

Team Works

October 2003

A Resource for Congregations from Hamilton Conference Staff

“Dare to Let God...”

At the 2003 Annual Meeting of Hamilton Conference the staff were asked to give presentations on the theme, “Dare to Let God...” Following are those four theme presentations adapted for print and questions to use for group discussion.

Leadership & Spirituality

by Ann Fleming

It is a privilege to have this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts about Spiritual Leadership.

All of us are leaders. Each one of us who is a representative of a congregation to a Presbytery or to a ministry/mission unit of our United Church is a leader. I very much believe in the gifts of the Spirit being within each of us. I believe that we have the gifts that are needed for the ministry we as courts of the church are called to bring to life! We are one with the body of Christ’s church. I have heard one or another say, “But I’m not a leader, I’m a doer.” Doers, the feet and hands of the body, are leaders as much as the head, eyes and ears! I believe we all share the heart!

I also want to declare that I am a believer in the ministry of all believers. We are called to our ministries within the church and the world at our baptism and affirm that call each time we say, “I believe” and put that belief into action of some kind.

What is it that energizes you? I feel that the answer to that question is the simplest form of determining some of the spiritual gifts within. Where is your blessing seed? My first answer would be being with people, in relationship

with others where we can learn and grow through experiences, study, talking, planning for the next step. My second answer would be to be free to just be in silence, in worship, reading, enjoying music, watching the water flow by. Whatever your answer in the moment of today I hope that you find appropriate times to dig deeper into the knowing and developing of your spiritual gifts to bring them to your leadership roles.

I have another question: How do you approach a new day? Or, as one author put it, what *is* the size of your dream?

Here’s a scene from *Winnie the Pooh*: Pooh and Piglet are out for an evening walk. For a long time they walk in companionable silence.

Finally Piglet asks, “When you wake up in the morning, Pooh, what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

“What’s for breakfast?” answers Pooh. “And what do you say, Piglet?”

“I say, I wonder what exciting thing is going to happen today?”

What is the size of your dream? What motivates you as a person and as a leader?

Author Robert Dale suggests this question for congregations. He claims that “a healthy church lives out of a healthy dream.” A church can choose a “breakfast dream” or an “excitement dream.” The important piece of work is to determine what the possible dream is and to live it out. The living out of the dream takes the leadership of us all. A healthy congregation is one that plans. Dale claims the unhealthy congregation is one that merely solves problems.

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Planning involves taking initiative for the dream, building on it, renewing it, and, at the same time, ministering to others! Where would your gifts fit in the dream? In the holding up of the dream? In the planning? In the doing? In the caring? In the maintenance and details? I would want to work on the process of education and preparing for change and the details, the wheels, of how we could make it happen!

In the last month I have had heard two speakers on leadership, Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership the New Science* and other leadership books and our own United Church theologian Douglas John Hall. I have also been reading Tom Harpur's latest book, *Finding the Still Point: A Spiritual Response to Stress*.

Each in their own way is offering us ways to be spiritual leaders in the church and community for today and each is saying very much the same thing. Each of them speaks to my mind and my heart.

Margaret Wheatley spoke of the chaotic world in which we live and the need for new models of leadership. Her claim is that we need to let go of the "command and control" style of leadership because it is failing us. No one can create the equilibrium for people to feel safe and secure. Leaders are called instead to help people to move into a relationship with the uncertainty and chaos.

She named leaders today as pioneers because the world is a new place and she claims leaders need to be invitational, not prescriptive. She spoke of the need for knowing what we treasure, what we value and what our guiding principles are as the means to be prepared to get through the next trauma or crisis. When naming the values and principles she says we must ask the questions: How will we apply this? How will we know we are using it? What have we learned about being honest, for instance, or whatever the value named is? Wheatley names some essential beliefs or tenets for leaders:

- Life is uncertain;
- Life is cyclical;

- Meaning is what motivates people;
- Service brings us joy;
- Courage comes from our hearts;
- We are interconnected to all life;
- We can rely on human goodness;
- We need peace of mind.

We need to be giving birth to new leaders, offering an invitation to share. "Together we can figure this out, together we can not be afraid. Together we will hold each other with tolerance, forgiveness, trust and love."

Douglas Hall's lecture made me want to go back to school...well almost! He both praised and challenged we who are the United Church. At our best we have been wholesome in holding our great interest in justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

However, he asked and challenged: Have we been attentive to the deeper questions of being in the world? Have we held up the classical questions of meaning, purpose, truth, beauty, nature? Have we addressed the human questioning of what is evil? What is hope? Have we asked and explored together the essential question: What are human beings for? Hall urged those listening to address the despair which he named the "underlying element in our society." Despair is the absence of hope and he urged the church to address it not psychologically but in light of the classical questions about the meaning of life.

