

## 3 articles on anxiety, vision and hope, published in the Anglican Journal, 2006 - 07

### Now that we have your attention

---

John Kenneth Galbraith once remarked that the main function of economic forecasting was to make astrology appear as a reputable science. The same could be said of other types of projections, including predictions of the demise of the Anglican Church in Canada based on patterns of declining church membership. In addition to raising the profile of astrologers, such predictions have another function, and that is to create anxiety.

Decline in Anglican affiliation, membership and participation measured as a percentage of the Canadian population beginning about 1945 is a fact and has been known for some time by people who take an interest in Canadian religion. Furthermore, unlike twenty years ago, this fact is generally known and accepted today by the majority of people who participate in congregational life. Generally speaking, most of the historic Protestant congregations are either stable or in numerical decline. Certainly some are experiencing growth in numbers, and new congregations are being founded even as older ones close or amalgamate. However, overall the number of congregations is also decreasing. People know this general picture to be true, even if they happen to be in a thriving congregation. But one cannot extrapolate from this general picture to speak of the future, desperate days of the last of the Anglicans.

I think the function of such dramatic forecasting is to create anxiety. These projections are intended to wake people up, especially people with some authority, by creating as much distress as possible. The objective is to get attention and to shift focus. Who, after all, wants to be part of a church whose end is in sight, not from the Second Coming but through the inaction of its leaders?

The danger with anxiety is that it encourages us to focus on the wrong things. A focus on 'getting more Anglicans' is an unworkable solution to the wrong problem. The church growth consultants I know and read all ask the difficult question, 'What for? What significant difference will it make to newcomers' life to be part of your congregation?' This is a good question that shifts the focus from numbers to the quality of congregational life. Now that our attention is engaged we can look at some creative and productive responses that congregations and their leaders can take:

- Developing self-confidence and discovering that the gifts you have are the gifts you need.
- Congregational resources are there for the service of other people.
- A movement from being a church indistinguishable from part of the culture to becoming a Christian community of faith.

- Becoming ecologists, aware of social influences and encouraging healthy relationships between congregation, neighbourhood and society.
- Becoming much more intentional about congregational life and ministry. Having a vision for ministry that emerges from a process of Christian community development and engages a high proportion of the members.
- Learning how to go through significant transitions. Rightly grieving what is lost, but in letting go of the past finding the courage for new ventures - in new or reshaped ministries, renovated buildings for new purposes, amalgamations to found a new church, and dignified closures.
- Lay leadership sharing authority, responsibility, and accountability for ministry.
- Managing conflict that inevitably accompanies change.

There are many examples in Anglican and other churches where these shifts are occurring. They don't happen overnight or even in a year. They require inspired, persistent leadership on the part of clergy and lay leaders. These efforts bring energy, purpose and direction to congregational life. Congregations become places of spiritual development for individuals; there is a symbiotic relationship between the body and its parts, so that spiritual energy flows between personal and corporate life.

This is in marked contrast to the defeatist approach that suggests a dwindling congregation should see itself as a faithful remnant in a godless society and take comfort in the line 'Lord, we are few, but thou art near.'

Will all this make a difference to membership figures in another half century? I don't know. I am convinced that these are the right things to focus on, and that instead of despairing about declining church membership we should celebrate the fact that we belong to communities of abundant hope.

Paul MacLean

## Can you see what I see?

---

John's church was in the midst of a visioning process. The enthusiastic members jokingly let slip that they had already chosen John's vision for him, that he was to be the new Sunday School superintendant. After all, what better way could a retiring high school principal serve the congregation and use his gifts for ministry? John seemed resigned to his fate. Vision seemed to be about how others saw the church's future. He would just try to fit in.

John dutifully went to the discussion session on the birth of the early church as described in Acts 2. He was disturbed, but also strangely exhilarated by the story of the Pentecostal wind and fire that got the whole thing going. The leader of the session asked people to think of two kinds of change in their lives: changes that were trying to restore equilibrium, like a pendulum, and changes that were more dramatic and irreversible, like the symbol of fire. John wondered about his retirement and the dread he felt but had never expressed about leaving both a

career and a passion. Was this a pendulum or a fire type of change? The leader pointed out that it was fires that released enormous amounts of energy, not pendulums. If the vision of a church was to get anywhere it had to be animated by the spirit and energy of its members and God. John felt fearful.

The visioning process culminated in a weekend retreat for all members of the congregation. On the Saturday participants divided into groups according to their interests to develop vision statements and ministry projects. Building Christian community, worship and the life of prayer, teaching and learning, compassionate care, social justice, evangelism: these were the options. To no one's surprise John chose teaching and learning. At the end of the afternoon, there was a report back. People were looking forward to a revitalized Sunday School under his leadership.

