



Accounting for Hope

*Toronto Scarborough Presbytery's story
of planning for change*

By Gary L. Redcliffe

Introduction

Christians have from their beginnings known that hope is central to faith, and that giving an account of that hope is one of their strongest forms of witness. Paul prayed God would give the Ephesian Christians a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that, with the eyes of their hearts opened, they would know the hope to which God had called them (Ephesians 1:17–18). The First Letter of Peter instructed its readers always to be ready to give an accounting of the hope that was in them, and yet to do it with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15–16). This article tells the story of a church judicatory (presbytery) – a story about hope, loss of hope and restored hope. It tries, with gentleness and faithfulness, to give an accounting for the hope (and despair) of members of the United Church in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery as they planned for change.

The companion to this article (*Potentials in Print*, Fall 2003) described how a cluster of concerned members of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery proposed a project, which they named **SpiritWork**, to see if deliberate change to the life and work of the presbytery could be accomplished. With the presbytery's support and financial backing they contracted with *Potentials*, a church consulting group, to undertake a process of discernment, discovery and direction over an eighteen-month period, beginning in late 2001. At the suggestion of the *Potentials* team a research group was established in order to track and test over a seven-year period the success of the project in creating change. This report is the completion of Phase One (as of July 1, 2004) of the group's research into the **SpiritWork** project.

The major discovery of the research group, made from analysis of information gathered from the participants in the project, has been the detection of the “root narrative” of the United Church in Scarborough. (See Appendix for details about research methods.) This story is so fundamental that it has shaped all the smaller stories of the life of congregations and their presbytery. It seems very difficult for the congregations or presbytery to move, or to imagine doing so, very far from its powerful pull. And yet we believe we have discovered signs that this story is changing. And as the story changes, the people who hear it, tell it and live it change, and their life together changes as well.

As we gathered up the responses to the **SpiritWork** project, in preparation for understanding and presenting it, we encountered the root narrative sitting like a

memorial artifact, in a place of honour near the centre of the room. After hearing about it, often in oblique ways, we came to realize that the hopes the presbytery and congregations have for their future are wrapped up in the root narrative. In the section below the narrative comes into full view, as we consider the desire for change in the presbytery.

What Needed to Change?

One of the first questions we asked participants was what they thought needed to change in the presbytery, and why. What we heard back brought us close to the founding story – root narrative – of the United Church in Scarborough.

Ralph and Wendy, in the story that follows, are composite characters whose dramatic presentation sets the stage for understanding what participants believed needed to change as the **SpiritWork** project began.

Ralph and Wendy are committed members of their respective Scarborough United Church congregations. Ralph moved into the area with his spouse and young family in 1952. He served his church in just about every way possible. In recent years, however, it became more of a struggle for him and his wife, as health issues increased. At the same time their energy and hope for their church began to diminish. Ralph felt burdened by the declining membership in his church, but could not exactly say why. So when he received the invitation to attend a presbytery consultation, as part of the **SpiritWork** process led by the *Potentials* team, Ralph was eager to be there. He hoped to find answers to the dilemmas his congregation faced.

Wendy is a single mother who grew up in a Lutheran congregation. She got involved in a United Church three years ago when her two children were invited by school friends to attend a Christmas concert at Sunday School. She quickly became an enthusiastic learner and participant, although she is one of the small number of regular church participants under the age of sixty-five. She is a presbytery representative, a role she now knows falls to newcomers if no one else wants to take it up. Wendy is eager to learn about matters of faith and spirituality. She is full of life and positive energy. When the opportunity arose to attend the first consultation she quickly signed up.

On a frosty Saturday in January, Ralph and Wendy and about fifty-five others gathered at the consultation. There the demographic profile for Scarborough and for their church neighbourhoods was spelled out. They heard the voices of others like themselves, speaking of the sadness they felt in their own hearts and recounting stories of decline in other congregations.

Someone said, for example, “We can no longer take care of a building.... We do not have the strength or energy to do it.” Another participant noted, “Decisions are going to have to be made. There are several older congregations with declining numbers in Scarborough. The demographic information now confirms

that there is not even much potential for a reversal of our present decline.” Ralph and Wendy could both relate to the folks who spoke those words.

Another person reported that conflict had become a regular feature of the congregation's life. “We never used to fight the way we do now. Sure, we have always had our differences, but we worked them out as we tried to give our best for the good of the church. But now there seems to be so much more at stake, we just don't know where to turn, and so we seem to turn on each other. It's sad, really.”

“Our congregation just cannot carry on much longer,” lamented one participant. “We are now so old, and getting older. No younger people are attending anymore. Our building needs some serious work on it, but we have no will and no money to do anything but the simplest repairs. It cannot go on this way for much longer.”

There were many other stories like these. Ralph and Wendy listened. They heard the stories, but they also heard the mood and the lost hope conveyed through the stories of the people and their churches.

