



Potentials

I N P R I N T

Spring 2008

I N S I D E

- 1 **What Can We Learn?**  
*Paul MacLean*
- 5 **SpiritWork: The Final Phase**  
*Joan Wyatt and Glenys Huws*
  - A Short History
  - Evaluating SpiritWork
  - Voices of the Presbytery
  - Voices of the Congregations
  - Future Directions: What Season is it for TScP?
  - The SpiritWork Legacy
- 25 **Visionkeepers – Plural!**  
*Douglas duCharme*
- 28 **Project Partners**

# Evoking and Sustaining Hope

## What Can We Learn?

by *Paul MacLean*

This publication contains the final phase of the SpiritWork research project. The core of this phase is the evaluation led by Joan Wyatt and Glenys Huws. It's an extensive and valuable piece of social science research conducted over the last year, involving many interviews and careful listening. Joan and Glenys have provided an assessment of the effects of SpiritWork on the life and work of the Toronto Scarborough Presbytery. They also look at the strengths and shortcomings of SpiritWork through a sample of congregations. At the heart of their research is the question, 'Can a presbytery or other judicatory successfully initiate and sustain intentional deep-level change?' They go on to frame their conclusions within a theological context, and offer some advice to the presbytery about how to navigate the next bends in the road.

We've also included a short, personal article by Douglas duCharme, the Visionkeeper. It's very different in tone, and it reminds us that at the heart of SpiritWork are people who care deeply and passionately, who 'are not happy with the way things are and would like to make a difference'—ordinary people who strive for extraordinary outcomes. In their two very different ways, these evaluations capture the many voices of the people who have been engaged and affected by SpiritWork, in varying degrees, over the past six or seven years.

This is the fourth publication about the research project. The published material generated is now approaching the size of a substantial book. It includes the work of ten different writers who have listened to the voices evoked by SpiritWork. They have offered their analyses and varied perspectives to help create a rich body of work

---

## Transformational change can begin from the most unpromising conditions

that can be of great benefit to the wider church. In many ways, this practical, field research project and its results are unique in the Canadian church context. What can we learn?

Some reasons for undertaking this research in the first place were to test assumptions about transformational change and leadership, and to see if there were broadly based criteria that could be useful in other settings. There are dangers, of course, in moving too far away from the contextual research to make generalized and high-level claims that may not apply in very different settings. However, with that limitation firmly in mind, we can still identify important themes, and learn from how they played out through the SpiritWork venture in the context of the United Church Presbytery of Toronto Scarborough.

### *Unpromising Beginnings*

The starting place for this venture was a feeling of dispiritedness. The presbytery had a generally depressed or sad collective mood. The hopes that once fuelled the passion and work for the church had lost their power, and were in fact leading church leaders to despair. Furthermore, there was a profound sense of isolation. Members of one congregation had virtually no knowledge of other congregations just a few blocks away, or even of their presbytery. Congregational life was in many cases flat and depressed. People were unable to recognize or come to terms with the vast demographic changes that had taken place in Scarborough within a generation. However, the default position was to carry on as if everything was stable

and normal, resulting in emotional fatigue.

*Transformational change can begin from the most unpromising conditions. Life-giving energy can be evoked from within places and people where it seems most absent.*

### *Episcopal and Pastoral: The Role of the Judicatory*

Although depression was felt at both congregational and presbytery levels of the church (and not by everyone), SpiritWork focused on the role of the judicatory. This body had episcopal oversight and responsibility for the congregations and their leaders. In this case, the presbytery, as a result of the first phase of SpiritWork, significantly changed the way in which it met, emphasizing worship, learning and the building of relationships. It devolved much of its business to an executive. Presbytery became a place where pastoral, episcopal leadership was exercised.

*Existing bodies with pastoral, episcopal authority can be transformed, so they become agencies through which both formal and informal transformational leadership is exercised effectively. Can transformational change happen without such an authorized body? Can bodies and partnerships be created as a locus of transformational leadership, where none exist? These are interesting questions.*

### *Enabling Conditions*

Depression was not the complete story of the presbytery in 2001, by any means. There was a lot of change going on. The presbytery had recently been reorganized to improve effectiveness. Fifty

---

percent of the congregations were going through a transition in ordained leadership or were in conflict. The chair and vice-chair of presbytery had interviewed leaders in each of the congregations. Dissatisfactions were surfacing in parking-lot conversations. A considerable sum of unallocated money became available to the presbytery. Miraculously, leadership time was freed up. Furthermore, there weren't any dominant leaders who would block new initiatives. New clergy were entering the presbytery and some had started to meet together in Bible study. These and some other significant factors were identified early on in our research as enabling conditions for SpiritWork.

*Transformational change can't take hold in a vacuum. It needs energy, even if energy is expressed through conflict and dissatisfaction. It needs resources of money and people's time. New leaders, new connections, an absence of effective blocking – these are all necessary for nurturing the early embers of change. When we look to the possibility of transformational change in other settings, do we have the necessary enabling conditions to get it started?*

#### ***Transforming the Root Narrative***

During the first phase of SpiritWork and then during the research interviews, there were many little stories told of congregational life. Collectively, these stories were an expression of the root narrative of church life in the presbytery. This was a narrative in which there was a vital, friendly congregation in every neighbourhood with lots of people of all ages and stages, creative programs and a harmonious social and spiritual life. But

the root narrative could not be sustained, and had moved from being a blessing to a burden for congregations. No wonder they felt despair. What really needed to be transformed was hope, and what was hoped for.

*Transformational change is a process by which the very stories and root narrative of congregational life are transformed. Hope itself is what needs to be transformed. The Anglican Primate of Canada said recently that 'the bishop's calling is to be an ambassador of hope.' The episcopal or judicatory role is to engage faithful people in the discussion and examination of their deepest, collective hopes in the expectation that many of these will have to be discarded and that new, guiding hope will emerge.*

#### ***Transforming Identity***

For the presbytery and for many of its congregations, SpiritWork became a locus for thinking about change. The atmosphere of the presbytery was transformed. Its meetings were organized to reflect the directions proposed by the first phase of SpiritWork. The presbytery led a workshop on demographics that people credit with giving them a new appreciation of the context for ministry and the marginal place of the United Church within it. People spoke of developing a greater theological understanding of the role of presbytery. There were examples of greater co-operation between congregations and a desire for a unified vision. There is some debate as to the success in moving from awareness to action, from seeing things differently to developing collaborative structures for ministry and mission. However, on balance there were many indications that the

---

SpiritWork became a locus for thinking about change

---

It is doubtful that any other model of leadership would work as well

type of change at work in the presbytery and some aspects of congregational life was an identity change, and that SpiritWork sustained and consolidated this change.

*Transformational change does not necessarily mean a total break with the past, but it does involve a profound shift in identity. An authorized project with adequate resources, such as SpiritWork, is probably necessary to lead, sustain and consolidate changes to identity.*

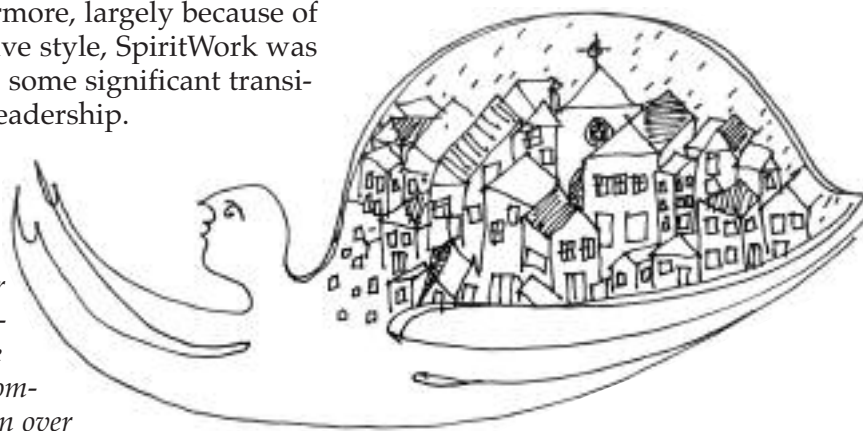
#### **Collaborative Leadership**

One is struck by the high degree of collaborative leadership evident throughout the SpiritWork project. The leadership style of the SpiritWork team had a ripple effect throughout the presbytery, and is evident in the increased collaboration and levels of trust. Good communication and interaction with all parts of the system are hallmarks of collaborative leadership. SpiritWork was well embedded in the official presbytery leadership. There is some criticism of communications at the congregational level, but for the most part the SpiritWork team was able to convey the sense that SpiritWork was an enterprise of the whole presbytery. Furthermore, largely because of this collaborative style, SpiritWork was able to survive some significant transitions in team leadership.

