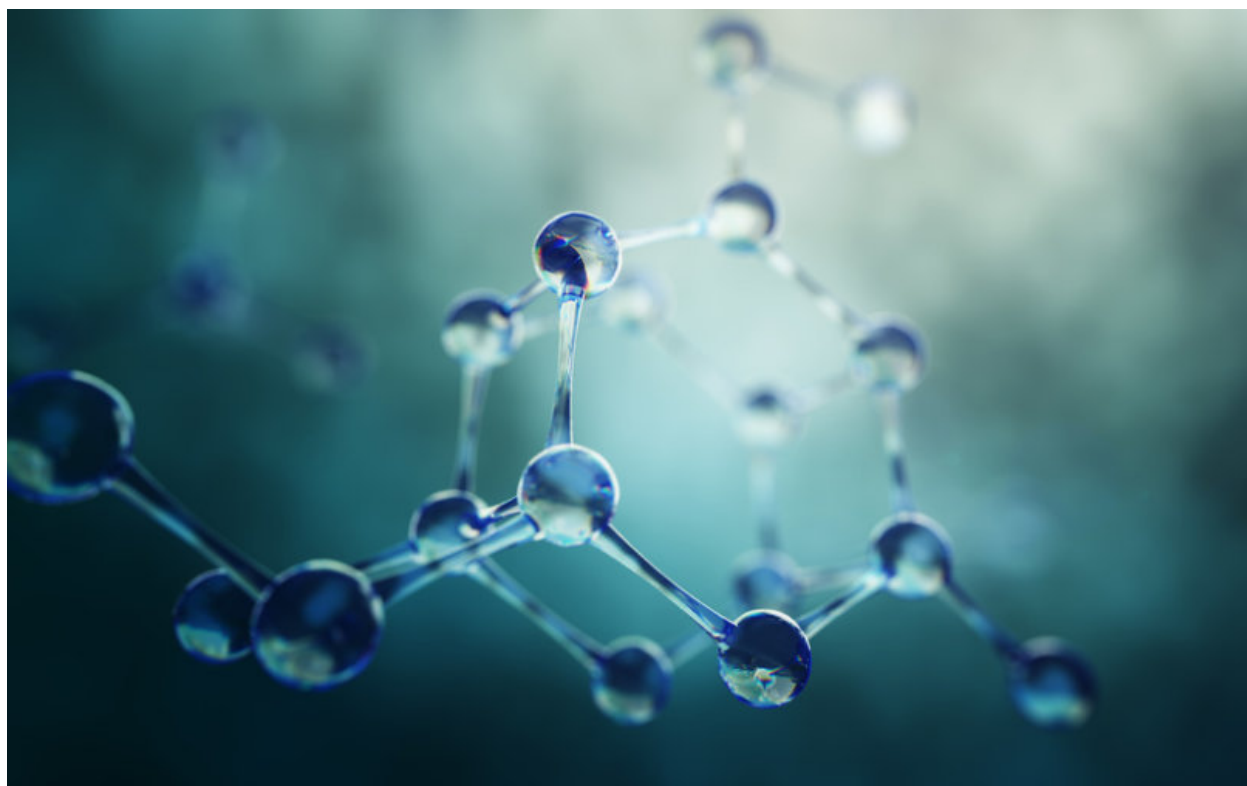

The Art of Clusters

Prepared for Calgary Presbytery



Dr. Stephen Harper

1st Edition

Preface

A Brave New World

There was once a time when humanity thought the world was flat. European explorers thought that if they ventured too far from the familiar shores of home, they would literally sail right off the edge of the world. They were locked into a particular way of thinking about the world around them, which was based on the popular theories and beliefs of the day.

This all this changed when explorers like Vasco da Gama, Magellan, and Columbus challenged the conventional ideas of their time and set sail for the great unknown. In doing this, they sailed into the pages of history by discovering "*A Brave New World*." They radically changed their world by having the courage to venture out, "blown" by the winds of change.

We are in a place today which is much like the time of these explorers: it is a time of monumental change. These men lived during the European Renaissance. This was, like our time, a time of great change and diversity, a dynamic period of discovery, exploration and expansion. It was also a time when many ideas and institutions were challenged and changed.

Our Current Context

The world has changed and is continuing to change at a rapid pace. This is most apparent in western society. The world that birthed church groups like the United Church, no longer exists. Unfortunately, many denominations continue to go about their business as though they live in that world. In the last forty years, Canada has gone from a Christian nation to a secular nation. From a country whose inhabitants were primarily from European backgrounds, to a cultural mosaic with citizens from all over the globe. It has also moved from a society that held a "modern" worldview to one that now holds a postmodern world view. These shifts are significant, permanent and have created a problem for the church in the western world; staying relevant.