There were also stories of a different kind, stories of amalgamations and renewed hope for some of Scarborough's United Churches. For example, a story was told about the amalgamation in the 1950's that created Zion-Wexford United Church. The old pioneer-farming church was faced with an influx of suburban newcomers. “We could have kept them out [of the church], so the story goes, but we welcomed them in.” A woman of long-standing membership in Zion-Wexford told this story during a recent visioning event with Wilmar Heights United Church as those two congregations were exploring amalgamation. The message was, “In our past we have faced great change and we responded by being an open congregation, incorporating people who were very different from us. Now we are being asked to do something similar again.” This story took on extra power when it became known at the January, 2001, consultation that the woman who spoke those words of welcome in the 1950's has a daughter who was at the forefront of the recent amalgamation that created Wexford Heights United Church.

Ralph and Wendy went home with a sense that their own church experience was shared by a lot of United Church people in Scarborough. Church life is challenging these days and not getting any easier. Still, some conversations had begun, resulting in a slight lifting of spirits. Ralph and Wendy also took with them a heightened sense that their church work continued to have purpose.

While walking in a shopping mall ten days later Ralph spotted Wendy and invited her to have coffee with him. Their conversation quickly turned to the consultation and the future of their respective congregations.

Said Wendy, "Somehow I feel relieved and more hopeful after the consultation. Our congregation is not the only one going through a fall-off in numbers. There is a mood of sadness and even some denial. But, all the same, I was heartened by the sense of relief I felt when we realized we were not the only ones feeling sad and alone."

Ralph responded, "Yes, I feel that too. You know how some folks say that us old-timers only long for a return to the glory days of the 1950's? Well, after the consultation, I'm not at all sure that's what we want. I think what we want is to know that all our hard work and Christian devotion amounts to something. It's hard to watch what we built shrink and shrivel."

Wendy added, "One thing I saw was that the presbytery wants to help congregations like yours and mine. At least it is helping congregations come together to talk about their problems and to find solutions. I think that is a hopeful sign."

This story is a composite based upon answers to our research question asking what needs to change in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery. The members are describing the state of the United Church in Scarborough. They are reflecting on its storied past and feeling deeply, perhaps legitimately, saddened that the hopes which once fuelled their passion and work for their church have lost their power. The Ralph and Wendy story points out that the first great need in the presbytery is for a change to its generally depressed or sad collective mood. Respondents seemed to recognize that their hope for regeneration lies in transforming what hopes they have formerly held for their church because those hopes have been leading them to despair.

Another greatly needed change about which people spoke had to do with the way congregations related to one another (or didn't!) Many participants reported that they had virtually no knowledge of other congregations in Scarborough, and some had only the most rudimentary knowledge about a presbytery. For example, one participant reported, "We don't know in our congregation that there is another United Church congregation just a few blocks away. Why is that? Well, we never talk about the church as anything more than 'us.' 'We' are all we imagine when we say or think about *the church*."

Another participant commented on her feeling of isolation, hoping that this condition could possibly change. "I know what it feels like to live alone, now that I am a widow. I feel isolated, left to my own devices, without a lot of support or help. I find it hard sometimes. But now that is what it feels like at church too. We are older, and alone, and we have to make ends meet on reduced income and rising expenses. I feel more and more like I'm home when I'm at church!"

Here are a few words from someone who wants to be hopeful but finds it hard to be. "I wish things were not like they are. I would like to see us change back to the

way they were in our church, with lots of people, including children, a big choir, a beautiful building, and so on. But that change seems unlikely, in light of the demographic information we received from *Potentials*. It's unrealistic. But something needs to change, and soon. Maybe together our congregations can come up with solutions that we would never have thought about on our own."

Several participants reported that the presbytery and its committees, before the **SpiritWork** project got off the ground, seemed uninspired, emotionally flat, without much life, even depressed. Not much wonder if we consider that the presbytery is made up of representatives from those congregations that are in decline or afraid that decline is just around the corner. Emotional fatigue is the likely affect for a people who are still trying to live as if their church is stable, thriving and looking optimistically ahead, when in fact the church is unstable and becoming more so all the time. All the stories we heard and the data we collected made it abundantly clear that the presbytery is, as one participant stated, "unsteady and somewhat erratic in its behaviours." In the places where the presbytery has carried on as if it were still in a stable environment, "it has made the situation worse," in the judgment of several of our respondents. What needs to change? The presbytery needs to change the way it builds and maintains its relationships with congregations. The desire for change in this area was repeated over and over.

These statements, recorded by participants in the **SpiritWork** process, make it clear that many are feeling quite urgently the need for some kind of positive change. What they say seems to point back to the large impact of the root narrative in shaping the hopes and visions of the congregations and the presbytery. And that narrative is seriously out of joint with current reality for many of those who responded to our research questions. They impressed upon us the gravity of the disconnect in their congregations and especially in the presbytery as it tries to administer and oversee the work of the church in Scarborough.

The root narrative

The root narrative for Scarborough United Church congregations and their presbytery has been around Scarborough United Church circles since the 1950's, but was born long before that. The Scarborough church's root story reinforces the message that growth and expansion have been and still are the visible signs of Christian faithfulness and of spiritual progress in the United Church.

A root narrative is part of the cultural substratum of an organization such as a congregation or presbytery. It would be unusual for a root narrative to be "told" as a story because it is a composite of many smaller stories of individuals and groups in the church. It influences a wide range of thought, action and interaction in a largely unacknowledged way, much as the subconscious part of the mind makes its impact. In this study no one told the root narrative as such, and yet through many smaller stories we heard it.