*Collaborative, team leadership is a successful model for leading transformational change in a large and complex organization over*

*a long time frame. The team can sustain transitions in its membership and remain effective. It is doubtful that any other model of leadership would work as well.*

These themes do not begin to exhaust what we can learn from the SpiritWork experience and its research component. We invite you to bring your own questions to the pages that follow, and to enter into dialogue with the folk in Scarborough who are trying to find new paths of faithfulness through SpiritWork and beyond. 🖤



---

# SpiritWork: The Final Phase

A Report by Joan Wyatt and Glenys Huws

by Paul MacLean

## A SHORT HISTORY

### SpiritWork: Three Phases

In 2001, a group of concerned leaders of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery (TScP) asked *Potentials* to facilitate a meeting that would help them talk about some of the deeper issues affecting the presbytery, issues they felt were always present but never addressed. From this first meeting, a project emerged, eventually called SpiritWork. *Potentials* was invited to develop, lead and facilitate a process of re-visioning and renewal in TScP that anticipated substantial change in the life and work of that presbytery. This process took place from spring 2002 until June 2003, at which point an extensive document was issued called 'The Report of SpiritWork Phase One.'

As its title suggests, the proposal to the presbytery was that SpiritWork continue. The report made the case that TScP was going through profound, deep-level

change, which it called 'transformative change,' and it recommended that the presbytery concentrate on four goals:

1. Developing a bold and passionate common mission and vision
2. Creating an environment where the renewal of faith and worship would flourish
3. Renewing commitment to engage in co-operative ministry endeavours
4. Identifying and training current and future leaders within congregations and presbytery

In order to do this, the SpiritWork team would stay intact and a paid position of Visionkeeper would be created. These recommendations were approved and SpiritWork entered Phase Two. During this period of two years, there were instances of collaboration and joint projects – jazz services, a food bank, amalgamation discussions. The presbytery became a provider of helpful facilitation. In June 2005 it approved Phase Three, another two-year cycle with a paid staff position, which came to an end in



---

From the outset, there was a sense that SpiritWork was going to be an innovative project

2007. Other activities initiated by the SpiritWork team included a presbytery-wide Bible study on the book of Acts, a workshop on changing demographics, several presbytery-wide services and the reformation of presbytery meetings to focus more on learning, community building and worship.

### Researching SpiritWork

From the outset, there was a sense that SpiritWork was going to be an innovative project. Much could be learned from its experiments and experiences. To this end, *Potentials* proposed to the TScP that a research component be added to the project, and this was accepted. A SpiritWork research team was formed, composed of partners from four denominations and three United Church institutions. This team reflected on the project as it progressed and began to shape their questions. In fall 2003, Gary Redcliffe, professor of Pastoral Theology at Emmanuel College, took on the first stage of research. Gary's research, along with other supporting articles, was published in two editions of *Potentials in Print*: 'Hope for Transformation, Part One and Two.' Three conferences were held between 2004 and 2005, highlighting the story of SpiritWork, and a further publication was issued, 'The Tipping Point of Change.'

The research project lay dormant for a number of years as SpiritWork continued. However, it was always the intention to observe this change process over a long period of time, so a second and final stage was planned as SpiritWork drew to a close. Joan Wyatt, Director of Contextual Theological Education at Emmanuel College, and Glenys Huws were engaged

as researchers. Together with the team, they shaped the current project, which seeks to evaluate this remarkable venture through the voices and experiences of its many participants.

---

by Joan Wyatt and Glenys Huws

### EVALUATING SPIRITWORK

The evaluation process was designed to gauge the extent of the engagement of TScP and its congregations in the Spirit-Work process and to assess its effect on the life and work of the presbytery. The overall question to be addressed was whether a presbytery or other judicatory, by undertaking a project like SpiritWork (SW), could successfully initiate and sustain intentional deep-level change.

The two researchers gathered data through:

1. focus groups and questionnaires involving approximately forty presbyters who attended the April 2007 meeting of the presbytery;
2. focus groups with the SW Steering Committee;
3. phone interviews with members of the Presbytery Executive; and
4. focus groups with five congregations chosen on the basis of differing levels of involvement with SW.

The data was then analyzed to determine the level of awareness of SW in the presbytery and congregations, to identify the ways in which SW goals had been met and to discover where and how the SW project had fallen short of expectations. The categories of data were interpreted through the lenses of

---

future directions for TScP and possible application in other settings.

## VOICES OF THE PRESBYTERY

### Involved and Aware?

In order to measure the effect of SW, it was important to determine how much presbyters knew of SW goals and purposes. The responses indicated significant variation in the degree of knowledge, the main contributing factor being the length of time in the presbytery. Most members were aware of and had opinions about the SW project. Although newcomers knew much less about SW than those with longer involvement, often they could recognize the conditions and activities ascribed to SW by more experienced presbyters. They had not realized the connection between these phenomena and the SW project.

Among those familiar with SW, most understood it as a project directed towards change and renewal. Some identified individuals as the locus of renewal while others emphasized congregations or the presbytery. It was also generally understood that significant change was needed in the presbytery because of the frailty of many congregations, a condition related to the considerable demographic changes in Scarborough in recent decades. It was a widely held view that the SW process encouraged increased co-operation among congregations and hoped to create a common vision for the presbytery.

Not surprisingly, among the Presbytery Executive and the SW Steering Committee, the goals, principles and activities of SW were well known and

understood. Unlike the presbytery as a whole, these members could quickly name the four goals – common vision and mission, faith formation, co-operative ministry, and leadership development – and were keenly aware of how these connected to various SW programs and activities.

### Speaking Out about Strengths

#### *Presbytery Focus Groups*

In response to questions about how SW goals were implemented in the presbytery and what role SW had played, most experienced presbyters expressed appreciation for the way the SW project had influenced the presbytery and some of the congregations within its boundaries. In relation to the life of the presbytery, there was consensus that the atmosphere had changed for the better during the course of the SW project. People described a spirit of goodwill and generosity, a unity of purpose and a sense of collaboration among presbyters that had not existed prior to SW. There appears to have been an identity shift in the presbytery from being a collection of UCC congregations to being one organization with the purpose of being the UCC in Scarborough. One person described this as ‘presbytery becoming an organic whole rather than being individual congregations.’ Increased collegiality and collaboration among clergy were also noted with appreciation by a number of presbyters.

Many people observed that a change in the nature of TScP meetings had come about with the decision after Phase One of SW to transfer a significant amount of the business of the

---

People described a spirit of goodwill and generosity

---

Meetings  
had become  
a place  
where  
people  
could  
'speak from  
the heart'

presbytery to the Presbytery Executive and to have the full presbytery meet less often. The intention of this shift was to allow more time at full presbytery meetings for worship, theological reflection, substantive discussion, education and fellowship.

Overall, this change was experienced as positive and life-giving. Some people felt it contributed to 'infusing presbytery with Spirit' and 'promoting the Spirit of God.' Presbytery was experienced as vital, vibrant and relevant. Meetings had become a place where people could 'speak from the heart.' There was recognition that the change included spiritual renewal and a deepening of faith on the part of individuals and the presbytery as a whole. One respondent described it as presbytery members moving from an understanding of the church as simply another community group towards assuming their identity as the 'people of God.' Another commented that the open and welcoming spirit in the presbytery was an inspiring model for congregational life.