Hall spoke of the need to return to the "teaching eldership" where the deeper internal discourse can be enabled. Engage the Gospel, discover it, open it to the reality of its social context! In the church, tell the story; in the world, live the story. He urged us to be articulate leaders about what we believe. He also said to let our despair, our anxiety, our doubt be heard and to share how we are struggling with these elements in life! I recently heard a minister tell the congregation about his deep despair over the September 11, 2001 events. He also shared how he coped with that day and the ones that have followed! I found that very helpful in leading me to think how that day has

affected my life and how I am dealing with anxiety in these days of uncertainty.

How are you struggling with the stress, anxiety and turmoil of life? How is your personal journey connected to the community, connected to the world?

This is where Harpur's book comes in. He sets the contemporary scene, offers a spiritual response, gives a good number of practical ways and concludes with recognizing the God within. He includes extensive biblical referencing in two chapters. This book is one of many that offer leaders an abundance of ways for developing one's spiritual side and for teaching. I tend to be more undisciplined than disciplined but I do return again and again to that central crucible of my being, using a smorgasbord that includes prayer, space and silence, swimming, journaling, reading, friendship and worship as essential elements of being in tune with my spiritual being. Harpur speaks of the power of meditation and deep breathing as the way to the still point; others name creative artistic activities; and still others use movement, be it gentle dance or running. There is no one right discipline. I think the point is to find your way or ways and practice them to deepen your relationship with God.

Margaret Wheatley lists six practices:

- Start your day off peacefully.
- Learn to be mindful; pause before you act or re-act, make choices.
- Slow things down, take those deep breathes, sit back for a minute.
- Create your own measure for how you want to be;
- Expect surprises, the wisdom of living tells us they are coming.
- Practice gratefulness, count your blessings and express your appreciation to others often!

All of what we do is a form of leadership. All of what we do is spiritual. All of who we are is a form of leadership. All of who we are is spiritual.

Sometimes I sense spirituality is more a secular issue than an element of church! I like what one author says in defining spirituality. It is about being in relationship with God, neighbour and self. Christian spirituality has a specific quality of relationship: loving God, loving neighbor and self and receiving love and grace. Reminding myself daily where I have received love and grace is a very affirming spiritual discipline. Praying that I am able to offer it to others is another!

Joseph Campbell says if you follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you. And, the life you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are, if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time. The bliss happens, I believe, in community and conversation.

How do we "Dare to let God..." encourage and nurture us to be spiritual leaders? How do we "Dare to let God..." challenge and inspire us to be healthy, vital, communities of faith? How do we "Dare to let God..." be the still point in our lives? These are questions that challenge us and offer us food for thought! "Dare to let God..." use the gifts God has given to you to be the person God has called you to be! So be it!



Community and Conversations

by Fred Monteith

Do you remember the story?

On the road to Emmaus, two friends were talking about the things that had happened in Jerusalem. And as they were talking, as they built their thick history, a stranger appeared. Later, they would know it was the Lord, but the stranger appeared when they were talking.

I discovered a book a couple of years ago that I'm still not sure I understand. It's written by a fellow named Lewis Mudge. He's worked with the World Council of Churches. He's a Reformed theologian. He's a sociologist. He's a philosopher. And he's a hermeneutician. Maybe now you understand why I'm not sure I understand it yet. But Mudge, in answer to the question, "What are congregations for?" begins by saying that sociologically, congregations are to hold open space in society so that people might have conversations about the deep things of life.

It's Mudge's contention, and I think I agree now that I'm getting about 57 e-mails a day, that in this highly technological society we get lots of data but we don't often have opportunities to ask the deep questions. Why am I here? Why is there evil? What does it mean?

How is it at home, in the place where you live? Do those deep conversations go on? Or are people caught in some sort of superficiality? Or, even worse, do they not talk to each other at all?

Once I got over not wanting to tell people publicly what I did for a living I found it fascinating to go into Tim Horton's and when somebody said, "What do you do?" answer, "I'm a United Church Minister," and watch the conversation start. And it gets quite deep quickly. "Well, I've always wanted to know" or "What do you think about?" Sometimes I've wondered about seeing whether I could get Tim Horton's to pay me.

But what's it like where you live? And if the deep conversations aren't happening, why not?

I can remember being shocked when I was about 16 years-old when somebody said they found First United Church in Waterloo terribly unfriendly. At that time there were about 500 people worshipping on a Sunday morning. Heck, I thought it was wonderfully friendly! I knew all sorts of people. They talked to me and I talked to them on Sunday morning. But I forgot I was one of the in-crowd. I'd been there for 10 years. On Sunday morning I talked to the people I knew and heaven forbid that I should talk to somebody I didn't know.