The plot of the root narrative is organized to support the goal of having a healthy and vital congregation in every neighbourhood with lots of people of all ages and stages, creative programs and a harmonious social and spiritual life. Participants are assumed to be neighbours and friends, serving on the church committees, as well as on the local PTA and on the boards of libraries, hospitals and schools. Since the end of the Second World War and the building up of the neighbourhoods of Scarborough this has been the predominant story. It was the root narrative seeding all other United Church stories. Associated stories have also grown but none has been as accepted or as powerful as this one. The influence of this story, as noted, is still being felt in the presbytery and in its congregations five decades later.

After careful consideration of the mountain of research data generated by our protocol, it seems clear that the root narrative has been given uncontested sovereignty as the primal provider of United Church identity and mission, and therein lies its problem for the church of today. The root story has become what Harrison Owen describes as “the way we do things around here” (Owen, 18). The power of that story is its telling church members and participants who they are, or should be. When it is no longer possible to be the kind of church the founding story tells members they should be, feelings of disappointment, sadness and despair may begin to set in. The story tells the people of the churches that they are a failure when their congregations shrink and decline. In other words their faith and the facts do not match. One or the other is wrong, and because the facts of decline are undeniable there must be something wrong with their beliefs or their faith behaviour. When entrenched hopes for the church become unrealizable, hope flips over and its underbelly comes into view: hopelessness. Burdened with this condition, church members have little energy to find imaginative solutions for their problems.

Their situation is made even worse by the continuing dominance of the root story in church culture. That story assures them that their sense of loss and sorrow has no legitimate place to be told and heard. Thus, because the root narrative no longer tells them who they are, and they cannot any longer do what that story has told them to do, they have no story (human or divine) to give them place, identity and purpose. Survival creeps into the spiritual space vacated by hope; it gets embraced as the best possibility when growth and progression are beyond reasonable hope. Survival – prolonging life or delaying death – has become the new goal of congregations in decline. Toronto Scarborough Presbytery is called to do its mandated tasks of pastoral oversight, discipline and visioning for the future in this context of sagging spirits.

The root story in Scarborough has kept alive a set of hopes, the realization of which would build a growing and vital church. Now there is despair and hopelessness in hope's place. Why? I think we should at least consider the possibility that hope for the kind of church they have been visualizing for a long

time is now a burden to many if not all the congregations and to the presbytery in its formal role as a judicatory. The story has moved from being a blessing to being a burden. This is the condition that many presbyters have identified as most in need of transformation.

SpiritWork has helped the presbytery see the matter clearly, a painful but necessary and helpful process. Facing losses squarely and honestly is the first step to creative, imaginative living, including changing hope itself and the bedrock of faith on which it rests. Transforming what it means to be a church and transforming despair into new or renewed hope can only happen during a time of transition when new and/or transformed stories take a legitimate place in church gatherings and meetings. In order for the life and dynamics of the presbytery and its congregations to change, church members will have to relinquish or reduce their commitment to the root narrative. They will have to change what they hope for.

Root narrative and transforming change

As we said in the previous article, change begins to occur when a significant number of members in an organization see and understand that they face a new reality, that the narrative that they use to interpret themselves no longer holds true (12). When that mythic narrative begins to be questioned stories emerge that express faithfulness and discipleship in new ways. In Toronto Scarborough Presbytery there are voices that are questioning long-held beliefs in the presbytery. They are asking members to consider who they are now, in light of new realities. They are beginning to seek and find new language to tell a new story. They are inviting the presbytery to consider how to grow in faith with a renewed sense of mission in the face of their emerging stories, which seem to be saying that faithfulness looks different from how it did in the past.

From what we have heard from our research partners and respondents, the **SpiritWork** project and the contributions of *Potentials* have already triggered some positive, if small, changes. It is too soon after the project to tell whether any current changes will cascade into larger changes. But the fact that new stories are emerging to challenge the root narrative's dominant position should give United Church members in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery reason for hope.

We might ask, "What is the Good News in the story?" In Scarborough United Churches we discovered from participants in our research process that there has been some Good News as a result of the **SpiritWork** project and the work of *Potentials*. It is not huge or dramatic Good News but it is solidly present in the data. Here's what participants told us.

Signs of Change

Participants were well aware of the root story of their church. What kind of change did they experience in relation to the **SpiritWork** project? Not everyone said it, but the majority answered the question this way: "Yes, certainly I

experienced a positive response to the **SpiritWork** project, including the contribution from *Potentials*.” Below we report our findings about change in the presbytery as a result of the project.

A changing mood

Someone noted that “the presbytery needed a kick-start out of our flatline condition. As a result of the project there is a growing energy. Instead of general discouragement and pessimism about the future of the church ... we are looking at ways to look at the church in a broad context.” Another member reported, “Things seem more hopeful now than they were before.” There has been a shift “from failure to positives, from frustration more to hope,” one respondent said. “We are more intentional and proactive,” said another.

There has also been a shift in the level of curiosity. Several respondents stated that they have learned enough about other congregations and about the presbytery to want to learn more. “We have found out a lot about ourselves and about one another,” reported one participant. Another wrote, “If we have been losing hope in recent years, at least now we know what it is realistic to hope for.” Someone else observed that there is a relationship between curiosity about one another and a growing imagination about what could be accomplished together. Another said, “It was something like meeting a new neighbour, and getting excited to learn all about her and her family, her values, what are her interests and so on. For the first time in a long time I see the church in a new light, and all because I got to meet some new church neighbours!”

