



## ***“Living The Hope”***

**Mar. 22, 2009**  
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The dictionary defines hope with the words: expectation and desire combined; that a certain thing will occur; promise; to feel confident; trust. The dictionary defines “hopeless” with words like: inadequate, incompetent; futile; without hope of success. And our theme this morning is *Living the Hope*. Living expectation, desire, and promise with confidence and trust. These are the makings of a spiritual community with practices worth pursuing. I’d like you to ponder for a bit what the distinction might be between “having” hope and “living” hope? As I was giving this question my own consideration, images flashed in my mind of the many congregations that I have known and worked with throughout my ministry, especially as it relates to stewardship. I usually get a call or a plea to help turn things around when the situation is already desperate. As I do my “needs analysis” I hear congregational stories which more often than not, reflect the same words in the dictionary that defines “hopeless”: words of inadequate, futile or with little hope of success. And while incompetent may seem like a harsh evaluation it can describe their potentially hopeless scenario that will not easily be resolved.

I’ve learned over the years that most congregations do not understand the connection between their ministry and their stewardship. They tend to compartmentalize the two, but I have realized that stewardship challenges are usually a reflection of ministry challenges ~ not always, but often. One is usually a symptom of the other. Why, because people don’t give to budgets and financial statements, at least not any more. They are not the motivating factors for our support. And the new generations of church seekers not only won’t attend, but they also won’t give their money to systems that are closed, inflexible and irrelevant to their context. My premise has always been that people will give money to what matters to them. They will financially support those things that have meaning and value for their lives. And we will also support those places that recognize and nurture our inherent desire to be the best that we can be; to learn and grow into what is required so that we can make a difference in those places in our lives where we have influence. I believe that is why we will give.

I asked you earlier to consider the difference between “having” hope and “living” hope. What did you come up with – I invite you to share your thoughts... As you’ve indicated, it would seem that “having” hope is passive, and while it may reflect expectations and desires, it tends to be re-active rather than pro-active. So you will often hear congregations say things like: We hope that we will attract young families. We hope that we can grow our numbers. We hope that we can balance our budget, and so it goes. It places hope in the external. “If we can just get the right...” (what ever that right might be: the right minister, the right program, or the right kind of advertising), “then things will be different.” There’s no question that these elements in ministry can and will make a difference, but they can also be cosmetic in nature. I often use the term “tricks”. An example of this is in the Welcoming area. You can have a well developed welcoming program but if it is not embraced by everyone in the congregation, if everyone doesn’t understand and take seriously what it means to be hospitable, open, warm and caring of the stranger at all levels, then the programs is doomed to fail. You can have the most gifted ministry personnel available, but if you don’t have the leadership to support them; the vision and values in place to reflect inspired ministry goals; or if you are systemically resistant to change, then your relationships will not live up to their full potential. And you will often hear congregations say: “It was their fault.” So with all of this in mind, our denomination, the United

Church of Canada has taken a serious look at what it means to be an authentic church not only in our relationships with each other, but also with our culture.

The United Church of Canada is not speculating on the changes we need to make, but rather it is engaging in research that will tell us what we need to know, even if it isn't what we want to hear. As a denomination we are taking seriously the role that technology is playing in how we find information, the way we share it, with whom, and how we learn. The project known as *Emerging Spirit* is a major initiative financed with a \$10 million bequest given specifically for this type of congregational development work. It's edgy, controversial and has great depth ~ if you are paying attention. Phase 1 of the project, called *Living the Welcome* covered four major areas: research with 30-45 years olds who do not attend church and a national training program with practical steps to help congregations be more welcoming. It also included a risky national advertising campaign that had all of North America in a buzz; as well as the launch of an interactive Website called WonderCafe. This virtual United Church has provided a forum for those from the non-churched culture who are seeking insight within their own spiritual context on life's important faith questions. This *Emerging Spirit* project has been seen a gift by some, and a needless squandering of money by others. And there are yet others who don't know anything about it at all. Some experience it as relevant and timely, with the insights needed to help us meet our expectations and desires for meaningful places of worship, programming and spiritual nurture. For others it is us pandering to the lowest common denominators in our society. This program offers and asks for more than some are willing to consider. And others are interpreting it as being about "them out there" which of course has very little to do with "us" in here.

