

When we were first married Gaye would sometimes say to me, “How do you think we’re doing?” And I would say, “sorry,” having that young husband’s instinctive reflex that this must be code and would ultimately lead to the uncovering of something I’d done wrong. Upon hearing the question I presumed dis-satisfaction but usually it wasn’t the case.

So too over the past few months when people have asked me, “So how do you think we’re doing as a congregation” the question does not necessarily contain anxiety or dis-satisfaction but simply reflects a desire to know where we are. So, this last Sunday of the Christian year seems like a good time to attempt a response.

The “How are we doing? Question presumes another: Compared to what? How are we doing compared to what? In our marriage the criteria question becomes the more interesting as we periodically assess where we are with respect to our spirits, our relationship, our children, our finances and the deep hopes and yearnings of our heart.

As a congregation we have been working on a 3-year plan, and much of that has been reported to you in the pamphlet to which some of you have responded. And, last week, I said I am not yet convinced that we have the kind of clarity we need about our particular mission as a congregation; but some things can be said.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that, as a congregation, we are trying to do something that is very difficult. When we open each worship service with “Oak Bay United Church seeks to be a vibrant, growing, inclusive and intergenerational Christian community” we’re not uttering platitudes. To be a vibrant, growing, intergenerational community is a very difficult thing; intergenerational ministry is a cross-cultural activity that means we are introducing, indeed welcoming, very different ways of seeing the world into our midst. (The Hospitality Reading Group is probing this reality more deeply now and I would invite you to speak to members of that group for more discussion.) This goal, which involves a modification of our core culture, is not easy; if it were every United Church congregation would be doing it.

Part of what it means to have this kind of multi-modal congregation, each with different values and frameworks, is that **no one is ever going to completely happy.**

Music and worship are usually the lightning rod. So the worship team receives comments like why can’t we sing more of these hymns – although you do need to know that Gordon holds our feet to the fire every week, guaranteeing that we have at least one heritage hymn. Others say, what’s happened to the Gospel rhythm or the jazz – Gordon can really play that, why aren’t you letting him? You should probably also know that, on scale of 1 to 10, where one is radical contemporary and 10 is traditional, our worship probably ranks as an 8 to 8.5. We are quite traditional in our framework though we are blessed because Gordon and Gaye bring such creativity to the component parts that each continues to sound fresh.

The desire to mirror diversity and to provide different points of connection is also why we will stick with a rotating roster of preachers. And we are blessed to have quality preachers like Margaret and Gail

willing to contribute because they bring not only a different style but a different experience of life and God.

What this difficult task of truly welcoming different generations and people from other cultural backgrounds require is a spirit of hospitality and humility from the “old guard” and tenacity from the new to hang in there until there is critical mass. For a mid-size congregation this can pose a significant spiritual discipline. We have committed to this path but we are not there yet; we have chosen not to downsize to become smaller where we could have a single focus and a uniform profile and we are about 75-100 people shy of where multiple groupings begin to feel natural. This means that very few actually feel comfortable with everything.

At the same time as we are endeavouring to be a multi-generational church, open to people of different cultural backgrounds, our organization is in the midst of a fundamental transition. Many have said this is like trying to change the tires on a bus while the bus is still moving – and it is. We have chosen to be a congregation that seeks to respond to the current reality of our world and like many other organizations we realize that this requires not only a retooling but a shift in how we make decisions. So a couple of years ago we began the movement away from the traditional style of church organization that has been in vogue for 100 years or so to another. We have not quite arrived at the new place; we can see it but we’re not there. In my understanding, we are leaning more in the direction of seeing the Board being concerned with direction and policy and the rest of us living out the ministry through the formation of all kinds of teams, some staff influenced, others not. We are reaching for a combination of flexibility, innovation AND accountability that is aware of and responsive to a radically different volunteer base than what we even had 15 years ago.

The very real question that has to be asked is **Are we up to this?** To me the question has at least three dimensions: spiritual, financial and the state of our heart/passion.

Spiritually it feels to me as if we have moved through a time in the wilderness and a time of grief. A couple of years ago I felt strong strands of grief – for the loss of Rob Smith and the manner of his leaving, the uncertainty fanned by staff turnover and the sense that maybe church as we had known it in our youth may not be the total vision for the future. In my experience grief is not something to be managed; more we learn how to live with it until it comes not to dominate our spirits. And I think we are there. We remember but grief no longer sets the tone of our living.

We also seem to be regaining energy. The years of uncertainty plus the energy consuming task of raising money for the renovations plus other changes meant we were tired, some very tired.

I do not sense as much suspicion, anxiety, weariness and fear as even a few months ago. We seem to be settling in and anxiety now seems to be fading and energy returning before a growing sense that “there is a spirit in the air.” Curiosity, excitement about discovery and possibility are in the air. We are stronger and we feel stronger overall.

Finances

Our expenditures for this year, 2011, are projected to be over \$1/2 million dollars. We run a significant budget with many revenue streams. And I commend members of the Finance Committee to you for more indepth discussion. During the past couple of years a lot of hard work has been done to get our bookkeeping and accounting procedures up to where they need to be. Our treasurer, bookkeeper and the Thrift Store and Annex people have all worked very hard to develop and implement systems so funds are properly accounted and tracked. We owe all those who put their shoulder to this task immense thanks.

So where are we financially?

The latest projection is that, by year end, our giving will be about \$30,000 short of budget. Why? It is not because people do not give generously and even sacrificially. And, as you can see from the chart, many people have taken a step up in their donations. Part of it is that, since 2009, twenty-seven good and faithful members have died. Many of these tended to give at the high end of the scale.