SW acted also as a significant catalyst for new thinking in the presbytery, especially for 'looking at transformative change.' Through various events and workshops, the SW project helped people understand the nature of change and become familiar with the demographic and social changes that had taken place in Scarborough. Participants grew to appreciate the challenge involved if the United Church (both as a presbytery and as individual congregations) wished to be a vital part of life in its community. Many people mentioned the significance of the SW workshop on the demographics of Scarborough.

For some, it was a transformation of consciousness about the context in which the Scarborough United Churches function. 'How little we knew!' was the comment of one presbyter.

SW played a key role in facilitating dialogue within congregations and also among individuals and congregations. SW 'encouraged congregations to look within and to be pro-active in relating to their communities.' More frequently, people mentioned the opportunities provided by SW for congregations to come together to share experiences, to identify resources, to look at hard truths and to share concerns, ideas and information. In the process, individuals and congregations got to know each other and felt encouraged and strengthened by the interaction. A number of participants commented about 'no longer feeling so alone' after participating in these exchanges.

Some participants noted that SW had contributed to a change in the attitude of their congregations towards the presbytery, namely, that the presbytery was now seen as more of a support than a boss or bully. 'My congregation has much more confidence about calling on presbytery for help' was the way one presbyter described this change.

Many people attributed to SW the increase in co-operative activities in the presbytery as a whole, for instance, the presbytery-wide services and educational opportunities like the Bible study on the book of Acts. Some felt that presbytery programs that predated SW, like the Vacation Bible School, had benefited also from the overall increase in co-operation and collaboration.

---

A number of presbyters noted that communication and co-operation had increased among certain groupings of congregations and some identified SW as the catalyst for recent congregational amalgamations.

Most presbyters felt that virtually all elements and activities of the presbytery had been affected in a constructive way by SW. The overall energizing effect of the project had created an environment for creative things to happen. Presbyters seemed to have neither the ability nor the desire to identify changes not connected to SW. 'Everything in the presbytery has been touched by SW,' said one participant. Most presbyters concurred with this assessment.

A number of factors contributed to SW being seen as valuable and life-giving. The one mentioned most often was the vision and dedication of the leaders who had initiated the project and worked to maintain its momentum over the months and years. That there was money to pay staff (the Visionkeeper), as well as to fund events and activities, was also named as an important factor in influencing positive outcomes. Other factors named were the care taken to build relationships, the attention to maintaining continuity of leadership and the increase in the trust level among presbytery members.

#### *SpiritWork Steering Committee*

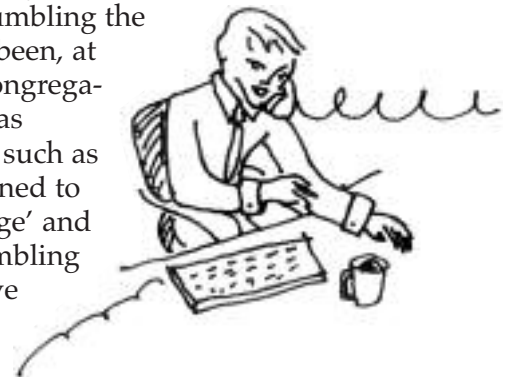
The assessment of the strengths of the project by members of the SW Steering Committee generally reflected the opinion of the presbytery as a whole. Committee members mentioned the change in the spirit of the presbytery as evidenced by the opportunity for

more fellowship, worship and learning at meetings, as well as the practice of praying for each other. Presbyters 'experienced the adventure' of speaking out about faith matters.

The presbytery was more spirited, more focused and more future-oriented. Committee members found themselves looking forward to meetings and actually enjoyed being at presbytery. The increased trust level among presbyters was noted as was the increased co-operation among congregations and among clergy. One committee member summed up the changes with the comment that 'so much of what I didn't like about presbytery is no longer part of the life of TSc presbytery.'

It was in the SW Steering Committee that the importance of 'The Report of SpiritWork Phase One' was most clearly recognized, particularly its articulation of the four ongoing goals and principles of SW: common mission and vision, faith formation, co-operative ministry and leadership development. Committee members believed that the findings of this report had guided and invigorated their work and the work of the Presbytery Executive.

The committee was acutely aware of how challenging and humbling the process of renewal had been, at presbytery and in the congregations. This awareness was expressed by comments such as 'my eyes have been opened to the depth of the challenge' and 'how hard and how humbling it is to help people to live into God's future.' Committee members



---

## Many factors had helped the SW project implement its goals

did not seem daunted by the challenge, however, and some understood it as a sign that God's Spirit continued to be at work in the life of the presbytery.

Committee members agreed that the SW project had a strong influence in increasing the sense of unity in the presbytery, as well as collaborative activity among congregations. Specific events such as the Acts study, the workshop on the demographics of Scarborough, the various gatherings of congregational leaders and the presbytery-wide services were identified as events that played a key role in moving forward on SW goals.

A challenge identified by the committee was the difficulty of maintaining the momentum of the SW process in the final two years of the project. This was offset, in the opinion of some, by the significant degree of integration of SW goals into the regular life and work of the presbytery. SW committee members echoed the opinion of the presbytery as a whole that it was hard to distinguish which aspects of presbytery life had been affected by SW and which had not. One committee member described it as SW 'moving from being an arm of the presbytery, to being the heart of the presbytery.'

Committee members suggested that many factors had helped the SW project implement its goals:

1. The direction provided by 'The Report of SpiritWork Phase One'
2. The involvement of outside consultants
3. The number of opportunities provided for various configurations of congregational leaders to meet

4. The funding which provided revenue for events and paid staff
5. The integration of presbytery leadership and SW leadership
6. The story framework provided by Gary Redcliffe in his research study 'Accounting for Hope'
7. The success of special events and educational programs when sufficient time was allotted for planning and publicity

As did the presbytery focus groups, the committee praised the initial leadership whose vision and energy had been crucial in the early phases. It was suggested by one respondent, however, that the powerful nature of this group had actually slowed down the ownership of SW by the whole presbytery. In his view, this paradox was difficult to avoid.

A relative newcomer to the committee named the dedication of people on the committee as a critical factor in maintaining the momentum of the project in its later phases.

### *Presbytery Executive*

For the Presbytery Executive, one of the clearest effects of the SW process was the structural change after Phase One, which saw the number of full presbytery meetings reduced to five and much of the business of presbytery delegated to the executive. This meant a heavier executive workload, but virtually all the members had found the experience satisfying and engaging. Some members noted with regret that, in the past year or so, time and energy that might have been directed at implementing SW goals had been consumed by two demanding personnel and pastoral relations situations.

---

There was general agreement that the good and healthy spirit of the presbytery as a whole had been at work in the Presbytery Executive. The atmosphere in the executive was described as ‘open’ and ‘trusting’ with ‘no hidden agenda.’ The leadership of people like Margaret Walker and Pam Lock was cited as an important factor in the constructive and productive way the executive was able to work together. Most members also credited the tangible and intangible effects of the SW process with providing needed energy and direction for their work on the executive.

### Speaking Up about Shortcomings

#### *Presbytery Focus Groups*

Responses to the question about which SW goals had not been implemented indicated that most presbyters, whatever their level of direct involvement in the project, had enough knowledge to be able to identify areas in which SW failed to meet expectations. That said, it was also evident that some presbyters had no expectations regarding SW because they lacked sufficient understanding of its goals and aims.

A number of respondents suggested that the lack of understanding of SW’s goals was even more noticeable at the congregational level, with certain congregations being uninformed and others being indifferent or negative. Several people were of the opinion that indicating an interest in the SW project was interpreted by some leaders as a sign of congregational weakness.