Phase 2 of the project, called *Living the Hope* has taken the *Emerging Spirit* program to a much deeper level of understanding. The three critical areas towards faithful, relevant and vital ministry were defined as: Re-imagining Sunday Morning, Building Connections in the Community, and Exploring Leadership. My congregation, Symons Valley United Church hosted this event on February 6 & 7<sup>th</sup> and you were there! It is my pleasure to introduce to you, those who attended. If you are here, please stand: John Carmicheal, Sandra Farr-Jones, Ron Laycraft, Joan Liberon, Eleanor Melnyk, Beryl Richardson, Shawn Rose, Shelley Lavenne, and Joel Den Haan. Well done, faithful stewards of emerging ministry. I know that those who attended this outstanding event came away feeling inspired, motivated, challenged and energized. It has also affirmed the difference between being proactive vs. reactive regarding our health, vitality and relevancy for the future. This brings me back to the differences between having hope and living hope, especially with the changes that are happening within the Christian Church in North America. In the words of Diana Butler Bass, author of the book *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, we are experiencing the most dramatic changes that the church has seen in over 500 years. It is huge! And as congregations we will make choices, whether intentionally or not, about our future.

In the scripture passage from Ecclesiastes, we hear a well know piece of wisdom that reminds that there is a time for everything; and especially that there is a time for change. In the 1950s Pete Seeger took the words of Ecclesiastes and composed the song *Turn, Turn, Turn*. In a very powerful and relevant way, he added another layer of meaning and along with it, a sense of urgency. There is a season, Turn, Turn, Turn and a time for every purpose under heaven. Turn, Turn, Turn. It's interesting that the Byrds in 1965, could take a biblical passage almost word for word, and turn it into a #1 billboard hit. I suspect that there were folks in the churches from that time, who wondered what the world was coming to.

And there in lies the key to being an *emerging* church. Those congregations who embrace change with all of its creativity, possibilities and potential will thrive. Those who resist change will potentially struggle, age and probably close. Those who see culture as a gift will discover its depths, its commitment and its yearning for spiritual diversity, meaning and relevance. Those who see culture as self-serving and shallow will preserve their old ways and build walls, both literally and figuratively, to protect or shut out the forces of change that are a threat ~ except when they bring money. Those who see God in the midst of change, as the director and orchestrator, will pay attention and feel the energy of the Spirit that says "I am with you, come play with me." They are also the ones who will reclaim the bible through the lens of contemporary scholarship and research, bringing new life and new insights to the characters, their context, and their search for meaning in a very different time and in a very

different world. Others will see contemporary scholarship and research as a threat against God, and against what they see as literal truths recorded thousands of years earlier. They will reject and turn away with contempt and deaf ears from the search for global and universal truth. And in doing so, will alienate the most educated scientifically aware and technologically advanced culture in human history.

Ecclesiastes as interpreted by Peter Seeger and the Byrds reminds us that “To everything, Turn, Turn, Turn. I believe at the core of my being, that this is an exciting time to be the church. I believe that we, as congregations and communities of faith, can demonstrate our expectations and desires to not just hope for change but to be the change. To lead rather than follow; to be proactive rather than reactive; and to trust with confidence that God is with us, rather than be afraid. And our denomination, The United Church of Canada has taken the risk to be right there with us, giving us the insights and tools to help us claim our ministry and mission with renewed passion, energy, vision and excitement. They too believe that we are called to Turn, Turn, Turn. They believe that as a denomination, we have something significant to offer a culture that yearns for a spiritual house and community for a new time, for a new generation and for a renewed future. This was confirmed recently when an organization of atheists in Britain sponsored an ad that said: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” The United Church of Canada initiated its own ad that said: “There’s probably a God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” The response to our ad has been quite overwhelming. And while some in the church (you can guess what group) have been critical, most others have expressed their gratitude for discussion and dialogue on issues and perceptions about God that can be shared openly and with respect. Many on the WonderCafe website, indicated that they didn’t realize there was a church out there that would even engage in this kind of discussion.

