



Congregational Life

Sticking to Business

by Clair Woodbury, Centre Staff

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The new year is a time for looking back and assessing. The question Joyce Madsen and I have been asking is the same one that Lorne Mead asked some thirty years ago – do consultants make a difference for a congregation looking for ways to deliver more effective ministry.

Lorne's answer after assessing the helpfulness of consultants for a half dozen or so congregations was "Yes." We took a little time for our assessment at the Congregational Life Centre. It became clear that in most cases there are very positive results. It also became clear that the results are never quite what you expect.

One of our first full transformation processes was with a city congregation that had once been very large and very prosperous. Now a hundred or so people were scattered around a 600 seat sanctuary. We asked them to imagine what their congregation would look like in the future. Every one of their drawings showed a sanctuary full of people and every seat in the choir loft occupied.

Crowded churches were a phenomenon of the '50s, and are not likely to happen again unless something very radical changes in the way we do church.

This congregation had been having great spiritual times in the chapel and study groups with depth. They had a small but solid children's ministry and grandmothers had been reading to children in the neighbouring school.

The break-through insight for this congregation came unexpectedly. It was at a Board event in the transformation process when one of the staff had a moment of inspiration. "We have been thinking we are failing because we think big is good and we are not big any longer. But we do small very well!" The sanctuary never did fill, but energy was released that

made their ongoing "small" ministry even more effective than it had been.

Music In Our Ears

We were invited to meet with people from a Regina congregation in an older neighbourhood. Their congregation's chairperson shared how that came about:

An important catalyst was a tirade one night at a Board meeting by one of our members who is in his 60's and has been a member for probably more than 30 years. He pointed out that our congregation was aging and that in 10 years or less most of the people here now will be gone? His daughter and grandson are members and he was concerned that there was nothing to keep them coming. We had spent \$170,000 rebuilding our roof but we had spent absolutely nothing on our spirituality or on people.

Centre staff worked with them to explore their identity and identify their strengths. We helped them do the research that revealed where their strengths matched neighbourhood needs. There was excitement and some good things happening, but nothing that really caught the imagination of the entire congregation

. We had virtually finished the process when it happened. The two page article in the March 2001 issue of the United Church Observer magazine was hard to miss. "Rosemont United's new music program doesn't have 76 trombones – not yet, anyway. It does have a music man and woman, more than 40 students and about 20 donated instruments."

Looking back, the choice of a music ministry as a major focus seemed almost too obvious. The minister at the time played a wicked piano. The chair of the Board played guitar in a group that led the

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singing in worship occasionally. The turning point happened when a newly arrived husband and wife team volunteered to lead a children's band and choir program. Instruments were donated. A fund-raising concert got city-wide support. The program saw its role to ensure that no child in the community would be denied a musical education. Meanwhile in the congregation, the occasional Sunday evening of music morphed into their "Sunday Night Live" featuring a local Christian band each week.

Out of the City

Sometimes we are invited to work with a congregation on specific occasions when they feel they are ready to take the next step forward in their journey. We have been out to one of the most isolated rural congregations in Alberta a number of times. The first time they clarified their ministry role in the community. Another time they wanted to explore how the two congregations in the pastoral charge could work more closely together.

A key event was when we asked the three questions that Jim Collins identified in his book *Good to Great*: "What are you best at?" "What are you passionate about?" and "How do you measure how effective you are at doing that?" The answer emerged very clearly. They were best at mentoring, and passionate about mentoring because it was the way they could best support each other on their life journey. They may have suspected this all along, but being able to express it openly has given focus to their ministry and energy to their mentoring.

Not every Time

We're not saying a congregational transformation process works every time. There are blocks that can stop the process at any point along the line, all to do with leadership. If there is a conflict in the congregation, that has to be dealt with before anything significant can happen. If the staff minister or priest has a need to be in control, that can keep lay leadership from developing.