This December I had the opportunity to be in Baltimore to do a course with Speed Lees. It was the last one he was doing as an Alban Institute consultant before he retired. Some of you may recognize him as the person who has come up with the five levels of conflict in conflict theory that we know about. When we asked him what he was going to do for his retirement project, like any good theologian, he said, "I've discovered my life's work was wrong. There's not five levels of conflict, there's six. And I think in my retirement I'll try and figure out what that sixth one's about. For now, I'm calling it Level Zero."

And here's what it looks like. When you walk into the congregation, they appear to get along quite well but it doesn't take long before, scratching below the surface, you discover there's not much leadership happening, there's hardly any ministry happening, and if you really invite them to go beyond, "Hi. How are you?" the conversation ends. He said, it looks like an organization that's depressed. He said, "I think what I've discovered is you see that level of conflict in congregations that have had a huge conflict in their lives and they are so terribly frightened of the pain that they never want to go there again. I'm not quite sure how to help them yet. But I think that's what I'll do in my retirement."

Do you know congregations like that?

With the congregations that I sometimes get to talk to the conversation begins like this: "I understand that Section 373 of the Manual says..."

My first question is usually, "What colour is your Manual?" and "When did you discover there was one?"

Sometimes the conversations are prevented when the Manual or any rulebook stops being the road map and becomes a weapon. So why would we have the conversation anyway?

Those of you who know about Meyers Briggs will be surprised perhaps to know I'm an extreme introvert and there are some days when I don't want to have the conversation at all, thank you very much. Leave me alone.

Can we allow space in our communities that people who will want to be alone for a while can have that space? Can we find ways to test when they've moved from being alone to being lonely? Can we find ways in our communities to begin to talk about the things that really matter to us and the things that divide us?

Begin the Conversation

Gill Randall of the Alban Institute uses what I think is a lovely image. He says, "The responsibility of leaders and spiritual communities is to hold people together in their differences." But to do that you've got to know what the differences are. You can't say, "Well, we all believe the same way." Because sometimes we don't.

How can we begin again to have the conversation? I might be able to say this and get away with it. And I'll start with this right here now: me talking to you—one way. What an absolutely silly way to have a conversation. As one who is ordained to the ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care, I want to say Sunday mornings are an abomination for conversation. But so is expecting, like I did when I was 16, that 500 people could have a conversation about the deep things of life. We need ways to bring people together in smaller groups.

I've discovered a great way to start is the church board. Use your Sunday order of worship as a format for a board meeting. Pray together. Reflect on Scripture and reports become responses to the Word and committee chairs have to wrestle with how they make it a response to the Word.

What if in meetings all you had to do was go to a mike and say, "Please stop. I don't understand. I need to sit with that for a minute. Can somebody tell me what we're

doing.” I’m not suggesting we need to throw out parliamentary procedure all together. But what if we thought about making it as simple as saying, “Please stop.” I think part of my own journey has convinced me that, for me, the road to Emmaus has some profound truth. Where God has appeared in my life has been when folks took the time to listen and to challenge and to sometimes to tell me to say more. When God appeared, for me, was not in me or in them but in between us, perhaps as a stranger.

Sometimes I didn’t even know it was God.

So will you begin? Maybe just in a little way? Not at Tim Horton’s but at church this Sunday morning.

Inagrace Dietrich says, “Congregations are to be outposts of the reign of God.”

When somebody walks down the street pass First United in Mississauga they should be able to point at it and say, “That’s what the reign of God looks like and I want me some of it, please.”

Or if they’re driving through Southwest-Norfolk Pastoral Charge, they want to stop the car and say, “I’ve got to get some of that.”

Mudge says that the other role of communities is that they need to be places of interpretation, places where the people of God gather and say, this is what we mean by what we do. And this is how we understand the world because of how we understand our faith story. And this is how we understand each other.

Mudge says those communities will be fragmentary and sometimes not look very God-like at all but as long as they are part of the conversation they may well be out-posts of the reign of God.

Do you remember the story? Two friends, building their thick history, a stranger appears and interprets for them what they understood to be the Word of God. And then they knew. And they ran and told the others.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



Into the Seasons of Your Lives

by Jenny Stephens

The two anticipated transitions which I spoke about at the Annual Meeting in May have occurred. The first was transition in the staff team, which as of September is now complete. We are at full staff! The second was the disbanding of the congregation I had worshipped with since moving to Cambridge more than a year ago. Lincoln Avenue United Church closed at the end of June 2003.

Staff transitions have involved both letting go and welcoming. They have meant getting used to a familiar person in a new role or a new person. My anxiety about transition raised questions about how we would get along together and how the work would get shared. I have experienced the staff transitions as a mixed up time emotionally – a roller coaster of anxiety on the one hand and expectant joy on the other; of wanting to draw some lines in the sand and of wanting to be open to a whole range of possibilities; of seeking to move beyond the grief of letting go to embracing the new. As staff committee produced four search committees in eight months, for us on staff, it was a “Daring to let God...” speak through those search committees to find the right people. For me it has been a lesson in daring to let go in order to let God, to let the Spirit open me to new possibilities and let go of or move past the anxiety.