Unfortunately, in the midst of these massive seismic cultural shifts, church leaders and individual Christians in most denominations have either been oblivious, indifferent or in complete denial to the obvious changes occurring around them. As a result, we now live in a world where virtually all the historic Protestant denominations in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States are in serious decline. In fact, it has been reported that “church attendance in Britain has declined from 7.5 percent in 1998 to 6.3 percent in 2007, and it is projected to continue declining”¹, and that weekly attendance in Canada has dropped to 18 percent and 35 percent in the United States.²

The United Church has not been immune to these changes. In fact, the United Church has been one of the hardest hit denominations in Canada. Simply put, the United Church has a people problem! The UCC, which was a merger in 1925 of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations reached its peak in the mid 1960s. Since then, it has been bleeding members, falling from a high of nearly 1.1 million members in 1965 to 413,171 church members in 2016³. Based on these recent figures, the United Church membership is currently around 1.2% of the Canadian population and falling.

What We Are Doing

No denomination wants to see its numbers continue to dwindle to the point that ministry is no longer sustainable or even viable, yet it seems many are letting this happen. The reasons are numerous. For some, the issue is fear, not embracing change out of a fear of change, while for others it's because they aren't sure how to go about making the necessary change, while others simply won't admit that there is even a problem. The reality is that whether these organizations admit it or not, change needs to happen. If it does not, these denominations will continue to decline to the point of further irrelevance and perhaps nonexistence.

As mentioned above, the United Church is far from immune to the culture shift that has gripped Christianity in the western world. As it turns out, we are now 50 years into our

¹ Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 205.

² Ibid.

³ The United Church of Canada, <http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/united-church-statistics.pdf>, accessed February 2018.

negative growth cycle. This has had an impact on every part of the United Church. From individual congregations, to presbyteries, conferences, and general conference, all have been affected by this numeric contraction. Thankfully, we as an organization are no longer content to let the world change around us without making at least an attempt to adapt. We have set out to try and turn around the decline that we have been experiencing. This has come about from years of study of this problem. Committees and councils have been brought together and we are now at the threshold of making substantive and significant changes in order to try and quell the decline that we have and are still experiencing.

One of the things that we are doing in order to adapt to the new world, is restructuring the way we organize ourselves. Historically, we have been organized by conferences and presbyteries. However, in January 2019 we will see that system, which has guided us for almost one hundred years, be replaced by a new system which will hopefully guide us for the next one hundred years. In January, we will begin to be organized by regions. These regions will then have that ministry further enhanced by informal clusters of communities of faith. The hope is that the new and much smaller organizational structure will be more efficient both financially and in its ability to adapt to needs and change. Smaller can have huge benefits.

The Strength of Small - Unlikely Teachers

One of the things in abundant supply in many homes, is Disney Movies. One of the reasons that they are so popular is that they most often mirror and then portray one of the strongest societal truths known; that we as a culture like to see the "underdog" or the "little guy" overcome the odds and win.

There are many examples of this contained within the Disney ethos. The story of the plucky little white VW beetle with a passion for racing; the mermaid who gives up her home under the sea to find true love and become a princess; or the orphaned lion who dethrones his evil uncle "Scar" and then takes his rightful place as king.

However, the one movie which stands out to me is *A Bug's Life*. Now this movie isn't as predictable as to start with the oh so familiar "Once upon a time...", but it does have a very

happy ending. The ants, who are oppressed by the malevolent grasshoppers, rise up and overcome not only the grasshoppers, but more importantly their own preconceptions of how and how not to do things.

Two of the key thoughts that stand out in this movie can be best summed up by the characters who uttered them.

“Why we have harvested this way since I was a pupa.”

The first quote comes from one of the ant colony's “old timers” who was observing the younger ants during the harvest. As he observed our unlikely and awkward hero Flick, who was exploring an innovative new way of harvesting the crop, he was compelled to speak against Flick's innovation by saying, “Why we have harvested this way since I was a pupa.” Implying that Flick's new way of harvesting was not at all needed. If we were to describe this “old timer” with a cliché it would be, “if it ain't broke, don't fix it.” This may sound old and stodgy, and we might think that we will never be like that, but it is those who are in leadership in the Church who are often the ones who facilitate the survival of this way of thinking. This is tragic, because even though the church might not be considered to be “broken” by some, in its present condition it could definitely be considered in decline and out of sync. For this reason, we should embrace new and innovative thoughts.

The second quote from the movie, which is particularly relevant to our current situation, comes from the leader of the grasshoppers. While commenting on the grasshoppers precarious control and hold over the ant colony, Hopper says, “Those puny little ants outnumber us a hundred to one and if they ever figure that out, there goes our way of life.” Each and every fairy tale has a moral, and the moral of this story is that a hundred small things can be a lot more effective than one large thing. One hundred ants can defeat one grasshopper and one hundred small clusters can do more and adapt more quickly to needs of society than a larger organizational structure.