So I am excited about the conversations that will unfold. I am proud to be associated with a congregation that is willing to step out in faith and embrace change with boldness, courage and meaning. In my organization development training I learned something very important. People don’t resist change ~ they resist being changed. God has invited us to participate in and pay attention to the signs around us; to have confidence and trust in our United Church Creed that reminds us that: We are not alone, we live in God’s world, we believe in God. And we are called to be the church; to celebrate God’s presence with us here, now, in our culture and in our time. This is *Living the Hope*.

From a stewardship perspective, this is what motivates us in our giving. Our financial needs are very real; there is no question that we need money. Money is not the centre of our ministry, it does not define it, but it sure does equip it. We don’t give because the budget tells us to. We give because we want to build ourselves, both individually and collectively as a community of faith, into a spiritual house where all are welcomed and have an authentic place to be. And our Christian church home, God’s house, is yearning for a makeover, to be updated so that it engages and connects with us, our children, our youth and our neighbours. This is not a cosmetic overhaul or decorating so that we can sell it on the open market. It is a renovation. And God, the architect assures us that the structure we are building on is solid, sound and will support the changes that we need to make. We need to be about replacing our outdated and inefficient wiring so that we can plug into new ideas, dreams and technology with renewed energy. It’s about upgrading our appliances so that we can deliver: cultural and environmentally friendly programs and projects that care for and support our precious inhabitants, whether they are Gay or Straight, Atheist or Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu, Jew or Christian. This house cares for and takes seriously the needs of one quarter of the world’s population who live on less than \$1.25 per day and who are dying from the reality of aids, war and poverty. This spiritual house we are proud to call Lewis Memorial United Church IS connecting people to a place of living hope.

In recent months, we have seen a major shift in the Universe. People in North America who felt helpless, depressed and angry about their political and economic state have been reignited by the spirit of hope that is permeating their lives. There is renewed optimism and faith in dreams that say Yes, it is possible. Yes, change can happen. Yes, dreams do become a reality – even the ones that seemed impossible. But we have also been given a challenge and a wake-up call. Change can happen, but we can’t do it alone. It is going to take all of us together to live the dream. I believe in the power and the reality of synergy: where the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Hope happens when we are proactive. Hope is real when we live it. I don’t know about you, but a community of faith that chooses to live as a place of spiritual nurture; the congregation that chooses contemporary programs

for growth, education, scholarship, and technology is where I want to be. The congregation that embraces, with authenticity and integration, children, youth and the stranger is the place I want to call my church home. The congregation that takes leadership seriously and encourages change with optimism and curiosity is where I want to live my ministry. The congregation that is *Living the Hope* is where I want to invest my gifts and talents, my time, and my money.

Your Stewardship focus for 2009, with the theme “Celebrate Stewardship” tells a special story, your story. You are a source of inspiration to folk who come through these doors. Your imagination, your expectations and your dreams are worth every dollar that you put into it. And despite all of the stresses you might be feeling, despite the challenges that may lie ahead, it is with pride and honour that you commit to and financially support this ministry. I served on the Foothills Presbytery Executive for eight years, and as a former member of this wider church community, I am most grateful: for who you are and for your willingness to *Turn, Turn, Turn*. And thanks to your Stewardship Team it is an honour for me to share in the celebration of your ministry, your dreams and your future. Your support for this spiritual home that you lovingly call Lewis Memorial is a gift to God, a gift to this community and huge gift to yourself. Well Done. You are *Living the Hope*. Amen and Amen! Let us sing together from *More Voices: #1 Let us Build a House*.