On the other hand, if there are lay leaders who are opposed to any change –

and entering a transformation process means there will be changes – that can bring down the curtain on any progress. Then if the staff person who was key in initiating the process leaves the congregation part way through, that can change the whole picture. Often this opens the way for "the old guard" to reassert their leadership and bring the process to a halt.

If committed staff have developed a team of strong lay leaders, chances are that God's call can be heard and heeded. We are very clear that being an effective congregation in today's complex world requires a team. Any clergy who tries it on his or her own is only inviting burnout.

Team Leadership

Our process is simple. We use workshops, focus groups, research teams and questionnaires to help a congregation answer five questions about itself:

1. Do we have a clear picture of our identity – what makes us special?
2. Are we aware of needs in our community that we are equipped to meet?
3. Do we have a strong core of committed leaders?
4. Are we clear what God is calling us to accomplish through our particular ministry?
5. Is there spirituality behind everything we do – a deep sense of God's presence?

The process, however, is only a vehicle to provide the occasion for some special praying and listening.

We invite each congregation we work with to name a Transformation Leadership Team. They work with us to develop a process that fits the particular congregation. They act also as our eyes and ears to assess how the process is going.

Most important of all, they listen for the voice of God calling the congregation to the particular ministry for which they are equipped.

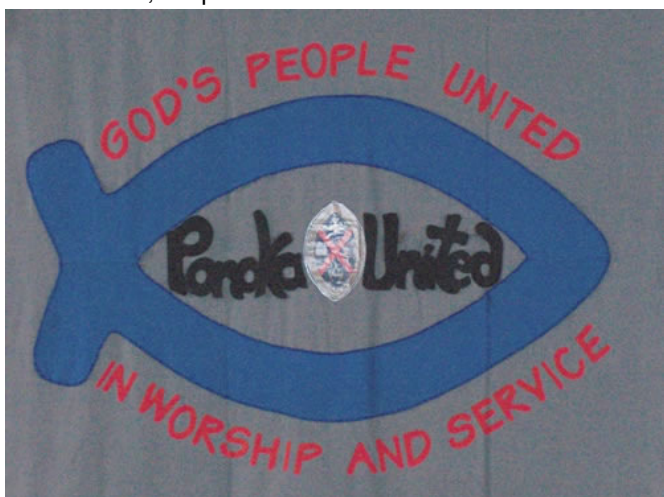
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The Ponoka Story

by Joyce Madsen, Centre Staff

They thought it was about transforming their building – a sanctuary, two halls, and a meandering basement. Would they tear down the old hall and replace it with housing? Could they use the back of the nearly empty sanctuary for other purposes? Was there a way to provide better access to the Thrift Shop?

What they ended up with was Klaglahachie, a *Ministry of Joy*. This is a ministry that focuses on the arts – music and drama, in particular. The mission of



the congregation, *to nourish God's Spirit within each person*, has led to the exploration of new ways to touch the lives of many. It is the intent that Klaglahachie will be the vehicle for connection to provide joy and wonderment to the lives of all those involved – whether performers or patrons.

The student minister working with them, Lyn Lamers, has an arts background and has provided much of the expertise needed to make this ministry work. It is all still under development, but a very successful event was held at the end of November. The December four-day dinner theatre run was a smash hit, every evening sold out — and people wanting more.

The people of Ponoka United Church have been on a journey. Beatrix Schirner, their minister, knew it had to be about more than the building and encouraged the congregation to consider hiring outside

consultants to help them vision a future. Members of the congregation and Board met with us and explored what the process might look like. The contract was approved and a year-long process was underway.

The Transformation Team worked with us to plan and organize the process and events and met with us regularly to let us know what the heartbeat of the congregation was. The 20 to 25 people who attended the workshops and events were dedicated to exploring what the future might hold for them.

They had a dream of a full sanctuary, children in the Sunday School and a return to the days when the building was buzzing with activity. The realization that the decline had happened over a long time and it was going to take new initiatives to begin the recovery process was and is a hard reality to deal with.

Beatrix worked with us to create more energetic worship, identify new possibilities, and celebrate the changes that were

happening. A mid-week children's group was offered with minimal response, but they kept trying new things and working to achieve the goals they had outlined.