It helped being part of a congregation also in transition, a more significant change than our staff one, a congregation that disbanded at the end of June. Worshipping with Lincoln Avenue helped me keep some perspective. Being with a whole congregation in its grief was sobering. Like me, over time the congregation went through its cycle of grief and of course, in such a large group, individuals were in different grief places at different times. Getting to know the members better and hearing their stories, their pain at the reality of their own decision called to me to reach out and connect with them with the understanding I’d derived from the feelings of my transition.

My friends will tell you that I haven’t found it easy to embrace the changes in the staff team and remain open. I have been caught in the anger, the depression, the bargaining (well if it doesn’t work out I’ll be back in the pastorate sooner than I thought!), and the sadness. Yet it has been good for me to be intentionally conscious about that roller coaster of grief as I experience change. It has been good for me to be part of a much larger system at Lincoln Avenue and seek to be a positive voice for the

promise of new life in the midst of the winter of congregational life.

Church closure is an example of the risk of “Daring to Let God...” If we are to “Dare to Let God...” then we must risk getting involved in the world which isn’t safe. It is needy, violent, desperate for love and care –whether we speak of nature itself being in need of space without pollution and free from ransacking so that it can heal itself, or whether we mean all the thirsty spiritual seekers some of whom in their desperation become addictive and ultimately destructive of self or others. Risking reaching out to others can change us, contaminate us. It means bringing those not like us into our buildings, or it means leaving our safe buildings and moving into the community. It means responding to the challenge, the call. It means “Daring to Let God...” lead us out into the field, away from the homestead and its safety, the barns and our knowledge of what’s there.

And so I am reminded of some foundational wisdom that I learned from those in the rural charges I have served, a way of looking at transition which is helpful and leads me back to God, and that is the gift of the seasons.

In a rural charge you know where the church stands in the scheme of things. The world comes first! There will be few if any meetings from May until mid-October. After all the men and boys and often the women and girls are out in the fields—preparing and nurturing, seeding and harvesting. You learned to pray hard in the fall as the heavy powerful machinery was out on the land harvesting late into the night. When the workers were tired, accidents were more likely to happen. In the spring you learned to pray for moisture but not until the crops were planted. Every year there was some anomaly—too little moisture or too much, rain at the wrong time, a late frost or an early frost. I quickly learned in Manitoba that every year was unusual for weather, and I think Bruce County has the same consistent unusualness in its weather!

When you think about it, weather is both the currency of farmers and the risk. Unlike congregations and ministers huddled safely in a church building like the fearful disciples in the upper room, farmers go about their business in the open air, dependent on factors beyond their control. No wonder they have so much to teach new ministers about “Daring to Let God...” for daring is about risking being out of control. Letting God is handing over control to a loving, powerful other.

So I ask you the question I ask myself: How have I dared to let God use the seasons of my life? How do we let God

use the seasons of the congregation’s life?

This last year of transition in the office has been no different than the constant change which is part of all our lives and which is so normal throughout the church. To use examples from my work – ministers diagnosed with chronic or terminal illness, active ministers or retired ones dying suddenly, ministers changing pastoral relationships, ministers wondering whether they are suited to the vocation after all, lay people discerning whether they are called to the ordered life, Ministry and Personnel committees dealing with troublesome situations which threaten the welfare of the congregation or staff, ministry personnel thinking about retirement, questions about arranging sabbaticals. Listing them makes me see that I deal with transition each day – but those are other people’s transitions. Although I am not brilliant at my personal grief work, this year has been wonderful because it has reminded me of the power of feelings and the cycle of grief as I journey with so many through their own transitions, the different seasons of their lives.

The Gift of Seasons

So what is the gift of seasons in our individual lives and our church lives?

In the field, each season has a purpose. I know that is an ancient thought—as ancient as Ecclesiastes “a time for every purpose under heaven.” But each season does have a purpose—a characteristic, a style.

Spring is my favourite season – for its colour and new growth. I wonder at the beauty in the blossoms, the bird song, the flashing wings, the wild flowers I see when walking the dog – trillium, jack in the pulpit, lady slippers. It is a time of lush and extravagant richness – of smell and colour, of new life and vivid sound. It is a clean season – the fields look green, a bank of trees shows the myriad different greens in the new leaves and splendour of blossoms in so many shades of white and pink.

The spring demands action from us and quickly – grass to be mown (as a new homeowner I have really become aware of this relentless demand), time for lighter clothes inspiring us to walk, to clean the windows which looked fine not so long ago, but now in the brighter sunlight look filthy. It calls us to be attentive as butterflies flutter gently nearby. It calls us to be aware of the pests too, mosquitoes and black flies. It calls to us to be at work or play. It calls out the fishermen and golfers, tennis players and baseball fans. And, of course, it calls to the farmers, those who care for the land and establish family and community in tune with the land.