One widely given explanation for this lack of understanding involved the means used to communicate about SW

to presbyters and to congregations. Respondents commented often about the inaccessibility of the reports that went to congregations. The reports tended to be long and complex – requiring significant commitment and effort to read and to understand. Moreover, the educational approach at certain SW events was experienced by some as too theoretical and ‘highly intellectual.’ It was difficult for some people to relate their practical concerns to the ideas and theories conveyed at these events. The Acts study was cited by a number of respondents as an exception to this pattern. Several experienced presbyters commented that, in spite of all the focus on ‘transformative change’ in the SW process, they were still puzzled as to what that phrase actually meant.

A related concern was the lack of clarity and specificity in the development of a common vision and mission for the presbytery. The principles and ideas of SW ‘were not translated into concrete options.’ Presbyters were in agreement about the desirability of new models of ministry for the twenty-first century, but no specific model, other than a regional church, had been articulated. One presbyter said she felt that ‘the presbytery is much better prepared to change, but to what?’ Another commented that, given the SW commitment to trying to ‘do church’ differently in the twenty-first century, the amalgamations that had taken place in the presbytery were failures. They were all based on the old model of one congregation/one building/one minister.

In the latter phase of the SW project, there were some events and programs that were not well attended. The failure

---

‘The presbytery is much better prepared to change, but to what?’

---

Most  
of the  
committee  
would  
have liked  
to see  
greater  
collabora-  
tion among  
congrega-  
tions

of the Faith Institute was mentioned numerous times. Presbyters offered several reasons for why this had occurred, such as the difficulty of maintaining momentum over time, the turnover of leadership and the limits of time and energy.

Most of the comments on the shortcomings of the SW project were offered in the context of a generally positive assessment of the effect of SW on the life of the presbytery. Within this discourse about shortcomings, however, a minority of voices claimed that the influence of SW had been either neutral or negative, resulting in no positive effect whatsoever on the presbytery.

In contrast to those who believed that SW had invigorated the life of the presbytery, a small number of presbyters felt that SW diverted time and energy from valuable activities that TScP normally undertook and caused confusion in the presbytery as to how certain responsibilities were to be carried out. Two presbyters lamented that SW had been too inward-looking, that there had not been enough attention paid to reaching out beyond the presbytery in the SW process. The assessment of some in this group was that the goals of SW had never been articulated clearly or sufficiently understood by most presbyters. SW's agenda was 'disconnected and unclear,' causing many presbytery members to feel outside of the project and most congregations to be unaffected by what was happening.

Another concern voiced by these presbyters was that the SW emphasis on co-operation and common vision resulted in little affirmation, moral

support or practical help being offered to congregations that were working on their own process of transformation. One person commented that, without change at the congregational level, co-operative activities and amalgamations were just a way of delaying death. It was voices such as these that expressed the strongest criticism of the 'head stuff,' which they believed characterized SW workshops and events. The overemphasis on theory added to the perception that the SW agenda was inaccessible to and disconnected from many in the congregations.

#### *SpiritWork Steering Committee*

The Steering Committee made many comments about where and why SW had not fully met their hopes and expectations. Most of the committee would have liked to see greater collaboration among congregations. All agreed that much remained to be done in the areas related to common vision and mission, faith formation and leadership development. One member believed that if collaboration among congregations had gone further, a common vision might have emerged. Another felt that the movement towards a common vision had been hindered by insufficient attention to theological reflection.

Like other presbyters, committee members could not explain clearly what 'transformative change' meant except to indicate that it did not mean adaptive change. They agreed that this lack of clarity, combined with disagreement among presbyters about the feasibility and pace of change, had hindered the movement towards a common vision. Some members of the committee felt that difficulty in identifying a common

---

vision was inevitable given that there is no ready-made answer to the question of how to be the UCC in twenty-first-century Scarborough. There was agreement, however, that the lack of clear and concrete options for the future had been problematic. It had frustrated those in the presbytery who, having caught something of a vision, wanted to move to the implementation stage, while increasing the anxiety of those who were uncertain or hesitant.

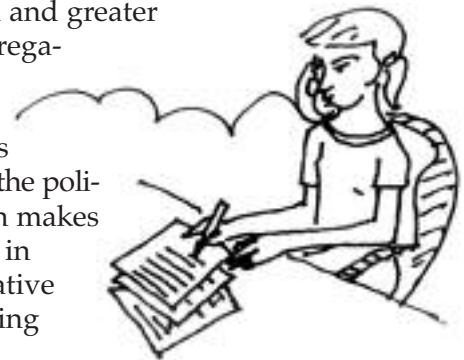
Other factors were identified by committee members as hindering fuller implementation of SW goals. For example, the intention had been to communicate clearly to every congregation and this goal had proved to be a daunting task and ongoing challenge. The committee had been diligent in sending updates and reports to congregations but had to rely on interested persons within congregations to 'pass along the news.' Also, some members questioned the use of print material as the principal medium of communication and wished that there had been more imagination and variety in the means used to communicate with congregations.

Two other hindrances identified by committee members were the turnover in presbytery membership and the resistance of some clergy leaders to the idea of transformative change. In the first instance, members felt that the degree of turnover was not sufficiently appreciated. Although it was 'hard to avoid having some in the locomotive and some in the caboose,' too many assumptions had been made about the level of knowledge and understanding among presbytery members as a whole.

In regard to clergy resistance, some members wondered if it might have been more effective to focus on intermediate stages of understanding and implementing change rather than emphasizing transformative change only. A related comment was that the process had not taken seriously enough the grief that individuals and congregations feel when contemplating or experiencing the losses involved in transformative change.

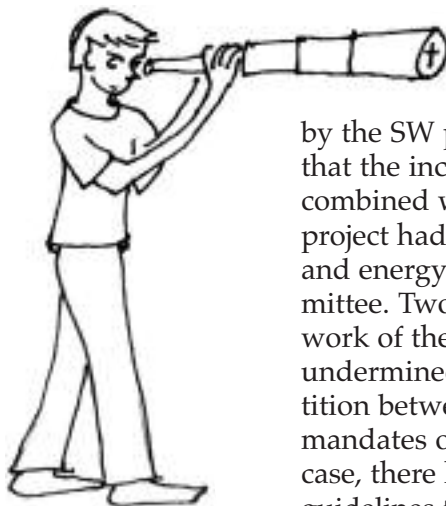
It was pointed out by some committee members that United Church polity, by reinforcing the one minister/one congregation model, did not facilitate the vision of common mission and greater collaboration among congregations. When the legal and emotional complexities related to church buildings and property are added to the polity barriers, the combination makes for a significant hindrance in developing more collaborative and unified options for being the United Church in Scarborough.

Another hindrance identified was the way that SW had been perceived – inaccurately, in the committee's view – as 'pushing for congregational amalgamations.' The initiatives for amalgamation were already underway before SW began and, from the committee's standpoint, the effect of SW had been simply to make the discussions more constructive. Some committee members believed, however, that some congregations were hesitant about collaboration because they feared, wrongly, that they would be pressured towards amalgamation by the SW process.



### *Presbytery Executive*

When interviewed, most of the chairs of presbytery committees indicated that SW had not directly influenced the work of their committees. Some changes had been made to protocols used by the Pastoral Relations and Pastoral Oversight Committees, but these had not been tested in any significant way. It was clear from the interviews that several committees were functioning more efficiently and effectively than previously, for example, meeting more regularly, clarifying their mandates, recruiting new members. There was no clarity, however, as to what role SW had played in these changes.



Three committee chairs felt that their work had been impacted negatively by the SW process. One chair believed that the increased executive workload combined with the demands of the SW project had diminished the interest in and energy for the work of her committee. Two other chairs felt that the work of their committees had been undermined by confusion and competition between the goals of SW and the mandates of their committees. In one case, there had been 'a crossing of guidelines that led to uncertainty about what the responsibilities of [our] committee included.' In the other instance, the committee had the paradoxical experience of having their work usurped by SW activities while, at the same time, having to put some of their own activities on hold because of additional responsibilities delegated to them because of SW. It is instructive to note that the three committees that experienced negative impacts from SW were committees whose mandates overlapped with SW principles and activities.

