

Backgrounder #3: Renewal and New Ministry Examples

It is clear that our society and the church are in the midst of significant change. The Spirit is moving, calling the church to take risks in how we respond to an ever-changing landscape, and creating space for God's new thing to emerge. Much has been made of the late Bishop Mark Dyer's notion of dramatic shifts in church dynamics every 500 years that he likened to a rummage sale opportunity for the church to rid itself of unneeded excess. Phyllis Tickle (*Emergence Christianity* and *The Age of the Spirit*) further developed this idea when she identified movement from a focus on belief (*sola scriptura*) to a focus on discernment, community, and the Holy Spirit.

While there is a longing and hunger for new and emergent ministries, experimentation and exciting new endeavours are already happening in the church. God is calling communities of faith to network, collaborate, learn, and draw inspiration from one another in ways that are contextually relevant. Here are just a few examples of new and emergent United Church ministries that illustrate how the Spirit is moving among us:

- **An innovative use of technology: "Trinity Live" shared worship through Trinity United Church in Thunder Bay, Ontario** (<http://trinityunitedchurch.businesscatalyst.com/trinity-live.html>)
Trinity United began sharing worship via an interactive Web-video and audio connection with two other United Churches. This shared initiative has now expanded to five churches, enabling each of these congregations to have a different worship experience than they could afford if they were worshipping separately. The five congregations use technology to tie together five locations, and take advantage of resources in each of the congregations that aren't in the others. Preaching can be from one location, prayers can be led from another, and a children's story can be told from a third. Congregations participate using their respective screens, with an online chat room for support and interaction. Trinity Live is not the only example of churches using technology to share in worship. Similar projects in northern Alberta have brought together communities of faith in remote areas for worship. Increasingly, church leaders and thinkers are exploring the implications of a changing context for the traditional worshipping congregation.¹
- **An example of shared leadership and an organic organizational model: "Souper/Culte + Supper/Worship," Montreal's Bilingual, Contemporary Supper Worship** (www.facebook.com/events/1536589079933131/?ref=ts&ref=ts)
This group, which is run through the McGill Anglican-United Chaplaincy and St. James United Church, gathers monthly to eat, worship, share communion, and explore spirituality through the Bible and popular media. They share in leadership equally among members. It is an example of a fluid, organic form of organization that can embrace uncertainty, explore newness and difference, and engage diversity.

¹ These uses of technology are examples of what writers such as Leonard Sweet (*Post-Modern Pilgrims, The Gospel According to Starbucks*) call EPIC worship: worship experiences that are **E**xperiential (providing meaningful opportunities for worshippers to be involved and take part in an experience, in contrast to a passive worship experience), **P**articipatory (creating space for all those gathered to offer leadership and actively participate), **I**mage-driven (integrating images through projection, installations, and other creative means), and **C**onected (worship that is about a community coming together and offers opportunity for connection, rather than a merely individualistic experience).

It is also a unique gathering catered to and created by young adults, where the focus is on bilingual engagement and mutual learning.²

- **Innovative repurposing of church space and partnership with community social service agencies: Community Peace Centre and Central United Church in Moncton, New Brunswick** (<http://centralunitedmoncton.com>)

The story of Central United Church in Moncton illustrates that communities of faith have the ability to manage change and respond to new social realities. Since the early 2000s, Central United Church has been reinventing itself to better serve its city. The congregation partnered with community organizations to form the Moncton Community Peace Centre, transforming Central United Church's building into shared community and church space. Today, 14 social service agencies are housed in the Community Peace Centre, helping people throughout the city meet the challenges of changing times. This project has brought together under one roof social agencies that were previously scattered throughout Moncton. The renovated 80,000-square-foot facility brings together various non-profit groups, allowing them to share resources, improve operational efficiencies, and create a "one-stop" experience for those in Moncton seeking support and assistance.