Finally, there were changes of heart during the process. These were very significant changes, and it is likely they had a deep effect on the outcome in spite of the small number of reports about it. For example, one presbyter spoke passionately about the importance of participating in the gatherings. Another person who attended the first consultation in January said later, “I started from a position of asking, ‘What’s all this got to do with church?’ But I became convinced that we needed to change, just from looking at all that information.” One woman stated, “From where I sit, I never have believed in this project. That’s my first statement.” When asked, “Has that changed now?” the woman responded, “Yes, because the people at the gatherings struck me as people who want to go forward, who realize there’s cement tied to the feet of the church. I was hopeful. It was wonderful. I came away from the first session thinking, ‘Wow, look at all these people who are willing to rethink, who are willing to make change....’”

The above responses make it clear that there have been changes in mood and attitude in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery, and that these changes help create the conditions for deeper and more substantial change. Some of these latter kinds of change have already been observed and reported to us.

A changing identity

In the judgment of several participants in the **SpiritWork** process, one of the most significant areas of change was what the presbytery thinks about its collective identity. Three different angles emerged about this matter.

We can no longer assume, one respondent commented, that who we are and what we do [as the United Church] is known or even supported in the public sphere. This feature of life in the early twenty-first century creates a serious disconnect between the presbytery's root narrative and current realities. "Collectively the United Churches are not any longer who they have always claimed they were – a contributing member of local neighbourhoods. Those neighbourhoods no longer know United Churches are in their midst, and do not seem to care much anyway." So collectively, United Churches in Scarborough are in search of a renewed sense of identity and purpose. What will be the Good News they tell now?

"United Church folks do not really know about one another, nor about the presbytery." So said a participant in an interview. Another noted that the **SpiritWork** project "seems to have stimulated a need to make the United Church in Scarborough the object of its own learning instead of assuming that we know about each other." Another added, "Who we can become together as congregations in this area is becoming more important than who we have been separately in our individual congregations."

Finally, **SpiritWork** has called the churches into discussions beyond the interests of their own congregations, that is, into a sense of being together. "Because we thought for so long that everyone was just like us we did not see the need, as urgently as we do now, to participate in a co-creative process defining, through discernment, what the United Church is called to be now and into the future so we can proclaim it to ourselves and to others." This imaginative and creative task centres on a sense of collective identity, a broad concern among participants in the **SpiritWork** project.

Although all respondents mentioned that there is a long way to go in achieving a sense of collective identity, several spoke thoughtfully about the need for it if the church is to live faithfully in the years ahead.

It seems clear that many United Church folks in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery have become increasingly aware that knowing who you are is an important matter for a life of faith. Many also seemed to know that who they are as the United Church is connected to who they are as congregations together. Moreover, United Church members cannot assume they know who they are because they are not who they once were, and they also have a different relationship to their context.

Participants are beginning to imagine ways of working together collaboratively and cooperatively. In addition they recognize the presbytery is encouraging this possibility.

“When our presbytery representative described **SpiritWork** to our congregation, he might describe it as a – well, this wouldn’t be the language he would use – but as a corporate response to declining enrolment in the church and it’s about amalgamation and it’s about downsizing or re-sizing.... Although I understand that’s a part of the picture, I’m more inclined to say the **SpiritWork** project is about building relationships and visioning a United Church presence in Scarborough.” What is described here is a first step in congregational collaboration.

Another participant made the criticism that too many congregations are simply navel-gazing. She said emphatically, “We need to decide what to do with our faithfulness other than keep a building standing.” She went on to say, “Seeing ourselves as a collective of congregations with a common identity and seeking ways of working collaboratively in shared ministries has already begun to happen in this presbytery. Some said that amalgamations are the way for congregations to work collaboratively. This way they continue to survive and even to thrive.” Someone else declared, “Breaking down our congregational barriers is necessary.” This year we are witnessing the second recent amalgamation with possibly more to come.

There are other ways, perhaps not yet considered, to share resources, such as printing of Sunday bulletins, sharing Confirmation Classes, even encouraging more than one congregation to share a common building without amalgamating.

Some participants believe there is already a shift in the presbytery toward enabling congregations to work together. From its beginning **SpiritWork** asked the question, “How can the presbytery help in our ministry together?” Hearing that question caused many congregations to think and hope that a new spirit of cooperation and collegiality had begun to grow in the presbytery. The simple asking and hearing a straightforward question is not, by itself, sufficient to indicate deep or enduring change. But it signifies a beginning and a potential for significant change in the sense that ministry in Scarborough is most faithful when it is shared.

One of the outcomes of the growing sense of togetherness among congregations is that they are beginning to understand that they are collaborators in a common mission instead of competitors for a scarce and shrinking market. We have heard voices say that working together is not just about survival but about trying to be faithful to the gospel in Scarborough. And being faithful no longer means the same thing it did in yesteryear. Living faithfully in the current Scarborough context means changing what the churches hope for. Changing hope itself has become the goal of participants we interviewed, as they continue to learn their

way into a new collective identity and as they learn ways of collaborating. Nowhere is this changed hope more evident than in the way the root narrative is beginning to be re-interpreted. As well, other narratives are beginning to take their place alongside the founding narrative and challenge its supremacy as the exclusive definer of congregational or presbytery identity and mission.