Bob Dylan once said eloquently in one of his songs that, “*The Times They Are A-Changin.*” Change is happening today at a faster pace than it ever has before in history. For example: “5 years ago online information was doubling every 4 years, now it's doubling every 60 days.⁴ So we need to be innovative in the methods we employ, in order to thrive as a denomination in the 21st century. We need to think in new paradigms. One of the ways that

⁴ Leonard Sweet, *The Dawn Mistaken for Dusk* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 194.

this will be accomplished is by breaking with the status quo and embracing models that are more adaptable.

The idea of replacing the tried and true with the unknown can be daunting.

What This Change Will Look Like ... Maybe

Very few of us currently serving in the church actually know what the end product of these organizational changes will look like. If we were to focus on what we do not know, we might find ourselves naturally feeling apprehension, uncertainty and perhaps even fear. However, a better approach might be to focus on what we do know. We know that we are replacing 13 Conferences & 86 Presbyteries with 16 regions, and within those regions potentially hundreds of clusters. But if we're willing to use *A Bug's Life* as an analogy, we can see that smaller might be better. It may make us more nimble and responsive to unique challenges individual to each area. The past is linear, the future is molecular.

The Advantages of Clusters

One of the realities that we need to grasp as we move forward into the 21st century, is the power of context. After all, no two audiences, no two churches, no two people, no two situations are the same. "One of greatest challenges of the future is for the church to move from franchise mentality to create-your- own app."⁵ The truth is, what works in Los Angeles doesn't necessarily translate to Toronto, and we must stop pretending that it will. Admittedly, there are principles contained within most methodologies that can be applied in a variety of situations. But as the cultural distance grows between church and culture and North American society moves farther from its Judeo-Christian roots, the issue of context becomes even more acute. Like the real estate axiom that states the three most important rules are location, location, location -- the three most important rules when thinking about how the church can thrive in the twenty-first century are context, context, context. Clusters are based on context. For this reason, we can be much more effective as a denomination by employing clusters because they are so naturally contextual. For a 21st century audience, "for anything to be real it must be local."⁶ Clusters give us the opportunity to keep it local and as a result, highly contextual.



Not only are we moving from big to small, from one size fits all to highly contextual but we are moving from linear to loop. The world that birthed the United church thought in cause-

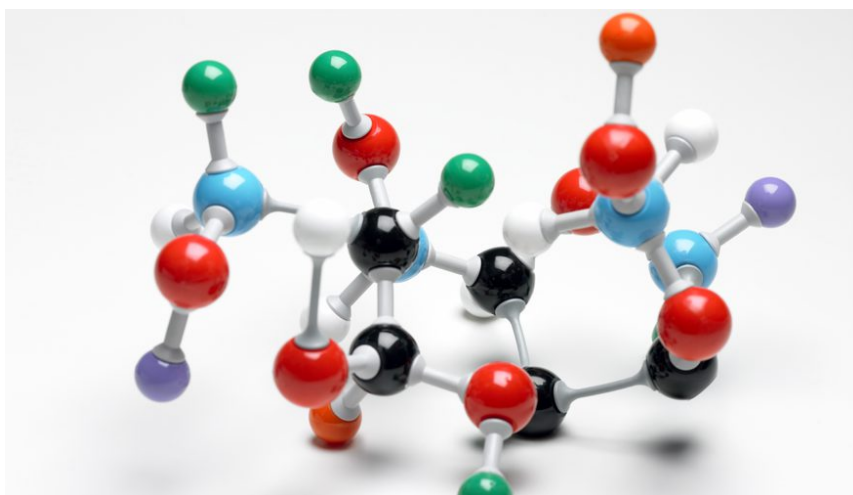
⁵ Leonard Sweet, quote from Twitter, October 29, 2009.

⁶ Sweet. *So Beautiful*. 193.

and-effect terms. In the past, (and until January of 2019) everything followed a neat, easy to package pattern: General conference works with the conference and the conference works with presbytery who then works with the congregations. Admittedly, this is a simplistic explanation of our current system but it makes the point that we are currently embedded in a linear system.



However, we now live in a world that looks more like a molecule than a line. Everything is interconnected. Each part is connected with other parts in multiple ways, with a muted beginning and end. What's important in the 21st century is connection, and clusters are all about being connected.



Another advantage of the more molecular make up of a cluster based system, is that congregations can be connected to each other in multiple ways. Each community of faith has the potential to be involved in a variety of cluster relationships with other churches, each with a unique purpose and a relationship. However, one of the challenges before us is that because of our past we have a tendency to try to systematize things and put things back into the form of a line. Our inclination will be to organize and systematize clusters. We must resist this pull. The intent of our new way of organizing is not to go from 86 to hundreds of presbyteries. Our opportunity is to expand into a web of hundreds of interconnected clusters which are better equipped to adapt and improvise in this new century than the system that we inherited.