### **Continuing SpiritWork Connections**

To help assess the effect of SW, a question about if and how SW should continue was asked. Most presbytery voices, regardless of the setting, supported the continuation of SW in one form or other. Some believed that, while it was essential for the spirit of SW to continue, another explicit project was not needed. Instead, furthering the goals and principles of SW would be better served by integrating them into the ongoing work of the presbytery. People expressed confidence in the capacity of the presbytery and its committees to do this.

Others felt that it was important to officially draw the SW project to a close (and not simply let it fade away). Another intentional focus and process would then be needed in the presbytery to maintain the momentum for change initiated and developed through SW. This would be essential to preventing 'backsliding.' One suggestion was that implementing another project be delegated to a group that would function like a sub-executive of the presbytery.

A small minority wanted the process of change to continue under the name SpiritWork with opportunities to implement the SW goals that had not yet been fulfilled. They were aware, however, that the members of the current SW Steering Committee were tired and that renewal and continuity of leadership were critical concerns if SW was to carry on in its current form.

Regarding the focus for an ongoing renewal project, a number of participants identified the need for more

---

attention to the well-being of individual congregations while continuing the SW emphasis on transformative change, co-operative activity, the sharing of resources and the development of a common vision for the presbytery. The need for more educational opportunities within the presbytery, especially in the two SW categories of faith formation and leadership development, was also frequently mentioned. One presbyter recommended the establishment of an adult nurture committee to support such work.

Another area suggested for attention in an ongoing process was United Church polity related to congregational governance and pastoral relations. If collaboration among congregations and sharing of resources, including personnel, was to continue and be strengthened, reinterpretation if not modification of some Manual requirements would be needed.

Matters of funding and staffing were raised in several groups. Participants reiterated the key role that financial resources and personnel played in enabling the SW project to go forward, and they identified the need for similar support if a renewal process was to continue in the future.

A related question that frequently surfaced concerned the structural changes to be decided at the Annual Meeting of Toronto Conference. If the proposal for four larger presbyteries was approved (and it was), then TScP would not exist much longer in its current iteration. The context for any ongoing focus or project would be considerably different from the current reality.

While this possibility made it more difficult for participants to be specific in their suggestions for the future, they expressed enthusiasm for the proposal, especially members of the Presbytery Executive. Those supporting the proposed change believed that the experience of having been involved in a presbytery-based renewal project like SW would enable members of TScP to help the larger church develop a renewed vision and mission within a larger presbytery.

## VOICES OF THE CONGREGATIONS

### Involved and Aware?

Because the congregational focus groups were chosen on the basis of differing levels of congregational involvement in SW, it was not surprising to find that the five groups differed considerably from each other in their level of knowledge about SW. Moreover, levels of knowledge differed widely within each focus group, with at least one member in each group having almost no knowledge of the project. Often though, during conversation, many people discovered that they knew more about SW than they realized – they recognized many of the activities and ideas that were being mentioned without knowing of their connection to SW.

No congregational focus group was able to name the four goals of SW – at least not without considerable prompting – but there was a general understanding that SW had been an attempt to increase co-operation among congregations and to work towards a common vision for the United Church in Scarborough. There was agreement that, given the

---

Matters of funding and staffing were raised in several groups

number of congregations losing members and losing heart, the kind of deep-level change advocated through the SW project was needed badly in TScP. A different perspective expressed by some participants was that, particularly in its early phases, SW was not relevant to a number of congregations who had addressed already the issues that SW was raising.

All the focus groups were able to name some of the educational events and activities sponsored by SW. Those mentioned most often were the Acts study, the presbytery-wide services and the workshop on the demographics of Scarborough. Some participants were aware that SW had provided 'lots of discussion groups' where congregational leaders could share experiences and ideas. Several focus group members had participated in these events without knowing their connection to SW. They had assumed that the presbytery was sponsoring these gatherings and believed that others in their congregation had made the same assumption.

Those who were aware of the SW connection agreed that, over time, the momentum for participation diminished and many people commented on the low turnout at events in the latter phase of SW. This was attributed by some to a lack of lead time in publicizing these activities.

The extent to which congregations embraced the goals and activities of SW varied considerably. No congregation had made an official decision to participate in the SW project, and there

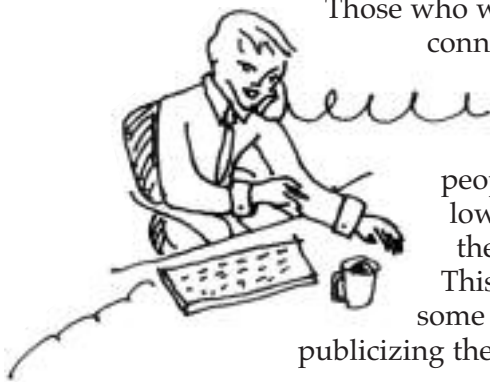
was general agreement that even congregations familiar with SW mostly understood it as a presbytery program that was 'out there somewhere.' The name SW had been a barrier for some people who thought that it was a Pentecostal-type revival campaign, while others confused it with the Emerging Spirit project of the UCC General Council.

In several congregations, the presence of presbytery members who were actively involved in SW meant that its activities were well publicized and people were encouraged to read the SW reports sent to congregations. Two focus groups suggested that levels of awareness and involvement might have been higher if a few people had been assigned by the presbytery to be SW promoters in their congregation.

The attitude of the ministry staff played a key role. Where ministers were supportive of SW, there were regular announcements at worship, update material in the congregational newsletter and general encouragement to be involved. Moreover, the goals and principles of SW were mentioned in sermons, and ideas generated in the SW process were introduced into discussions and decision-making at the congregational level. In contrast, one focus group member believed that by intentionally blocking information about SW the minister of his congregation had ensured minimal awareness and participation.

### **Speaking Out about Strengths**

All but one of the focus groups agreed that, however varied the level of



---

knowledge and experience of SW, their congregations were less isolated, more open and more involved in co-operative activities with others. They were also more aware of the larger picture in both church and community and more appreciative of the role of the presbytery than they had been before the SW project. Some examples cited were co-operative youth group efforts, more openness to new ideas, high interest in a JNAC process, more emphasis on leadership development and increased willingness to talk about spiritual matters. While some attributed the changes specifically to SW, most believed that a combination of factors, including the influence of SW, was responsible for these developments.

Various opinions were expressed about the role that SW had played in the amalgamations within the presbytery. Some participants were of the opinion that SW had played no role. Others thought that SW had facilitated the amalgamation process in a constructive way by encouraging congregations to talk with each other. In one instance, SW was credited with helping a congregation find 'life and focus after a failed amalgamation.'

### **Speaking Up about Shortcomings**

Most focus group members agreed that they found it hard to relate to the promotional and interpretive materials about SW received by their congregations. For one thing, not everyone had access to SW e-mail messaging. While the printed reports were more widely distributed, they were experienced as wordy and complex – overwhelming in their length and their density. They

were definitely 'not designed to grab the congregation's attention.' In the last year or so, some had noticed a decrease in the frequency of the reports and other information about SW. Focus groups were in consensus that other modes of communication besides print would have been helpful, notwithstanding that the diligence of the reporting and the value of the printed word were affirmed by several participants.

A few participants expressed concern about the theoretical nature of much of what was conveyed by SW. Several others commented on the lack of concrete options for the future that took seriously the 'relational nature' of church community. Participants mentioned an insufficient attention to the significant differences among the congregations and among the communities where they were located.

Several groups cited another factor as a hindrance to participation – the level of busyness in their congregations. In one congregation, the council had refused to participate in the initial round of SW focus groups because it felt that the congregation was simply too busy to do so. Two of the congregations had recently undergone amalgamations and renovations which, while invigorating in many ways, had consumed time and energy. One participant claimed that 'for three years, our people didn't have time for anything else.' Changes in pastoral relations had occupied one congregation and an intensive JNAC process another. Two others had been occupied with their own process of re-visioning, a process in which SW principles and goals seemed irrelevant, even outdated.