A changing faith and theology

In relation to the life of congregations and judicatories, I understand faith to include both belief and behaviour. Here I focus primarily upon the behavioural aspect of faith, that is, practices of faith that express publicly the way Christians choose to organize their ways of living in the world as communities of faith, their ways of relating to one another in those communities of faith and their ways of enacting their faith in worship, care and spirituality. These public and observable practices constitute the language of authentic Christian identity. Faithful practices are therefore as significant in telling the world who Christians are as their professions of faith.

How do Scarborough United Church folks practice hopeful faith, given the apparent loss of conviction about their root faith narrative? Interesting question! And has the language of faith and theology, including practices of faith, changed much since the **SpiritWork** project began? Another interesting question!

When asked about altered language or practices of faith not many respondents were comfortable answering the question. One respondent nailed the issue when he said, "The real watershed experience came with the realization that we were in a crisis of faith. We witnessed our hesitancy to talk about our faith, or even to feel secure in what we believed. When we were asked to respond to the demographics in terms of our faith, the place went almost silent, and people were reluctant to start to talk about our faith issues. And that was a surprise to me."

Even so, there were some wonderful statements about faith discovery and expression. For example, one of the **SpiritWork** team said he thought that "we've been re-formulating what we mean by faithfulness. It's not just survival. There's an amalgamation paper that has been produced for two congregations and in one section of it they've tried a biblical outline of it from Genesis to Revelation. One section of it is Exodus, that we as two congregations are called to leave the land of survival for the new land of mission."

Faith is being reformed and reformulated so it no longer depends upon the root narrative of the presbytery. Many people in the area are earnestly searching for alternative experiences and expressions of faith. Some folks reported that small steps have been taken. Faith words and language are being more commonly uttered in presbytery meetings than they used to be. In making decisions, as several folks reported, committees are reflecting carefully on practices of faithfulness in current contexts, in the case of, for example, replacing a furnace or doing church repairs.

Here is a final thought about faith and theology. Someone said, “The whole idea of the church ruling triumphantly over the social and political landscape, well I think we have suddenly been forced to face how far our church has moved from that vision. For many it is a deep loss. But the old is gone and we’d better face up to it. Where do we find the signposts to guide our way now that the Christendom vision is gone? Well, maybe we should be going back to the gospel.”

Changes in mood and the more substantial changes in behaviour add up to a considerable sum of change in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery as a result of the work of *Potentials* and the **SpiritWork** project. What is most interesting is that the changes have begun to take some shape *not after and as a consequence of the project, but during the time span of the project itself*. The foregoing responses reveal that many United Church folks from congregations and the presbytery believe that the root story is not going to be the story for their future. Of course, no small measure of grief is expressed about that, but for many participants change somehow seems less of a threat now than it did at the beginning of this project.

Reflections and Observations

Our research group has examined a slice of the life of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery. We have asked participants for their thoughtful responses to the **SpiritWork** project, and we have received a vast report of their experiences of the project. There could be more and different kinds of change in the future as a result of the project, because the **SpiritWork** team and the presbytery are still actively involved with their work.

What we offer here are not final conclusions or normative directions. However, we believe that Toronto Scarborough Presbytery and most of its congregations have embarked upon a pathway of change. What we have seen are signs and signals of changes that are beginning to be reflected by the root narrative. Below we will describe and reflect upon, especially in relation to the root story, the substance of the changes and what appears to have created them. We will attempt to stay as close as possible to the research data given to us by the research participants. However, it is necessary to begin this section with a brief review of “change” and “transformation.”

Change and transformation

In the precursor to this article we identified two fundamental types of change. The first is “adaptive change.” It maintains the existing equilibrium in the organization and, in fact, only occurs during periods of relative calm. This type of change is sometimes called fine tuning, minor, developmental, alpha, single-loop, linear, incremental, first order, enhancement, continuous, etc. However, no matter the name used it describes a type of change where the elements being changed remain within their existing framework. From all the choices of terms found in the

vast literature to describe and analyze change, we prefer the term “adaptive change” to describe the category for frame-sustaining change.

The second type of change is “transformative change,” which usually happens during periods when there is already a disequilibrium at work. Among researchers in the field of study this type of change is variously called second order, deep, revolutionary, gamma, double-loop, nonlinear, structural, quantum, advanced, multi-dimensional, transformative, discontinuous, radical, etc. (Levy and Merry, 3–9). No matter the name given to the second type of change it is qualitatively different from the first. The frame of the organization is changed, modified and reshaped. Nadler et al. note that there are two basic variations of this type of change. Organizational frameworks can be re-oriented (organizational frame-bending) or re-created (organizational frame-breaking) (29–31). Following the literature in the study of the dynamics of change, we have understood the term “transformative change” to refer to frame-bending (re-orienting) and frame-breaking (re-creating) change.