Qualities of Clusters

Clustering is easier if we understand what clusters are, and the easiest way to understand them is to understand the qualities that make them up. There are four qualities of clusters that are essential to understanding and implementing them in a successful manner. Clusters are: dynamic, relationally based, have a variety of time frames associated with them, and are able to be connected to a variety of other cluster relationships at the same time.

The first quality of clusters is that they are dynamic. They are fluid not static, always moving, and often changing in order to adapt to new obstacles or impediments. We should allow them to be organic and flexible. The priority relationships may change from year to year. For this reason, clusters are more like mountain streams rather than a prairie ponds.

The second quality of clusters is that they are primarily based on relationship not structure. This means that they will often come into being because individual ministers or congregations already share a relationship and enjoy working together. Communities of faith that want to work together, will do so, and those who don't wish to be part of the project or initiative have the ability to decide not to.

The third quality of clusters is that they have a variety of time frames associated with them. Specifically, they have a multitude of different life expectancies. Some clusters might come together for a specific project and when that project has been completed the cluster will naturally disband. Other clusters might be part of a seasonal relationship and so the cluster might have times of the year that it comes together in order to plan, organize and collaborate, like planning a combined Good Friday service. Not all clusters are built to last forever.

The fourth quality of clusters is that they live in the both/and world not the either/or world. We are used to thinking of things that we are involved with as, "I am involved with this or that", but in the world of clusters, congregations, and ministers can be involved in a variety of different cluster groups at the same time. In this way, clusters live out the idea that, "you can have your cake and eat it too."

What Clusters are Based On

If the qualities clusters give us, provide the “what”, exploring what clusters are based on, provides the “why”. There are a variety of things that will bring clusters together. Though this list is certainly not exhaustive it does provide a few of the key reasons clusters form in the first place. Here are the top three. The first is that most clusters will be birthed out of geographic proximity. Communities of faith in the same town, the same area of a city or the same area of a region will often times begin to work together just because they share geographic proximity. These churches will often come together because of shared needs, vision and to enhance the economies of scale. However, there are certainly times that congregations who are not in proximity with each other will come together, usually this will be for special projects.

Another obvious reason that communities of faith might come together is because of a common purpose, goal or need. An example of this might be something like inner-city churches who cluster in order to share resources for initiatives like helping the homeless population or addiction programs.

A third reason a group of churches might cluster is because they share a common culture or common values. It should be noted that this type of cluster will, many times, prove to be the longest lasting type of cluster and will most often have congregations sharing resources. A great example of this is Affirming churches that might have a cooperative arrangement to share the cost on Affirming initiatives.

Getting Started

The key to any successful cluster, as with any relationship is communication. If all parties have a clear understanding of things like expectations, responsibilities, purpose, and vision, the more likely the cluster will be able to accomplish what it hopes to. For this reason, it is important to ask many probing questions as the various parties are entering the relationship. The following is a list of some questions that might be helpful as a cluster comes together. The list is not exhaustive and is only meant to help get the conversation started.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK

Cluster Questions
Why are we clustering?
What is the need?
What is our purpose?
What is bringing us together?
Who is involved in this cluster?
Who can be involved in this cluster?
Can others join midstream?
How long will this cluster go on for?
What is our anticipated time frame?
What resources will be shared?
Where will we meet?
If project based, who will host the initiative?
How will we measure success?
Can we change the nature of our arrangement?
How do we change the nature of our arrangement?
How do we end the arrangement?
How will we disband?
What are the expectations of opting out?

Conclusion

Whatever clusters end up looking like in the long term, the fact remains, that if we are to be successful ministering in the 21st century, our solution needs to be lighter, leaner, and more adaptable than it has previously been. In his book, *Soul Tsunami*, theologian Leonard Sweet echos this, when he says that the keys to ministry in a postmodern context are adaptability,

flexibility, speed, and the ability to change midstream⁷. This is the context that we find ourselves in today. The way that we used to do church from the Sunday service, all the way up to the way that we organize ourselves is not a model that will set us up for success in the 21st century. For me, a great metaphor for what the United Church is about to undertake is the Vancouver School of Theology. When VST sold the old castle-like building, it was a time of nervous anticipation as the school let go of the grand building that was its past, in order to embrace the much smaller, purpose built, agile building which was poised to become the school's future. We as a denomination are currently in a very similar place. If there is anything that the metaphor of VST can teach us as a denomination, during this time of change and transition, it is that the future is bright!

⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Soulsunami : Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 97.