---

SW was credited with helping a congregation find 'life and focus after a failed amalgamation'

---

## They knew they needed to reach out more to their communities

One participant suggested that there had been a perception, partly related to the amalgamation and regionalization discussions, that the presbytery was trying to co-opt congregational revenue and physical resources. Others agreed that this perception, accurate or not, had been a barrier to the involvement of some congregation members in the goals of SW.

### Characteristics of Scarborough Congregations

As a way of discerning participants' awareness of the overall state of United Church congregational life in TScP in the context of SW goals and principles, participants were asked to describe their own congregations and others. Focus groups had plenty to say about what they wanted to affirm about their own congregations, for example, honesty and openness, warmth and compassion, commitment to inclusivity and co-operation, renewed energy and focus, maturity and resilience. Participants were equally aware of the challenges their congregations faced from declining numbers and aging buildings. They knew they needed to reach out more to their communities.

When asked what they valued about other congregations, as well as what concerned them, their responses often agreed. Affirmations included the diversity among congregations, their location in a variety of neighbourhoods and the commitment of most congregations to try to make a difference in their communities. The willingness of many congregations to co-operate with and support each other was also a val-

ued characteristic and a desire for even more co-operation was expressed.

Concerns included aging membership and leadership, as well as the lack of connection between the demographic profile of the Scarborough population and that of United Church membership. Participants lamented the seeming lack of ability to include a more diverse cross-section of the community in UCC congregational life. Also, they expressed apprehension about the attachment to buildings and the unwillingness of certain congregations to 'move out of their comfort zone' with the probable result that their churches would die rather than change.

### Continuing SpiritWork Connections

Four of the congregational focus groups could envision ways in which the goals and purposes of SW would continue to be relevant to their life and work. One group believed that the four goals of SW were relevant to the life of all congregations. Two congregations were highly committed to an expanded sharing of resources with one another and to 'actively pursuing the possibilities of partnering with others.' In a congregation that had recently amalgamated, people felt that the SW emphasis on looking to the future would help the congregation build on its strengths and develop a more vital presence in its community.

Two focus groups indicated that their congregations were anxious to get on with activities that reflected SW goals and principles, and they hoped for changes to materialize in the near future. Others expected no immediate

---

results but felt that the spirit of SW would bring long-term benefits to their congregation and to the presbytery as a whole, particularly if there was progress in developing a presbytery-wide vision and mission statement.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS: WHAT SEASON IS IT FOR TScP?**

Toronto Scarborough Presbytery Executive has adopted the theme 'for such a season' (from Ecclesiastes 3) for the presbytery focus in 2007/8. Using this framework, a number of implications for the future of TScP were identified from the research findings.

#### **A Season to Keep Travelling in the Direction of Renewal**

It is clear from the responses of presbyters that there is both a need and a desire to continue the emphasis on deep-level change and renewal initiated by SW. Three guideposts for this ongoing journey might be:

1. the development of a common vision and mission for the presbytery;
2. more opportunities for collaboration and sharing among congregations; and
3. the utilization of presbytery gatherings for worship, education and relationships.

What remains unclear is the shape and form this continuing emphasis on renewal will take, with presbyters being divided almost equally between support for another intentional project and support for an integrated approach where the spirit and principles of SW

would be woven variously and appropriately into the life and work of the presbytery. In both the focus groups and interviews, presbyters made persuasive cases for each of these approaches. Another element clouding the picture is the uncertainty as to what time and energy there will be for a TScP renewal effort, given the demands that will be made on all the presbyteries as significant structural change takes place across Toronto Conference. As well, there is the critical question of what size and shape the presbytery will be when the structural shift is completed.

In this in-between time, an intentional renewal project designed for TScP may not be feasible, but as long as TScP exists, it's important to keep open a space in its life for the goals and principles of SW to be further developed. SW leadership and presbytery leadership are already well integrated. There is intention and capacity in the Presbytery Executive and in presbytery committees like Christian Education, Communication and Outreach to promote co-operation and sharing of resources across the presbytery, as well as to strengthen leadership development and to nurture faith formation.

It is encouraging that work towards a common mission and vision is continuing. That so many presbyters speak with such passion for and commitment to the future of the ministry and mission of the United Church in Scarborough is both inspiring and hopeful (and was experienced as such by the research team). Safeguarding the meetings of the full presbytery for worship, education and fellowship is critical if 'space' for renewal is to be



---

maintained. Along with its 'newfound ability to cope with change and a renewed commitment to mission,' this space is a gift that TScP can offer to whatever new and larger presbytery structure awaits.

### **A Season for Seeking More Clarity About Collaborative Structure(s)**

There was no question about the enthusiasm of most presbyters for the way co-operation and collaboration among congregations has increased in the presbytery. The congregational focus groups believed that increased awareness of and connection to other congregations was one of the positive outcomes of the SW project. Most participants were also convinced that more work was needed in this area.



Increased informal co-operation among congregations was seen as both feasible and desirable – something that the presbytery should continue to encourage and facilitate. More critical still, in the minds of many presbyters, was a need to identify concrete options

for a more formal co-operative structure. There was concern that, without such a structure, it would be difficult for the presbytery to sustain the changes that it had already made. For some, more formal collaboration meant some measure of consolidation of congregational structures, while others didn't necessarily connect the two. Neither the amalgamation of existing congregations nor the establishment of a regional church garnered

much support from either group as a desirable and faithful model for what a more collaborative UCC in Scarborough might look like.

One identified shortcoming of the amalgamation approach was the perpetuation of the one minister/one congregation/one building model which many experienced as a barrier to moving collaboration to a deeper level. It also seemed to create an anxiety in some congregations that prevented them from exploring possibilities for collaboration. The regional church idea was unappealing to many participants because of insufficient attention paid to the relational nature of UCC community, to the value of smallness and to the diversity among both congregations and neighbourhoods. It would appear that the longing for a unified approach is in tension with the desire for congregational autonomy, and this ambivalence complicates the discussion about how to structure more formal collaboration.

The polity of the UCC, especially in the area of congregational governance and pastoral relationship, was mentioned by a number of presbyters as inhibiting motion towards increased collaboration among congregations, especially the sharing of personnel and property. A small task group to look more closely at this concern could be useful. Looking more closely would include identifying the specific Manual sections that are problematic and strategizing both short- and long-term action to bring about needed changes. A task group, in consultation with the Pastoral Relations and the Pastoral Oversight committees, might also

---

identify more ways, short of Manual changes, that collaboration among congregations could take place with the direction and support of these committees. Any resulting insights and changes might also be a welcome gift in an enlarged presbytery structure.

### **A Season for Strengthening Individual Congregations**

The initial intention of SW was to focus on a church judicatory as the locus for initiatives towards transformative change, rather than concentrating on individual congregations. Given the authority of the presbytery in the UCC conciliar system and its attendant responsibility for the well-being of congregations, it is critical to strengthen and transform this particular council, or court, if transformation is going to take place. The decision to focus on the presbytery clearly resulted in a constructive life-giving change in TScP and in a stronger collaborative spirit among certain congregations and congregational leaders.

The response of both presbyters and the congregational focus groups suggests, however, that a church renewal project needs to focus on both presbytery and congregations simultaneously. While only a handful of presbyters identified explicitly the lack of support for individual congregational renewal as one of the shortcomings of SW, many recognized what one member called, 'our profound need to be congregations.' They lamented that, in spite of considerable effort to inform congregations and to engage them in the process, many congregations knew little or nothing of SW.

A number of insights into what helped and what hindered the fulfillment of the goals of SW pointed to the desirability of the presbytery embracing its authority more fully, both to challenge congregations that seem intent on simply fading away and to support the efforts of individual congregations attempting to reinvent themselves. This kind of challenge and support from the presbytery would benefit and reinforce the renewal process in both congregation and church court.