One of the discoveries from our research has been that frame-bending change is the most apt description of the kinds of changes emerging from the **SpiritWork** and *Potentials* work with the presbytery. Primarily we have learned that transformative change first noticeably re-orientes the way an organization tells its story. And when the story changes, the identity and mission of the congregations and their presbytery begin to change, as well as their language, hopes, values and behaviour. That is, the framework for the life and work of the presbytery changes. This, we call a kind of transformative change. We are interested in being clear about the way we understand the term because it does carry some problematic freight.

“Transformation” lost the lustre given to it by Harrison Owen’s work in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s as it gave way to the more easily defined term “change.” In recent years, however, “transformation” has returned to favour, as researchers concluded that some kinds of change are best described as transforming the very roots of an organization.

The rise of interest in “transformation” does raise a set of serious questions, for the church in particular. For example, is change, even transformative change, the goal of the church? And what content does the term have? What exactly does “transformative change” in fact change? From what to what? In this article we are saying that transformative change involves changing an organization’s root narrative, which in turn changes who church communities say they are and what they do. That level of change gives rise to changes in hopes, visions, language and behaviour, that is, changes in observable action.

Not one, but many stories

We discovered in the course of our research that the root narrative does not change easily or automatically. What we found was that the root narrative may

fade in prominence or even be swamped as new narratives begin to take on more power. It is clear that the work of *Potentials* and the **SpiritWork** project released some of the hold of the root narrative on the church. The project has helped people feeling despair over their church losses begin to realize that they are part of a Christian story that is bigger than the root story's representation of the Good News. New and different stories have emerged to help them see their Christian identity in ways that help them re-cast their mission as a church.

When a root narrative becomes entrenched it becomes impervious to efforts to change it. Devotees of the root narrative are likely to resist giving up the place of prominence of their founding story. Change comes when enough members of an organization realize that other stories are telling them who they are and what their purposes are. With awareness of a disconnection between the root narrative and current reality some space opens up for other sources of identity and mission to be explored. In other words what was once assumed to be incontrovertible truth is now openly contested.

Challenging and revising the root narrative

Other narratives with breadth and depth exist in the Scarborough churches alongside the root narrative. In a time of change and transition these other narratives tell alternative stories about who the congregations are and what they should be doing. Listeners are beginning to gather around those stories as they recognize that they make some sense in nurturing their identity and giving them guidance. The new or revised stories are starting to compete with the root narrative for more attention than they previously had. One of the new stories concerns the decline of the church in contemporary society and the feeling associated with that loss; the other is a more hopeful story about new neighbours.

1. A story of loss and sadness

The participants who responded to our questions about change offered a surprising number of references, direct and indirect, to their feelings of loss and sadness about the church. What caught me off guard was not that some folks were feeling a sense of loss, but that *so many* expressed that feeling. Moreover, the feeling was deep and often intense. The sadness we heard was related to the losses that folks were experiencing in their church life.

Hearing elements of this story over and over again has helped me realize that acknowledging the death of the once-powerful status of the church in society, and the apparent irrelevancy of familiar Christian attitudes in a secular society, is an important pastoral task of the church. It is important not simply for the good care of the participants, but for the prophetic task of re-founding the church along new patterns. During times of transition increasing numbers of church members look for ways of listening for and telling hitherto hidden stories of loss and sadness so they can discover "new and renewed spiritual resources for letting go of the past and taking hold of the future" (Arbuckle, 3, 145).

There has been no place in the root narrative for despair. That feeling and stories related to it have been disenfranchised. The stories are submerged, disallowed, even disempowered. We have discovered two common responses to this situation.

Some, perhaps many, in Scarborough United Church congregations, in the face of decline and a diminished life, have been living as if things have not changed, an approach that is common in people who suffer loss. Some, perhaps many, members of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery have been living as if things have not changed. Some, perhaps many, of the groups with a structured and mandated life in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery (those dealing with personnel matters and issues of property trusteeship, for example) have been carrying on as if things have not changed. The social and psychological impulse in people experiencing feelings of loss is to seek safety, security, people and places where it is possible to stop feeling vulnerable, buffeted, victimized or powerless in the face of loss. In Toronto Scarborough Presbytery and its congregations, the natural impulse to flee from feelings associated with loss has been regularly applauded by silencing stories about loss. This is accomplished by encouraging stories about positive growth. The effect of that encouragement is to discourage telling stories that deviate from the main message of the root story. It is not possible, so the reasoning goes, to keep this church going if its members are going to allow negative feelings a place on the agenda. Thus the root story maintains its position of dominance in the church.

Others engage the new reality willingly, and sometimes eagerly. For example, they acknowledge that something happened in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery to deeply affect the power of the root narrative. When Toronto Scarborough United Church members came together to hear the report from *Potentials* about the demographics of their neighbourhoods, they came to view the Body, their body, the Body of Christ in its world. They did not know it at the time, and some even resisted what they were hearing, thinking this was a useless exercise. However, what they heard and saw that day forever changed their lives. They knew that their world would never be the same again. This kind of reality check has forced congregations, according to our participants, to say “hello” to the reality they now are living. It has also meant that the root narrative has lost a major source of its power to persuade church people who they are and what they should be doing as a people of God. At the very least, church members are now able to question openly their founding and root narrative.