Summer in Canada is so hot. I remember in Manitoba the heat waves of more than 30 degrees C. In summer we slowed down – enjoying the fruits of the spring labour, the browning fields, the young birds. It is a time of enjoying the outdoors but not being too active. Of caring for what is sown, of nurture and raising. Actually, Canada is a better place than England to learn about the gift of seasons, because of the extremes of hot and cold, drought and ice floods.

The fall is beautiful too—sunsets, and harvest. Like spring, it is a season calling to us to work, to gather in the sheaves, to reap the benefits of the nurturing of summer and the anticipatory planting of spring. There is an urgency to gather before the frost comes or depending on the crop to be ready to gather immediately after the first frost. It is a time for neighbourliness as the heavy machinery is shared and teams working together are more effective than individuals working alone – driving the combine, loading the trucks, driving them to the barn, unloading and stacking, meals taken out to the fields. It is a time of selling cattle fattened up in the luxury of summer. It can be a time of letting go. There is a sense that a change is coming and all must be safely gathered in.

And the change is winter, a shift in focus from work to maintenance but with time to curl and for euchre parties, to visit in each others' homes. It is a time when, if the land is lucky, a white blanket tucks in the fields, holding them safe for the next crop, preventing soil erosion, providing moisture, allowing the soil to live for another year to feed the new crop. And as winter snows disperse, snow fences are taken down, the fences start to be repaired to keep livestock in. It's time to prepare.

God gives us seasons in our own lives, for how can any of us survive our whole lives tucked under a blanket of snow, like winter, or with the frenetic activity of spring or with the constant demand for nurture of summer or with the persistent letting go of fall. We need it all, we need the cycle. We survive the transitions because they are just that – cycles, seasons of letting go, of resting, of anticipating, of sowing, of building, of reaping the benefits of hard work. This is as much true of our congregations as it is of ourselves.

In congregational life comes the moment to decide whether mission is being effectively done perpetually in the short days and comparative darkness of winter. For some congregations the way out of winter into the new life of spring is disbanding or amalgamating, for others it is dying so that a new ecumenical outreach might rise in its place, for others, less courageous it is waiting for the funeral director for burial.

Congregations, seemingly in the summer of their lives, forget that the abundant growth can only be sustained with careful nurturing, occasional pruning, and an attitude of gratitude not entitlement. New church developments in the exciting spring phase of their lives need to respect that season and delight in it recognising that a transition into summer is just around the corner and needs different leadership and management skills.

Congregations in the fall of their lives might enjoy the changing colours, develop skills in letting go, hunker down if winter seems a short season in congregational life with the promise of spring to follow, or get real about the letting go and the letting God.

In 79 years as a denomination we have moved through different seasons—beyond now the excitement of spring and the abundance of summer taken for granted a few decades ago, now we enter the fall. The average age of ministry personnel in the United Church of Canada is 55. Think of all the goodbyes over the next decade—the evenings set aside at future annual meetings for retirement speeches! The gift of fall is learning to let go. We need to let go of our presumptions and our pretensions. We need to be clearer about what ministerial leadership is about, the kind of leadership needed and be serious about recruitment – of leaders and disciples.

New Eyes

We need to look at ourselves with new eyes, open to renewal by the Gospel call and discerning of the visionary voices around us. The impact of new eyes can be great. Over the last several months, another transition I have been through, a public one, is the wearing of glasses. I survived all these years without them and now have been wearing them more and more. This coupled with a shorter hair cut has caused some to say, “Jenny? Oh, I didn't recognise you, sorry.”

If only re-shaping a denomination or a congregation was as simple as new eyes and a hair cut! Although new vision and some pruning of what's not important might help! Counting these glasses as part of the aging process draws me back to the seasons of my life. For I realise that in the seasonal nature of our lives is the security that God is present in every purpose under heaven—providing rest after frenetic activity, providing the comfort after the heartache of letting go, guiding us through the aging process or through congregational transformation. So how will we, as a denomination, “Dare to let God...” use this season of our life together? Will we hunker down? Will we dare new ventures? Will we focus on taking in the washing, using the manure to nurture the land and deepen our spirituality?

At the Annual Meeting we heard from our candidates looking forward to new ministries within our denomination and from retirees and jubilands, celebrating many years in formal ministry. Throughout their stories, we pick up the markers of different seasons in people's lives. All of them share with us both the joys and challenges of ministry. Within their stories we can hear where they have Dared to let God... into their lives and the joy that has produced. We also hear the costs of letting God into their lives and sometimes the reluctance to really let go. Openness to God's leading includes both the spring and fall—excitement and new growth and letting go and moving on. Transition is a necessary part of formal ministry. Like the Chinese word for crisis we find both the symbols for danger and for opportunity. "Daring to let God..." can produce a sense of crisis in us, or a crisis can allow us to Dare to let God..." "Daring to let God...", though, is not without risk—risk of danger and being changed by saying yes to opportunity.