### **A Season for Reaching Out to Individuals, Congregations and Community Partners**

Renewal of souls and systems means looking both inward and outward. Transformation involves taking a good, honest look at ourselves as well as at our context. Responses from presbytery members and from some congregational focus groups indicated that the SW project had contributed to an increased awareness of their own and other congregational situations, as well as to an increased understanding of the realities of their neighbourhoods.

There was, however, impatience and disappointment expressed by a number of respondents about the difficulty of moving from awareness to action – to connecting the church and community. Some felt that because looking outward strengthens renewal, more reaching out could and should have been incorporated into the SW project by, for example, initiating a presbytery-wide outreach project or advertising the presbytery-wide service more widely in the community.

---

Renewal of  
souls and  
systems  
means  
looking  
both  
inward and  
outward

---

Responses also indicated that some congregations in the presbytery are perceived as being worryingly disconnected from their surrounding communities. Others, that have always maintained some community presence, have been caught up recently in congregational concerns. In three of the congregational focus groups, participants described how, after spending considerable time in recent months and even years on internal congregational affairs, their congregations are now ready to focus on 'being a vital presence in the community' and 'actively pursuing partnerships with others.'



Whatever the past accomplishments and shortcomings in reaching out to others, this is an area that both presbytery and congregation members agree needs further attention. The reaching out may take different forms, such as congregational solidarity with those in need in the community, a more proactive approach to inviting individuals and families to become part of congregational life or the incorporation of collaborative outreach projects into the work of the presbytery. Whatever form it takes, clear understanding of a common mission for the presbytery is needed.

A number of participants were convinced that increased collaboration among UCC congregations would strengthen the capacity for outreach. Given what was said in the responses about the relational nature of congregational life, the value of smallness and the diversity of the neighbourhoods where United Church congregations are currently located, perhaps collaboration with ecumenical and communi-

ty partners in the neighbourhood could also be a fruitful approach for mutual strengthening and service.

### **A Season for Facing the Truth About the Present and Future Challenge**

The SW journey began with the request by concerned members of TScP for outside help to renew and strengthen the presbytery, in the hope of creating conditions for more effective support of individuals and congregations.

Participants involved in efforts to renew the church in various contexts indicated in their responses just how demanding this task is. Whether their efforts focused on individual faith formation, up-building congregations or transforming the life of TScP, they clearly recognized the challenge. They commented on how hesitant many people were to speak of matters of faith. The word 'spirit' in the name 'SpiritWork' had made some people anxious. Congregational leaders, lay and ordered, described the painstaking and often exhausting work of moving towards new and more faithful habits and patterns in congregation life, even when the need for renewal is acknowledged. Similarly, at presbytery level, the members of the SW Steering Committee were keenly aware of 'how hard it is to help people live into God's future' and 'how challenging the work of transformational ministry is.'

Yet the truth about renewal is not only that it is painstaking and onerous. In TScP, the spirit of renewal has stretched and strengthened the individuals and structures it has touched. It has enlivened hearts and invigorated groups.

---

People are being moved by the power of prayer, congregations nurture a revitalized sense of purpose, ministers flourish in the collaborative atmosphere and SW Steering Committee members speak with excitement and humility about abundance, trust and commitment.

The book of Ecclesiastes speaks of a season for sowing and a season for reaping. TScP has done a good job of sowing the seeds of transformation. Persistence is needed – careful and continual watering, tilling, weeding – to keep moving from sowing to reaping. The SW evaluation process, while confirming many life-giving changes in TScP and its congregations over the past five years, has identified that much remains to be done to live into these changes more fully. The evaluation identified a yearning among presbyters for the ongoing companionship of the Spirit on their journey towards God’s future. May it be so.

### THE SPIRITWORK LEGACY

From the point of view of the research team, the overall question of the SW evaluation was whether a presbytery or other judicatory, by undertaking a project like SW, could successfully initiate and sustain intentional deep-level change. What engagements, what vision and mission changes, had transpired? Particular areas to be examined were the understanding of a current or changed context, the shared vision for mission in the current context, and the commitment to seeking co-operation with both church and larger communities.

The findings indicate clearly that extensive and intensive change has taken

place in TScP since 2002. The identity of the presbytery underwent a significant and sustained transformation. There were a number of facets to this change, the most critical being the shift, among both ordered and lay members, from understanding the presbytery as a collection of congregations to understanding it as a unified body that incarnated the United Church in Scarborough. Another important facet was the movement towards understanding the presbytery not simply as another community organization, but as part of the people of God. Related to this movement was the expectation that the presbytery would be a locus where people could be both nurtured in the faith and strengthened for mission. A third facet of the identity change was a heightened awareness of the Scarborough context and of how marginal United Church congregations are in the social, cultural and economic profile of the community as a whole.

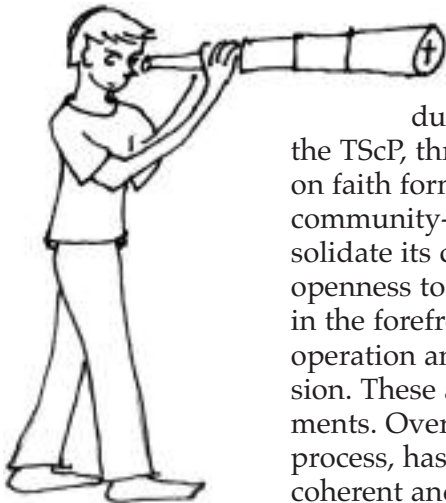
This change of identity with its various elements provided the springboard for other important changes. The most obvious effect was to strengthen the commitment in many congregations to seek greater co-operation with each other and with other church and community partners. It also increased the longing for a more unified and tangible vision and structure for mission in the presbytery.

A number of limitations to the changes initiated by the SW project were identified in the evaluation findings. Not all presbyters were engaged in the process and not all experienced the changes as life-giving. A number of congregations were unaffected or disaffected by SW.

---

What engagements, what vision and mission changes, had transpired?

Participants offered many suggestions as to how these limitations might have been mitigated, especially in the area of more effective and far-reaching involvement of congregations. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming in relation to the goals of SW was that movement from awareness to a unified action plan did not occur. While some co-operative engagements materialized within the lifespan of the SW project, it was deeply disappointing for many presbyters that their increased commitment to co-operation and their longing for a unified mission resulted in few concrete proposals and workable strategies for action. It proved very difficult for TScP to move from seeing things differently to developing a more collaborative structure for ministry and mission.



At the same time, the evaluation indicates that during Phases Two and Three the TScP, through persistent emphasis on faith formation, education and community-building, managed to consolidate its changed identity, sustain its openness to future changes and keep in the forefront the goals of more co-operation and a unified vision for mission. These are significant accomplishments. Overall, TScP, through the SW process, has developed a realistic, coherent and constructive basis on which to build and rebuild the relationship between the United Church and twenty-first-century Scarborough.

One way to visualize the change in TScP is to imagine a winding road. The presbytery has negotiated the first sharp curve in its path, that is, the transformation of its identity, as described

above. It has yet to manage the next curve – living into its new identity through a common vision and mission. If TScP persists in its efforts to nurture a climate of intentional change, this shift could still happen. Otherwise, it will be extremely difficult for TScP to sustain its new self-understanding. The fact that the road map has changed with the restructuring of presbytery boundaries means that the next curve will be especially tricky.

There is every reason to believe that the significant change in self-understanding experienced by TScP, accomplished in partnership with *Potentials*, could take place in other settings, both within the UCC conciliar system and in judicatories of other denominations. Elements of the TScP situation, such as significantly changing community demographics, diminishing congregational membership and aging leadership, are realities in many other places. Most of the factors identified as contributing to the change process, including the combination of dedicated judicatory leadership with knowledgeable outside consultants, can be replicated elsewhere.