Because of the work of the **SpiritWork** project and the *Potentials* team, the presbytery widened the plot of the root narrative to make room for the burden that story has caused its members. United Church members in Scarborough, because of this dynamic, are beginning to say that they are a hopeful, but grieving, people.

2. A story about new neighbours

Of the many consultations, workshops and other presbytery gatherings none seemed as potent in generating a change to the root narrative as the consultation where the *Potentials* team presented demographic data for Scarborough and the neighbourhoods of the congregations. There was scarcely a single participant in our research who did not mention the strong influence of the demographic information. It has changed the way Scarborough folks think about their church work, the way they talk to one another and the way they plan for the future. The root story of growth and expansion as a sign of faithful Christian community life is no longer the prime arbiter of Christian identity and mission.

It was surprising to see from the research data how few of our participants were in touch with the current demographic realities of their church neighbourhoods. They had a general impression that in recent years there were many more people of colour, speaking languages other than English. They observed mosques, temples and churches being built for Scarborough populations that would never be candidates for worshipping at their United Churches. They mingled with immigrant populations (some visible because they are dark-skinned and some invisible because they are white-skinned) at the shopping malls and on the sidewalks. But they seemed not to know the detailed extent of Scarborough's changed population. Those who attended the *Potentials* consultation when the demographics were presented for the region and for each congregation saw in bold relief how their situation had changed. In some ways it was a relief for folks to know why their congregation was in decline, and why there were few young families, youth and children attending their churches. It also showed them that they had to change the direction of their efforts. This was an important breakthrough, and it could not have occurred without a close look at the demographics. That data spoke for itself.

The demographics, newly engaged with in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery, make it clear that the root story had been calling church members to ignore another story of the lives of the people of Scarborough. The founding narrative, with its attention on growth as a sign of faithfulness, it is now easy to see, understood growth to mean an increase in church members who are like us, that is, white and often middle class. There are exceptions to this, but this is the truth of the United Church's story generally, and particularly in Scarborough where thirteen percent of all immigrants to Canada settle.

The demographic reality of the church's life in Scarborough unavoidably confronts churches and the presbytery with this question: What are we going to do with this story of our lives, now that we know where we live? The story of being a neighbour has developed to an extent where it challenges the dominance of the root and founding story's insistence that growth is what really matters. Alongside the story of loss and sadness about the decline of the church, this story stimulates revisions of the root narrative into a more realistically hopeful story. The process of challenge and revision seems to be helping at least some

United Church members in Scarborough to know anew who they are and what they should be doing as faithful and imaginative followers of Jesus in the current context.

Leading change in changing contexts

As Canadian congregations and their church judicatories struggle to meet the challenges presented by their changing contexts, they will be called upon to discern what nurtures their spirits. The root narrative we have identified in the Scarborough context is no longer in a position of dominance; it is being challenged and changed. As with so many other parts of human life these days, there is no single point of reference to provide guideposts and direction for faithful living. Instead, there are now multiple points of reference, and even those points of reference are not in a fixed state. This situation calls for church leadership that will be competent to negotiate and navigate in the world of faith when the root narrative no longer has the generative strength to support established patterns of belief and behaviour. The **SpiritWork** team and *Potentials* helped people understand their story, context and situation more clearly than they had previously. Thus they found a fresh permission to consider a future (or futures) different from that projected for them by their root narrative.

One of the great insights of Christian faith is that external reality is not an ultimate constraint; Christians believe they *co-create* the world through a complex interaction of Holy Spirit and the clay of their lives. They know that they cannot deny the reality of the external world, but they create the world in part at least by projecting their spirits and hopes upon it – for better or worse. As leaders care for those facing the challenges of changing contexts, they invite them to consider that they have a choice, which by grace they can make. They can choose between an inner confidence in wholeness and integration for their life and their church, as they work toward re-forming the language and life of their faith. Or they can be overtaken by inner terror about life being diseased and ultimately terminal. They have a choice about what hopes for their churches they are going to lift up before God and the world. When they make their choices they are helping to make the world the way they imagine it to be. When presbytery leaders nurture, support and encourage those who feel the loss of their former hopes and experience the challenges of their new demographic reality, they are helping faithful church folks exercise meaningful choice about what they can hope for in the future of their church. There is no leadership role more important than this one. It is pastorally responsible and, at the same time, effective for directing imaginative energies toward a new or transformed root narrative that will carry the church faithfully forward into an uncertain future.

Experimental faith

Large proportions of the participants in our research told us stories about experimenting with alternate patterns of worship, outreach, collaboration and approaches to mandated responsibilities. Those who invite congregations and

the presbytery into these efforts are practicing “experimental leadership.” I use the term “experiment” with intention.

Experimental faith is practiced by Christians who live “as if,” that is, without knowledge of a certain outcome. Experimental faith, and the leadership style related to it, learns on the way and puts new learning to good use for each coming step on a journey to faithful hope and action. Faith, in this conception of church life, is not a possession. Faith is, as Martin Luther declared, “that on which a person stakes his or her being.” Knowing who they are as followers of Jesus and God gives people of faith freedom to respond to a variety of Christian narratives that provide values and purposes from which they receive identity. People of faith recognize themselves in new stories as the world changes around them. Experimental leadership invites church members to enter into the emerging stories and to discover together what it means to live as characters in a world where the plot of their root narrative does not in fact have a known or predictable outcome.

