like to have. It's a list to break people open to see new ways that they can participate in the congregation.

The list includes praying, gardening, walking in the woods, singing, gathering for coffee or tea with friends, drawing, painting, sculpting, writing stories, walking the labyrinth, canoeing or kayaking, cooking, knitting, crocheting, bird watching, reading the Bible, reading novels or short stories -- books that raise religious or theological questions -- watching the stars, listening to music, visiting the sick, Inn out of the Cold program, teaching Sunday School, helping to plan worship, developing rituals to express my growing faith, and being involved in governance boards.

What are the results. "The feedback I get is that they feel welcome now. We have made an effort. We know they are here." When people come into worship, now they either look for Esther or for others that were in their group. When they go for coffee, they know people. It makes a difference. They have experienced the church as community, as a safe place where they can connect -- with each other and with God.

*They have experienced the church as community, as a safe place where they can connect -- with each other and with God.*



## A Different Perspective - WWJG?

By James Strachan

*Who needs a doctor? The healthy or the sick?*

I know quite a few devout Christians who try to govern their life decisions with the motto “WWJD” – “What would Jesus do?” Some wear those initials as a badge on a chain around their necks. I think that is a laudable attempt to govern life by a Biblical ethic, but a bit misguided. A more significant motto these days is “WWJG,” as in “Where would Jesus GO?” If you check with the four gospels we find in the New Testament, you get some rather disturbing hints.

First off, I think he’d hang around a playground and horse around with the kids! What was it he said? “Don’t push the children away. Don’t ever get between them and me. These children are at the very centre of life in the Kingdom!” Maybe Jesus saw that children are always ready for joy, that they know how to play, and that they tell the truth, even when it embarrasses someone!

My guess is that he’d set up a banquet for 20 or so people in a local restaurant, and then he’d go out looking for guests (Luke 14:12-14). And I wouldn’t be one of them! (Neither would you!!) Old guys who spent all their time and money in the local bar would be taken in to eat. Some guy with a walker down at the Senior Centre would also be at the head table. If there were “loose women” in town, that everybody knew about, they’d be there as well.

I’ll bet there would be young people there, as well! The kids who hang out at the corner, smoking all day and riding their skateboards in the middle of the street – they’d get an invite. Pretty soon the place would be packed with noisy, hungry people – some wouldn’t have had a shower all this week – and they’d be laughing and chowing down and having a great time. Probably no ministers, however, and the churches would be “under represented.” That would probably tick off a bunch of folk.



If there was a rodeo anywhere nearby, or a bull-riding contest, I’m sure he’d be there – in the infield (how’d he get *there?*)! He wouldn’t ride, but he’d squat down with the guys and talk to them about what they did, whom they trusted, and what they hoped for. Some of them would be late for their rides, too

By now, I imagine that some of the Christian believers in town would be getting a little cheesed off. They’re the ones who believe in the Christ, paid his bus fare into town, and all he’s done is insult them, and spend all his time with layabouts and characters who never darken the church doors, or profess to believe anything.!

At this point I imagine some of the ministers and elders of the local congregations would likely try to talk to Jesus. After all, they are his people, right! “We’ve believed and prayed and tried to live *our* understanding of your Way. Why don’t you treat us a little nicer?” And his answer, which we have all heard before, would be gratifying, but would push some of us way outside our comfort zone. “*Look,*” he said, “*who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? I’m here inviting the sin-sick, not the spiritually fit!*”

After he had gone, some of the good people, elders, pastors, Ladies Aid Presidents, began talking among themselves. “Do you think he meant that *we* should go down to the Seniors Centre and play cards with those old coots?... He couldn’t have meant us to spend a couple of evenings a week in the *bar*, talking to ‘those people,’ surely...” Well, I’m not getting down into that smelly infield with those tobacco chewing kids waiting to ride their bulls! It’s just too much to expect...”

I don’t suppose any of us would wonder why Jesus left town so soon, with such a sad look on his face...?

*Reprinted with the author’s permission from the Chautauqua, a Central Alberta newspaper.*

## Learning Circles

The Learning Circle is a new way – but actually a very old way – for clergy to learn and share together. The United Church of Canada is encouraging all clergy to use this approach to deepen their understanding of issues related to the church and ministry. The staff of the Congregational Life Centre (Joyce Madsen and Clair Woodbury) have been asked by national Continuing Education to organize and facilitate circles in Alberta and Northwest Conference.