These features of God's call to formal ministry—of danger and opportunity—are the same features as anyone on the journey of discipleship experiences—congregations and individuals. It is no idle threat when Jesus calls us to leave behind what we know, job security, our families, our homes, and follow him. In our culture, it is rare to experience these costs of discipleship, because we have preferred to do our journeying as disciples of Jesus Christ within a middle class institution which favours the path to Christ through intellectual endeavour rather than life changing experience. Like John Wesley, so many in our United Church of Canada, seek our hearts "strangely warmed," that we might truly know the love of God in our very being and feel the gospel message for us, no matter what dangers are ahead.

How often have I heard the farmers say: "It'll happen in God's own time", or, "It will be better next year." Or, "you know how it is." Sometimes we need the opportunity to reflect to "know how it is"—how God uses seasons in our lives. I am grateful for the perspective from the Conference Office which is like riding the gator to see the workings of the farm from behind—the manure piles with their potential to create a big stink or to nourish the land, the silos which store what is needed for future nurture, the working end of the barn—the vehicles for disbursing the Christian faith, and in the farm yard behind the house, I see the washing on the line that is hidden from the road.

Seasons are God's gift not just to farmers, but to us in our lives. We are richer when we appreciate the offerings of each season, when we are glad not to be stuck in one. When we acknowledge that the letting go, the anticipation, the anxiety and the commitment to building new

relationships is all part of the cycle, then perhaps we can "Dare to let God..." into the seasons of our lives, as individuals and as congregations engaged in Christ's mission in the world.



Paying Attention to the Margins

by John Asling

It's a tiny line in Scripture that scares the Hell out of me:

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

Where does that leave me?

I'm not perfect. I never will be. I'm wounded, weak, sometimes mistaken. First, there was that accident involving the grocery truck when I was five-years-old. And there have been many other kinds of mistakes over the years.

Thank God for Luke who says "Be merciful," or in other translations, "Be compassionate." And I'm mindful of James' words too: "All of us make many mistakes." But the Roman Catholic in me (It never really goes away) has had that "Be perfect" burned into my skull. I don't think I'm alone.

In any case, I sometimes like to take my Scripture with a dose of poetry. Listen to the words of Leonard Cohen:

"The birds they sing at the break of day/Start again I heard them say/Don't dwell on what has passed away or what is yet to be/Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."

Leonard Cohen sings about it.

Moses and Mary Magdalene experienced it.

Jean Vanier lives in the midst of it.

It's our imperfection; our weakness; our woundedness.

We are called to "Dare to Let God..." not as perfect souls but as the wounded followers of Jesus, who suffered the

ultimate wound. We are called to “Dare to let God...” use us, and others, who are wounded, weary or even just weird.

And perhaps we will not accept the gift of the woundedness of others until we accept the gift of our own woundedness.

This is both a personal and a political call. It is also a spiritual call.

Sometimes these wounds are personal, personally inflicted, personally suffered.

Sometimes these wounds are political, the results of systems that keep whole classes of people in misery.

In either case, it is often the very people on the periphery of our congregations, Presbyteries or Conference, for personal, political or spiritual reasons, who appear unable to minister to us at all but who can and ought to minister to us, and to our world, in the most profound and healing ways imaginable.

If we are open-hearted, they will change us, change the shape of our congregations, our Presbyteries, our Conference—change the shape of our mission as the United Church. This “Daring to Let God...” might be very dangerous indeed. And very exciting.

Who might these people be?

- a poor, disabled layman who starts a soup kitchen and stands disturbingly prophetic in our midst?
- a minister sick with ALS who begins to minister to those who share his deadly disease?
- a troubled youth who pushes for change?
- a minister with HIV-AIDS who continues to serve his congregation?
- an older lay leader continuing his ministry while dragging an oxygen tank behind him?
- a feminist who offers a different way of looking at our faith stories?
- a disheveled peacenik who pushes his church to work for justice?
- a congregation that perhaps offers us a model for living as it is dying?
- a First Nations woman who relives the pain of her

abuse in a residential school so that others will understand?

- a congregation that has become a haven for the poor in its neighbourhood?
- a woman of colour who challenges our perceptions of church?
- a congregation that shares a building with another faith group?
- outreach projects that push us to make real transformation of our communities a priority?
- poor people who show up at our doors asking for food and demanding justice?