Budget wise this has been a disastrous year for building expenses. We have spent about \$83,000 in unbudgeted work. Part of this comes – as many other areas of our infrastructure – from the fact that for 15 years we didn't know where we going to be. Before this building was renovated it was condemned so why would we put money or effort into it? We didn't but now that we have moved back we are discovering things. The Trustees have requested a list of maintenance projects that might be upcoming and we are working on that list. However, while our building is important and requires good stewardship we are not primarily in the building business but the ministry business. So our Finance Committee has adopted strict criteria for any new maintenance project of significance. Quite simply we cannot catch up on 15 years in one.

And that has been true in other areas. These comments are no reflection on the people who gave long and faithful service. This is not about blame but is quite understandable in terms of everything else that was going on. But in the office since Barbara Ann left, we accumulated boxes and files that have taken months to sort through. We went to do a mailing and there was no up to date mailing list. People write to have their membership transferred to another city and our membership role is not up to date (and Betty Forgie and Barbara Ann have been working for months trying to bring order there.) In many ways, much of the year and a half since we took possession of this building has been spent getting our house in order.

We have decided to live and to rise to the challenges and the call of this new time.

How are we managing with these costs? We have been blessed with some generous bequests and we draw upon those. By the end of the year we will have approximately \$105,000 in GICs remaining and we are using that as a backdrop for planning for 2012. Personally I am concerned but I am not panicked. We are not currently living within our operating budget and that needs attention but there is no immediate catastrophe ahead though **change will be required.**

So the Board will be working early next year to develop 3 options about where we are heading as a congregation, what staffing those directions may require and how we project financial support. And then you will decide.

Which brings me to the matter of **heart**. To be brief, I believe you have the heart for what lies ahead. There is a growing passion to get on with it and a sense that we will be able to meet the spiritual and practical challenges. We want to be a faithful church, not only for ourselves but we also carry a yearning for a vibrant, healthy church for our children, our grandchildren, our friends, the de-churched and others. And we are curious about what may be around the corner and our role in that.

Possibilities

Are we foolish in this? I do not think so.

Given our current size we will have to be very strategic in our moves but we have very many assets that position us well. We have an attractive, functional, up to date infrastructure from which we can grow God's work. We have a good team that carries the potential to be great. We have diverse revenue streams. And we have people like you, modesty aside, that provide this congregation with a vast pool of skill, knowledge and experience in all kinds of situations, all around the world. And the truth is that if we are to become the kind of congregation that God seems to yearn for in this space it will take our best.

For us this is the time. In the larger culture there is the start of shift away from viewing religion as being purely toxic to an interest in spirituality And religion. And we are preparing ourselves for those conversations. We live in the midst of an area where many United Church congregations will close within the next five years. We will have the opportunity and responsibility to enlarge our ministry.

Much of what we currently do can be expanded.

We are people who care for one another, including those whose physical condition keeps them confined. Next year – although it has not yet been announced – we hope to reallocate some of our ministry money to have a slight increase in the hours devoted to those faithful for many years that are no longer able to be present on Sunday morning. But more will be required of us if we are to care for those who may never come into this building.

Look around and it is not difficult to envision a **multi-generational congregation** with faces and stories drawn from many cultures. If you were at the Wednesday evening event with Linnea Good, Gordon and Gaye it is not difficult to envision another way of gathering and worshipping, perhaps once a month that includes a simple supper. Look at those who work through the Thrift Shop and Annex and it is not difficult to imagine a congregation whose health is not solely measured by the numbers on a Sunday morning but by the number of relationships we have, the number of people who use this congregation as a platform to contribute, to make a difference even as they tell me, "but I don't come on Sundays." Soon we will judge vitality by the number of people with whom we have a relationship.

Look around at the interest and vitality of the Hospitality Reading Group and other conversations and it is not difficult to envision occasions two or three times a week where people of all persuasions, ages and

beliefs gather to talk things that matter in a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere. And now with our Community Hall – and someday with a renovated kitchen – we can easily host such gatherings.

Look around at the increasing number of children and young families we encounter through Sunday school, through the Pro D program, through VBS, through nights like last Wednesday and it is not difficult to envision new seeds sprouting. And, like last Wednesday, children playing with seniors, saying hello not as strangers or curiosities but as real people, with affection and respect and inquisitive, growing souls.

Look at the technological and communication tools we have already developed through the work of Mike, Barbara Ann and Gordon where our website is, even now, referenced by those who give workshops on what church website should look like and do. And it is not difficult to envision our web site as a place of conversation, of exchange, of engagement not only for us but for those anywhere.

Look around at the people in our congregation and the awareness that exists of the needs, hurts and opportunities “out there” in the world, places where we, individually and as a congregation and church, are already lending God a hand. And it is not difficult to envision the next step where we work alongside God for a better world all the while being ourselves firmly rooted in the practices and worldview that make us Christian.

Taking seriously the fact that God is already “out there” will be a challenge for us for we still prefer people to come to us. We prefer to make small adaptations rather than venturing too far beyond our normal so see all the different worlds, the different Victorias that are not like us; and yet, if the early disciples provide any example it is that Jesus constantly draws them into places of discomfort where a word, a hand, a companion to walk with may be needed. **Complacency is our temptation and our enemy.**

The possibilities are not difficult to envision or to cast a vision where God may be drawing us.

We have challenges to meet, some things to sort out, some people to recruit, some cautions to put in place so we don't burn and burn out people, some deep matters of culture to which we need to attend and some strategic decisions to make but we might just be, with God's help and a couple of miracles, up for the journey.

If God indeed is calling us and moving among us, God help us all because who knows what ride lies ahead. Be careful what you pray for. Amen.