- **Fostering an ecumenical leadership model to respectfully support hungry families: College Avenue United Church's Food for Friends program in Woodstock, Ontario** (www.hopecollection.ca/2014/12/food-for-friends-an-alternative-to-food-banks)

College Avenue United Church in Woodstock, Ontario recently began the Food for Friends program, an alternative to the food bank the congregation had previously hosted for almost 20 years. It is an example of ministry beyond worship, and is transforming how communities offer food and services to those seeking assistance. The Food for Friends program issues food cards to local residents who need assistance to meet their weekly food needs. The cards function much like debit cards and are recognized at participating grocery stores, as the community seeks to provide dignity and empowerment to those in need. The Food for Friends program is one of several church-based services gathered under the umbrella of "Operation Sharing," an ecumenical ministry supported by 38 churches representing eight denominations in Oxford County. This project has now spread to neighbouring towns, and several other communities are looking at the food card model as an alternative to their local food banks.

- **An example of embodied worship experiences, opening up opportunities for new types of leadership and the ability to share electronically: Yoga Chapel** (www.yogachapel.com)

Yoga Chapel is a unique project that brings together a physical yoga practice with Christian scriptures and stories of faith. It partners with churches; hosts conferences, workshops, and retreats; and teaches private, small-group, and public yoga classes, weaving together the art of Christian storytelling with the wisdom of the physical yoga practice. It is not based out of a single congregation but rather is a community of faith that works in partnership with other communities, providing yoga chapel experiences at churches and for community groups in a variety of locations. A young minister, seeking to practise her shared passion for ministry and yoga outside of a congregational context, piloted Yoga Chapel in British Columbia. It has since

² This type of shared organizational model and the need to create space to respond to significant shifts in culture have been written about and discussed by thinkers such as Margaret Wheatley (*Leadership and the New Science*).

expanded, allowing its model to create space for online sessions and the reach of this ministry to take place across borders.

- **A faith community that elected to not have a building or paid staff: Faith United in Milton, Ontario (www.faithunitedmilton.org)**
Faith United Church in Milton, Ontario, made the decision to not have a church building or paid ministry staff. In the fall of 2014, Halton Presbytery recognized Faith United Church as a "community of faith." This designation recognizes that Faith United is an active, practising faith community but no longer looks like a traditional congregation that has a building and paid staff. The community chose this route so it could focus its energy and resources on outreach and mission. This initiative depends on other ministers in the Milton area who take on occasional preaching opportunities at Faith United, and the availability of the Masonic Hall, creating space for innovative worship and a focus on serving the wider community.
- **Recognizing and acting on a community need through ecumenical cooperation: St. Paul's International Charge (www.stpaulsestevan.ca/st-pauls-international-charge.html)**
St. Paul's International Charge is made up of three congregations: St. Paul's United Church in Estevan, Saskatchewan; Knox United Church in North Portal, Saskatchewan; and First Presbyterian Church of Portal, North Dakota. Recognizing the prevalence of homelessness in their communities, the churches of the charge cooperated with other churches in the area to establish the Warm Welcome Shelter Ministry. The homeless population it serves is unique: those coming to the area to work in the oil fields who are employed but have been unable to find places to live. Instead of sleeping in their cars or other makeshift arrangements, workers are able to access warm sleeping space in the United Church, as well as wholesome food and community.

The United Church is not alone in these new and emerging ministries. Other denominations, such as the Church of England and the Methodist Church in Great Britain, offer examples of transformational ministry. In 2004, these two denominations formed [Fresh Expressions](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk) (www.freshexpressions.org.uk) which has witnessed the emergence of new, dynamic church communities such as: café churches; soft-play church spaces with child-friendly furniture and material, creating space for families to play and grow in faith; pub communities; drop-in centres; and many more creative examples of being church. Fresh Expressions has since expanded to include partners from a range of denominations and organizations.

In many cases, innovative, emergent ministries provide insights into the opportunities that arise when communities take risks and try new things.

Links

- For more stories of hope and new life in The United Church of Canada and through our partners, visit the Hope Collection website: www.hopecollection.ca.
- See *From Anecdote to Evidence* from the Church Growth Research Programme website: www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/report.