A Learning Circle usually consists of up to eight people who want to support one another and explore some aspect of ministry together. The great gift of a Learning Circle is that the group decides when and where they will meet, and the focus of their explorations. A circle generally meets for three hours once a month, with its members making a commitment to be present for one another some ten sessions over the year. The cost is \$100 for the year.

### Calgary

Clergy in Calgary who are interested are invited to join us for an information meeting at 1:30 p.m. on Monday October 15 at Hillhurst United Church, 1227 Kensington Close NW, Calgary.

### Edmonton

If you are interested in learning more about participating in a Learning Circle this year, please join us for an initial exploratory get-together at 1 p.m. on Wednesday October 10 at St. Andrew's United Church, 9915 – 148 Street NW, Edmonton

### Central Alberta

Clergy in Coronation, Red Deer & St. Paul Presbyteries — if you are interested in learning more about participating in a Learning Circle this year, send us an e-mail. We will advise you regarding a date and location for a get-together — ideally no more than an hour's drive for any participant.

### Distance

We have learned that six persons (five participants plus a facilitator) are best for Learning Circles that meet by conference call. We will use a format that involves conference calls for two hours each month (one hour twice a month, or two hours at one time with a break). If you are interested in participating in a Distance Learning Circle this year, send us an e-mail that includes areas relating to

## Managing Congregational and Personal Transformation

The Congregational Life Centre is offering our course "Managing Congregational & Personal Transformation" as a four day seminar this fall: Monday Oct. 29 through Thursday Nov. 1. It offers an understanding of how we individually handle change and use that as a guide to preparing plans for congregational transformation. The cost is \$250.

Each day has a different focus. They include:

- ◆ Change and Transformation
- ◆ Vision and Values
- ◆ Gifts and Strengths — Identity
- ◆ Leadership

E-mail the instructors, Joyce Madsen and Clair Woodbury for more information.

### BUMPER STICKER

When you're over the hill ...  
You pick up speed.

### Congregational Life

is published by the Congregational Life Centre,  
#1405, 5328 Calgary Trail, Edmonton AB T6H 4J8  
Phone: 780-619-0386

Visit our website:

[www.CongregationalLife.com](http://www.CongregationalLife.com)

Staff Team: Joyce Madsen & Clair Woodbury

E-mail: [clair@CongregationalLife.com](mailto:clair@CongregationalLife.com)

[joyce@CongregationalLife.com](mailto:joyce@CongregationalLife.com)

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

# Revelations Book and Gift Cooperative

We-re your bright ideas bookstore!

Revelations Book and Gift Cooperative is a member-owned and operated cooperative. It was established as a creative solution to the closure of the United Church Book Room. Today we have more than 780 members from Bella Coola, BC, to St. John's Newfoundland, and from Milk River to Whitehorse.

We offer the best books and gifts around! We offer fiction and non-fiction, good general reading, books on prayer, church development, bibles, beautiful children's books, etc.



Come in have a coffee — it's rich and fragrant free-trade — and browse. You'll find what you are looking for.

## Revelations Book and Gift Cooperative

#144, 4211-106 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T6J 6L7  
Phone orders: call (780) 485-8744

Monday through Friday  
9:30 a.m. — 5 p.m.  
Saturday 9:30 a.m. — 4 p.m.

# Workshops and Resources

Congregational Life Centre staff have worked with many congregations and leaders over the last 15 years and can design a program that will meet your needs.

**First and Second Impressions** – A workshop that designs a process that will truly welcome and integrate new people.

**Small Group Ministry** – Workshops that focus on Where to begin, Training the facilitators, Growing this ministry. 4 days in Athabasca can provide a foundation for a successful ministry.

**Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church** – What are the skills required. It begins with knowing yourself and then deciding how to lead in your environment.

**Becoming a Team** – Creating and maintaining effective teams requires a commitment to putting the team first and then learning how to work together effectively.

**Transforming a Congregation** – This is a process that will take time and commitment. It requires knowing your gifts as a congregation, understanding who lives in your community, and discerning what God's call is for you.

**Coaching** – We provide individual and group coaching for leaders who are working to make changes in their communities.

**Learning Circles** – This new learning style is supported by the UCC. Circles of people who are exploring and learning together provide both opportunities for growth and accountability.



Congregational Life Centre