The challenge, whatever the setting, will be negotiating the second curve, that is, moving from a multi-faceted identity change to the implementation of a common mission. Through a process that builds on the recognized strengths of SW while addressing the limitations that have been identified, it is to be hoped that the articulation and implementation of a common mission will be a realizable goal and that learnings from this noteworthy project will encourage and benefit similar endeavours in other settings. 🖱

---

# Visionkeepers – Plural!

by Douglas duCharme, SpiritWork  
Visionkeeper

I have been close to the SpiritWork people, and the process that they and you have been committed to, almost from SpiritWork's inception. Two and a half years ago, I was amazed to be hired as the Visionkeeper because it felt like both my deepest desire ... and fear!

So now, letting go is not easy. I know letting go does not let go of our deepest yearnings. Those remain and they ache to be born.

I write as someone who cares deeply, who was involved deeply and who was changed deeply by that involvement. As I write, I find myself seeking a storyline – because the narrative is important to many I am writing to, and about. After all, it was and is our story, and I'm sticking to it.

Ultimately, it is a biblical story. A man was in prison, writing to friends in the

Turkish city of Ephesus. 'Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,' he writes (Ephesians 4.1). Centuries later a group of people – standing in a parking lot following a meeting – ask themselves a few questions. 'We are a small group of good, well-meaning people trying our best, but ... but is our way of being the church worthy of the calling to which we are called? Are we feeling imprisoned by some of the ways we have learned to be a faith community, ways that no longer make sense for the people around us, for the changed and changing context of Scarborough?'

And so some folks within Toronto Scarborough Presbytery tried to figure out how to make some things happen differently and how to move parking-lot conversations into meeting rooms. They wanted change, and not just change, but *transformational* change – long-term, deep and lasting.

Gradually, they discovered that they weren't alone. Eventually, they became



---

something called SpiritWork, driven by the audacious thought that God, and God's Spirit, was at work among them, in Scarborough among a bunch of admittedly dwindling neighbourhood churches who wanted to do things differently.

The Canadian author Malcolm Gladwell writes about people like that. In his book *The Tipping Point*, he observes that change happens because many



different *kinds* of people come together. Some people are connectors. Connectors are the people who 'link us up with the world ... people with a special gift for bringing the world together.' They accumulate knowledge and know how to share it with others. When it comes to SpiritWork, I could name names, but I won't. They know who they are!

Then there are persuaders, charismatic people with powerful negotiation skills. They tend to have an indefinable trait that goes beyond what they say, that makes others want to agree with them. Again, I could name names....

Gladwell also talks about the 'stickiness factor.' You know, did what SpiritWork achieve have the effect on us of fly-paper? Did it help us in all our flying about in circles to get stuck on each other? Or just get stuck?

That letter from the fellow in prison, written so long ago, claims that if newness happens it will come 'with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity

of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

Okay, we have done that – it has not always been easy, but we have worked together and worked to imagine what being together as churches could look like in Scarborough. Pretty much. Humility? Patience?

Some of us have thought it involved doing more of the same, only better. Some of us thought it involved doing *everything* differently. Some wanted to find a way between. Some wanted to go back to old ways of doing things. Perhaps we might have done the decision-making better. We are the United Church after all.

But our letter writer writes from his prison to ours: 'he made captivity itself a captive' (Ephesians 4.8). This is a man speaking from prison. Imagine God making our captivity – our captivity in our limited imaginations, in our struggling buildings, in our wearied meetings – captive.

The letter goes on: 'Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4.11–12). So the *gifts* we need, the leadership, the vision we need, to bring about the change and newness we yearn for ... we already *have*.

Our correspondent then says something crucial. We must no longer be children (Ephesians 4.14).

If SpiritWork has achieved anything, it is this. We are no longer children. We've grown up in faith and as churches. It has not been easy, sometimes it has been

---

really hard. But speaking the truth in love, we've grown up. As SpiritWork, as a Steering Team, we did not always communicate clearly or well. We were trying to live into something we didn't really understand very well yet ourselves.

Strangely, wonderfully, as one seeking a storyline, I recently happened upon the Tafelmusik's performance of Biber's *Mystery Sonatas*. The music is great, but the story is intriguing. The string instruments are tuned in *fifteen* different ways. This has a fancy name (*scordatura*), but it made me think of the United Church congregations in Toronto Scarborough Presbytery. We are more than fifteen, yes, but even with our different tunings somehow making the same music.

It is a challenge to the players of each instrument, and a challenge to the instrument itself as it responds to the tensions of re-tuning. Yet it makes unexpectedly harmonic music, for those willing to take the challenge. It is perhaps a storyline, an image, that helps us understand what we have been doing.

This is supposed to be an evaluation. Did we have the gifts we needed? The leadership, the vision we needed? Achieve the goals we sought? Those who know me know that I am entirely capable of answering, at great length! But I think perhaps something less linear might be helpful at this point.

Malcolm Gladwell talks about the importance of context. Yes, we *had* the gifts we needed, the leadership, the vision we needed. And yet, in some

ways we *lacked* those things too, because of our polity, because of personalities, because of politics.

I am grateful for words from the book *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed* – by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton – words printed on the cover and continuing within: 'This book is for those who are not happy with the way things are and would like to make a difference. This book is for ordinary people who want to make connections that will create extraordinary outcomes. This is a book about making the impossible happen...WARNING: This book is not for heroes or perfectionists. This book is for flawed people (and we are all flawed in one way or another...).'

In the end, both the hardest thing for me, and the deepest honour for me, was that I was asked to be your Visionkeeper. Because, you see, we agreed in the end that what we did not identify was a common vision for me to keep.

But maybe that remains our deepest hope, and as together we continue to live into that vision we will together keep it ... Visionkeepers. Plural. 🐣



# Project Partners

Many people have contributed to the success of this research project since its beginning. Some have stayed the full course. Two of these, Ron Ewart and Douglas duCharme, have new positions. Others have retired and new people have come to take their place. We have tried to acknowledge all those who have contributed to the first stage of research in previous publications, and we now list below those who have been active in the final stage.

## Members of the SpiritWork Research Team

Douglas duCharme, Visionkeeper, SpiritWork  
Ron Ewart, Toronto United Church Council  
Barbara Lloyd, Toronto Conference (United Church of Canada)  
Paul MacLean, Potentials  
Alan Rush, SpiritWork steering team

## Researchers

Glenys Huws  
Joan Wyatt

## Project management and publications

Paul MacLean,  
Potentials

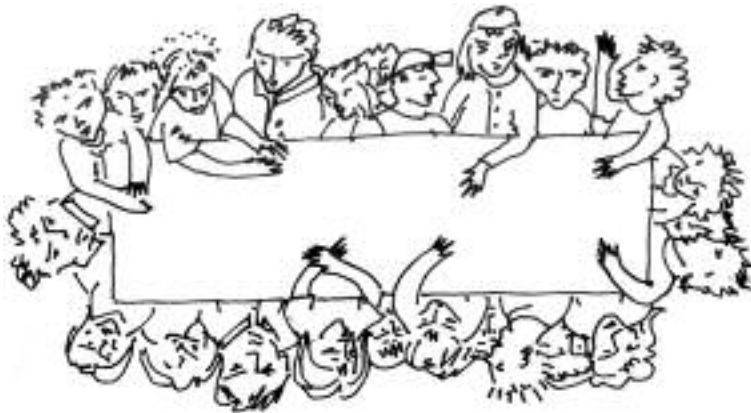
## Members of Toronto Scarborough Presbytery and the SpiritWork Steering Team

## Sponsoring body

The Centre for Research in Religion, Emmanuel College, Michael Bourgeois

## Funding bodies

Emmanuel College  
Toronto Conference (United Church of Canada)  
Toronto United Church Council



Original artwork by Jennifer Mitchell  
Copy-editing by Carolyn Black  
Layout and design by Gord Oxley

---

## Potentials

*A Canadian Ecumenical Centre for the Development of Ministry & Congregations*  
761 Queen St. West # 309 • Toronto, ON • M6J 1G1  
(416) 504-3664 • potentials@bellnet.ca • www.potentials.ca

© Potentials 2008