What did happen is members of the congregation started to dream about how to share their gifts with others in the community. Out of those dreams came the seed of a new idea – a ministry of music. The passion was there – and God provided the support. The right people in the right place at the right time – and a leadership team that was open to trying new things.

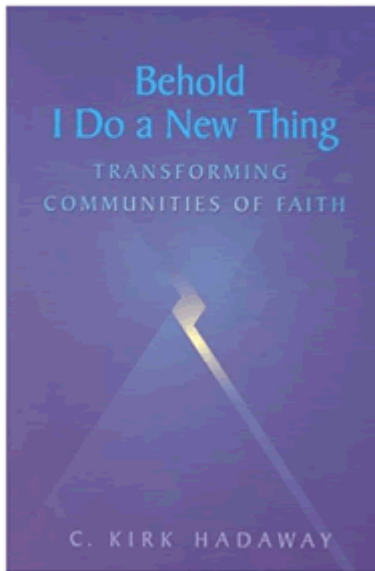
How will this ministry grow? No one knows the answer to that, but without making the commitment to work together to explore who they were and what it was God was calling the congregation to be and do in the 21st Century this new initiative with all its possibilities could not have happened.



**Come join our family!
Our mission is to nourish God's spirit within each person, to promote personal growth, and to work together for justice.**



Joyce Madsen



Behold I Do a New Thing

Book Review

This may not be a new book, but Kirk Hadaway's wisdom makes this an enduring source for congregations wanting to refocus their ministry.

He quotes Peter Drucker who says that "The business of a church is to change people; the business of a corporation is to satisfy them." Too many congregations are social clubs for an aging in-group — or they are entertainment-oriented organizations

whose aim is to please their current membership. The key question for Hadaway is simply, "Are people being changed (transformed) in your congregation?"

No one would take a hospital seriously that entertained its patients, talked about wellness, and organized interesting social activities — but did not heal anyone. If people come to congregations for spiritual healing or to be part of a faith community and it does not happen, they will not stay long. Too many mainline churches are designed to decline, "not by driving people away, but by failing to be useful, relevant, or interesting."

A transformational pastor helps the congregation to "reduce, simplify, reframe, and refocus its agenda on key elements that are central to its purpose." This means creating a team of congregational leaders who work together to make this happen.

The two main tasks which must be done well in a healthy congregation, Hadaway insists, are worship and small groups. Worship creates space for God to act in people's lives. Small groups help members "to know one another in non-superficial ways and form the church."

C. Kirk Hadaway, Behold I Do a New Thing. The Pilgrim Press. Cleveland Ohio. 2001. Review by Clair Woodbury.

Why the Emphasis on Sunday Morning?

Joyce's Rant

Why the emphasis on Sunday morning? If we really want to invite people to be part of our congregations, we need to focus on what it is they need — and that is most likely a place where they feel they can connect with others.

Those of us in the church continue to put 90% of our effort into what happens on Sunday morning. My experience is that those who want to understand their spiritual dimension or find meaning in their life are not about to join 100 other people to sing some hymns, digest a scripture and listen to someone reading a prayer. They are looking for a small group of people — maybe only one — who they can spend time with in earnest discussion and reflection.

Do you have a port of entry for someone who is living through a life transition — marriage, parenthood, divorce, death, etc? Or do you expect that they will come to worship on Sunday and that will somehow magically enable them to connect with others. If you don't have an intentional plan to invite, include, and journey with new people (or those who choose to come back) they won't come and they certainly won't stay.

Plan ahead for renewal ...

SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN DIALOGUE

May 12-16, 2008 in Edmonton

Clair Woodbury and Joyce Madsen lead this one-week intensive course that explores the way our current culture is asking questions that both challenge our faith and enrich our understanding of God. This is a journey of spiritual exploration filled with new insights and excitement.

Call the Congregational Life Centre at 780-619-0386 or St. Stephen's College at 780-439-7311 for information, or visit the Centre website www.congregationallife.com.