They evangelize us. They can change us. Do we “Dare to Let God...” work through our own brokenness? Do we “Dare to Let God...” change our church through a new openness to the outsiders in our communities – the poor, the disabled, the immigrant, the unorthodox believer?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *How Good Do We Have to Be?* says that religion often turns our woundedness into guilt and fear that are useless commodities. “They drain the joy out of life.

“But when religion teaches us that God loves the wounded soul, the chastised soul that has learned something of its own fallibility and its own limitations, when religion teaches us that being human is such a complicated challenge that all of us will make mistakes in the process of learning how to do it right, then we can come to see our mistakes not as emblems of our unworthiness but as experiences we can learn from.

“When Charles Darwin shocked the 19th Century World with his theory that human beings and apes had a common ancestry, someone asked him whether there was still anything unique about the human being. Darwin answered:

“ ‘Man is the only animal that blushes.’ That is, human beings are the only creatures capable of recognizing the gap between what they are and what they can be expected to be, and of being embarrassed by that gap.” So we are the only creatures who blush and the only ones who need to.

A bumper sticker adds: “God Loves You Anyway.”

The rabbi reminds us, “The heroes of the Bible are not perfect people. Their great deeds of faith overshadow their

mistakes but they all make their share of mistakes because they are human beings, not mythical models of perfection.

“Abraham sends his wife and son off to starve in the desert... But Abraham is called the ‘friend of God.’”

“Moses repeatedly loses his temper at the people he is supposed to be leading, but Moses is granted an intimacy with God that no other prophet experiences.

“David commits adultery with a married woman and arranges to have her husband killed, but God loves David as (God) loves no other biblical figure.”

Peter’s lack of faith made him sink to the depths of the sea; he denied Jesus three times; he was a stumbling leader. And yet it was upon Peter that Jesus was said to found the church.

Mary Magdalene had a reputation. Yet Jesus allowed her the kind of intimacy that afforded her the opportunity to lavish comfort upon him.

And Jesus really was the ultimate outsider: born out of wedlock, persecuted for his religious and political statements and executed as a criminal.

Jesus told stories where the outsiders like Samaritans were the heroes. He hung around the poor and tax collectors, lepers and the so-called bad people. He didn’t go looking for the perfect to preach to or to begin his ministry with. He stood up in the temple and brought good news to the poor.

Perhaps we need to be careful not to think we are perfect just like Jesus, but to follow him.

Kushner says, “The person who claims to be perfect, without flaw or defect, is claiming to be like God. The person who knows her flaws all too well is open to God’s love and God’s presence because she realizes she is not God.

“Imperfection is the wound that lets God in.”

Are we trying too hard to be perfect, waiting until we have it all together to minister to our communities?

Are we closing out opportunities to hear the word of God and feel God’s healing hand because it is outstretched by someone who looks, sounds, smells, different?

Did you know that some Inuit artisans deliberately add a flaw into their art so they will not offend God by trying to

create something perfect?

Did you know that the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi celebrates the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete?

Do you remember that Mother Teresa used to say, “We are not here to be successful; we are here to be faithful?”

Maybe being faithful has some kind of connection to our imperfection, our woundedness, our humanity.

Kushner suggests that the person who has everything is in some ways a poor person. He or she will never know what it feels like to yearn, to hope, to nourish their souls with the dream of something better.

There is a wholeness about the person who can give himself away, who can give their time, money, strength, to others and not feel diminished. There is a wholeness about the person who has come to terms with her limitations.

Jean Vanier lives in community with people society looks on as having severe limitations. In his book *The Broken Body*, he talks about descending the ladder of success to find our humanity and wholeness.

“It is the people who are handicapped who are the heart of our communities. Though they are sometimes angry, violent, weak and broken, it is they who have taught me how to live and love, who have taught me about pain and suffering, who have taught me about Jesus and the church, and who are teaching me still how to follow Jesus.

“This way is open to us all. Jesus calls some to leave everything and to become beggars of compassion like St. Francis, He invites others to leave their familiar surroundings to share their lives fully with the poor and weak.

“Still others, He calls to invite an elderly neighbor or a child with a handicap into their hearts and their homes. Jesus calls each one of us to go deeper, and to be compassionate as he was compassionate, wherever we find ourselves, and whatever our circumstances.

God Sides with the Poor

“The poor and weak have revealed to me the great secret of Jesus. If you wish to follow, you must not try and climb the ladder of success and power, becoming more and more important. Instead, you must walk down the ladder to meet and walk with people who are broken and in pain.

“The poor with whom you are called to share your life are

perhaps the sick and the old; people out of work, young people caught up in a life of drugs, people angry because they were terribly hurt when they were young; people with disabilities or sick with AIDS or just out of prison; people in slums or ghettos; people in far off lands where there is much hunger or suffering; people who are oppressed because of the colour of their skin.”

Vanier reminds us: “Those who are poor possess a precious gift and we must listen to them with deep respect.”