Based upon the findings of our research we can say with some conviction that the leadership team for the **SpiritWork** project has been practicing this experimental style of faith. They made a habit of trying to persuade the presbytery with sound information. They invited participation. They allowed room for a lot of discussion by building into their process many opportunities for feedback. They took what they received very seriously, amending directions and plans in the light of the feedback. They were inclusive of all presbyters in their decision-making processes. They assured the membership that the vision of the presbytery would only come from their active engagement in the visioning process. The leadership team for **SpiritWork**, although they struggled with their style of leading, understood the importance of open, honest communication and the significance of encouraging disagreement and dispute as a piece of that open process. They used language that emphasized “we,” not “I,” and “ours,” not “mine.” Such language and the processes around it built a level of trust, although not unanimous in the presbytery, to a workable level. This is what we heard about the kind of leadership provided in the presbytery by the **SpiritWork** team. The elements of their leadership identified by our research participants constitute what I am calling experimental leadership. The future success of the **SpiritWork** project almost certainly depends upon a continuation and development of this style of leadership.

Summary

The **SpiritWork** process, enabled by the work of *Potentials*, opened up space for careful consideration of the life and work of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery and its congregations. There is a significant amount of change taking place as a result of the project. In this article we have identified the findings of a well-documented research process, and we have offered some cautious observations and reflections upon them. There is more to discover, just as there is more work to do in changing the presbytery into a fully functional church body living in a

moving and changing social and cultural context. The hope the research participants have given account of here sustains the efforts and energy required of them.

It seems certain that changes in the way the church describes itself and its purpose are deeply related to the narratives upon which the people stake their being. The root narrative, we have discovered, is no longer universally accepted as the dominant authoritative source of identity and mission in the United Church in Scarborough. That narrative has created anxiety, loss and grief in place of the hope that it was first designed to foster. It also has had little place in its plot for accepting the new Canadians recently arrived in Scarborough. A sign of transformed life for the churches in Scarborough will be whether they re-found themselves in new and different forms because they have new and different stories to tell about themselves. Further research is planned in order to learn more in the years to come about the consequences of the **SpiritWork** project and the work of *Potentials*.

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Appendix: Research Method

Gathering the story

The goal of the research support group was to learn about and assess the process, the content and the outcomes of the **SpiritWork** project and *Potentials'* contribution to it in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery of the United Church of Canada. The group remains committed to the vision that the first to benefit from this research process should be Toronto Scarborough Presbytery, the **SpiritWork** team and *Potentials*. The research was framed as an investigation into the hopes for, and the commitment to, change that may have occurred as a result of the work of *Potentials* with **SpiritWork**, the presbytery and its participating congregations between late 2001 and late 2003.

We studied the literature in the field of organizational change. We carefully considered the presbytery's contexts. We probed the theological dimensions of belief and behaviour as patterns of faithful living. These three sources provided the framework for asking our questions and undertaking the investigation about the project as a faith-driven necessity.

The specific tools that we used to generate information that we have processed in this article were

- questionnaires completed by thirty-five Scarborough presbyters;
- transcripts of a forty-five-minute structured interview of twenty-six presbyters, selected to meet carefully considered criteria;
- a transcript of a meeting with a focus group from the presbytery;
- the text of proposals from the Pastoral Oversight Committee and *Potentials* that launched the **SpiritWork** project;
- the text of reports of the consultations, demographic studies, focus groups and other gatherings that were part of the project;
- the text of reports and consultations between *Potentials* and **SpiritWork** and the presbytery;
- minutes and summaries of planning and debriefing meetings of **SpiritWork** and *Potentials*;
- meetings and records of meetings of the ecumenical research support group; and
- the text of my own field and research notes recorded at (or following) these gatherings.

The accumulated data from these nine sources adds up to approximately 600 pages of single-spaced text representing a narrative about a significant moment in the life of a church judicatory. It is indeed an overwhelming sum of raw information.

Organizing the data

As Bruce L. Berg, a widely acknowledged authority in the field of qualitative research methodology, notes,

[Researchers] come up with excellent ideas for research, conduct solid literature reviews, produce what sound like viable research designs, and even collect massive amounts of data. The problem arises, however, at this point: what do they do with the collected data? (Berg, 34)

While it may be comforting to know that someone as authoritative as Berg recognizes that the size of our problem matches the enormity of the pile of raw data, we are left with the methodological issue of finding a way of honouring and making sense of all the parts that contribute to the complexity and range of the story of attempting big change in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery.

The large quantity of our raw data needed to be focused, simplified and put into manageable form through an encoding process that would lead to themes that were grounded in the coded data. As researcher I have taken up the obligation of moving beyond the surface structures presented in the data to uncovering the deep structural meaning contained in the data. I have immersed myself over the past few months in the pool of raw data in order to identify the themes that seem most meaningfully to capture what the producers of the raw data collectively want to convey.

Here is an outline of the steps I have followed in order to present the findings of our research protocol:

- identify basic content units through a colour coding system;
- create thematic categories by gathering together basic content units with common elements; and
- formulate overarching patterns found to be common in different themes.

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