John stood in front of his congregation and said, 'I know we need a new Sunday School superintendant, and I know you want me to be that person. But I've been thinking a lot in the course of this visioning process about my life, my faith, what I care deeply about and what place my church has got in my future. What is central in my life right now is that I am afraid of retiring. I've never admitted this to anyone before now, often not even to myself. But I'm afraid. This afternoon I decided what I could contribute to this congregation's vision for ministry in the area of teaching and learning. Instead of being a teacher I will become a learner. I will come to the church every Wednesday afternoon, put on the coffee pot, and talk and learn with any other men who are going through similar transitions in their lives and want to talk about that and their faith.' John sat down, and the session continued with the description of the many other ministry projects devised by the groups.

John is not a fiction. He is a real person. He did what he said he would, and a considerable group of men began to gather every Wednesday under his leadership. It didn't stop with talk. For some time a group of teenagers had been gathering in the church parking lot to skateboard. They were considered by church members to be dangerous pests. The men's group overlapped with these teens and after a time befriended them. They discovered the difficulty they were having with their own transitions - moving into colleges, universities, jobs. The men began to develop mentoring relationships with the teens (and regularized the skateboarding).

Vision means seeing. It means seeing clearly, deeply and differently. Seeing in this way is transformative and brings new life and energy. It results in direction, purpose and value for self and others. People become true disciples of Jesus, which means they become learners, open to the unexpected places the Spirit leads. Seeing on its own is not enough; it needs expression in sustainable action. All of this 'seeing' takes time and discernment in community.

John's story depended upon the collective visioning process undertaken by his congregation. Congregations, like individuals, have their times of transition, crisis, and decision when it is important to seek God's gift of vision for their future. These times may be taking decisions about growth and expansion

(physical or spiritual), finding new purpose in a dramatically changing social environment for ministry, exploring options with reduced resources, or simply feeling stuck.

Whatever the time, the vision of our people needs to be animated, not by the ticking pendulum of an old fashioned clock, but by the energizing fire that gave birth to the first congregation.

Paul MacLean

## Sparrows of hope

---

There is a famous story recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that marks the spread of the Christian faith into northern England. In 627 the missionary Paulinus met in council with the powerful King Edwin and his wise men to argue the merits of the new religion. Responding favourably to Paulinus' promotion of the Gospel, one of Edwin's chiefs compares human life to the swift flight of a sparrow through a banquet hall in wintertime while the storms rage outside. 'After a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he has emerged.' If the new faith can illumine our ignorance of what goes before and what is to follow, then, the chief argues, it deserves to be followed.

(Perhaps on poetic grounds, I prefer to trace my Christian and Anglican origins to that story rather than the matrimonial events associated with another king, Henry VIII.)

The conversion of the Northumbrian king was due to a hope that the pagan religion could not offer. One can imagine Edwin gloomily contemplating the dark abyss that lay ahead, with the refrain of Anglo Saxon poets his only spiritual guide – 'lif is laene' (life is fleeting). What hope could there be at a time of decline and the end of life? The Christian faith answered the questions, 'Does my life have purpose?' and 'Is there meaning to my life after death?' It gave a hope for the future that could be felt in this present life. It is significant that the questions were asked out of despair, and that hope was given at a time of spiritual crisis.

There's a second element to this story that I find resonates with our situation today. This is the sparrow that flies through the open window of that great, drafty hall. I like the fact that it was a common dusty sparrow that was the sign of hope, and that this little fellow fluttered his way in and out of a great building, a building that was not enough to provide a bulwark against death and anxiety. So, I think that hope is going to be found in the mundane sparrow-like issues of this world and will often have something to do with buildings.

First, real hope does not emerge from avoidance. A sign of hope is when leaders are prepared to accept the present situation of decline and engage in some serious analysis of why this is so. At present, blaming is the substitute for

analysis. Many of the reasons for decline we probably can't do much about, just as that northern king knew he couldn't avoid the inevitable end of his life. However, he found a spiritual hope that gave his life and his death meaning, and so too I believe that churches experiencing decline can find new spiritual purpose if they begin by being realistic about who and where they are. Avoidance, blaming, a nostalgic desire to return to happier times or just plain stubbornness (all of which we have in abundance) are blockages to facing reality. When congregations do face reality, they gain in spiritual maturity and take ownership for their life.

Second, decline is a threat to existence that raises spiritual questions about our purpose as congregations. Is our sole purpose to keep going? Is our existence for the benefit of our members? A few years ago I was engaged in a project with the Canadian Armed Forces to revitalize the Christian communities of the forty-four base chapels, which had in many cases fallen into a desperate state. At the outset of this project the Chaplain General gave his vision in which he said the fundamental reason for revitalizing these chapels was to bring spiritual value to the life of the base of which they were a part. Is that the motivation we have for wanting our congregations revitalized, renewed or transformed? This is the type of inspiring vision that sees far past mere survival and is the source of real hope.

Third, many congregations have inherited great, drafty, historic halls that are themselves a constant reminder of grander days. A sign of hope is when these congregations take difficult building decisions based upon their vision for ministry. These can be major renovations, decisions to amalgamate, sell or build anew. It can even be a decision not to rebuild a ruined structure. Through such decisions congregations are investing in a hopeful future.

These are not the times of great soaring eagles. The little, feisty sparrow brings a sense of proportion to our identity and ministry, and she's a good symbol around which to weave our present stories of hope.

Paul MacLean