In other words, they evangelize us. And they might change us personally and as a church. Do we “Dare to Let God...” let that happen?

Latin American theologian Elsa Tamez reminds us that the biblical story is about God taking the side of the poor against oppressors. She hears that story told again in the Mass of the Nicaraguan Farmer, particularly in the Kyrie chants that repeat the theme of the Psalms:

“Christ, Christ Jesus
take sides

not with the oppressor class
that squeezes dry and devours
the community

but with the oppressed
with my people
thirsting for peace.”

For Tamez the oppressed in Nicaragua are “the impoverished, the slaves, the day labourers, the widows, the resident aliens, the orphans. All are poor and lack both social standing and power.”

They have the law of Leviticus on their side: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

And if we love them, these sojourners will evangelize us, change us. Do we “Dare to Let God...” let that happen?

It is said the church in Brazil truly changed and became relevant only after the poor literally invaded the church, compelling it to become relevant.

Are we willing to “Dare to Let God...” let such an invasion take place here? What would our staid old United

Church look like?

Listen to the words of this song, which comes from the Sojourners Community:

“Is there room in your home for the outcast family?
Is there room in your heart for the lonely one?
Is there room at your table for the hungry one?”

We might add a line, “Is there room in your church for the unwelcome ones?”

Jim Wallis of Sojourners says, “Putting ourselves in proximity to oppressed people begins to open us up to understanding and compassion. Our hardness of heart cannot be maintained for long in the midst of such obvious human suffering.

“Only when our eyes are opened and our hearts softened are we really ready to work with and for the poor in seeking to change the wretched circumstances of their lives.”

In other words, they will evangelize us. They will change us. Are we ready to “Dare to Let God...” let that change begin—both in our hearts and in our congregations?

Wallis says, don’t just open your church doors to the poor for a meal; sit down with them, be in relationship with them; learn about their personal woundedness; and, about how society has wounded them; then make your ministry about reaching out to heal them personally and about healing the systems of society that hurt them. And in the process, he adds, echoing Isaiah (58), you will be healed.

Jean Swanson, the British Columbia author of the disturbing book, *Poor Bashing*, tells the story of Georgina Isaacs, an anti-poverty activist who invited city hall officials to a meeting in her neighbourhood.

“What we do is bring people together to talk about problems and do something about them,” Isaacs said. “I took some city hall people down here...Coffee was ready and they wouldn’t sit down to drink it. They were dusting their chairs off.”

Says Swanson: “Poor bashing is thinking that people who are poor are dirty or that they are too unimportant to drink a coffee with.”

How often has that been our approach as church?

The most recent Canadian census data offers the United

Church a great opportunity by showing us there is at least one group we are not reaching out to—new immigrants.

How might they change the shape of our church if we reach out in an honest attempt to journey with them?

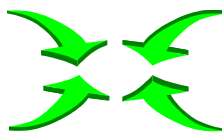
Many other Canadians now say they are part of no faith group at all. I wonder how many of them fit into some of the categories we have been talking about: the wounded or disabled, sick, lonely, tired and the poor.

What might our church look like tomorrow if we truly invite them in? I wonder.

Finally, I want to ask: Can we, “Dare to Let God...” keep us open to those on the margins of our communities who may evangelize us to be a new kind of church?

Can we, “Dare to Let God...” keep us open to our own woundedness as a source of new life for our churches and communities?

As the poet Leonard Cohen says: “Forget your perfect offering—there is a crack in everything—that’s how the light gets in.”



Suggested Questions to Use for Group Discussion

by Judith Johnson

Setting The Stage:

These theme addresses are personal faith stories, so it would be helpful to have participants identify their stories of their faith journey, using the following questions:

Where have I come from when I think about my personal faith journey?

What are some of the benchmarks and touchstones that mark my journey?

This particular exercise would need at least 15 minutes for each person to make individual notes and then you can encourage sharing of these stories for those who feel comfortable doing so.

Engaging With The Theme Presentations:

There are two questions that would be the same for each address:

What questions emerge for you?

What comments have been sparked for you?

Discussing the questions and comments that emerge during your reading can be enriching and help you probe into the meaning each person pulls from a particular address.

Specific Questions for the Individual Presentations:

Each presentation had a specific focus and we have given you one question unique to each presentation:

Leadership and Spirituality by Ann Fleming:

How do we “Dare to let God...” lead us to be spiritual leaders in healthy congregations?

Community and Conversation by Fred Monteith:

How do we “Dare to let God...” be present between and among us?

Into the Seasons of Your Lives by Jenny Stephens:

How do we “Dare to let God...” into the seasons of our lives as individuals and as congregations?

Paying Attention to the Margins by John Asling:

How do we “Dare to let God...” change us as church through the woundedness of ourselves and others?

