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Siblings in Christ, I am grateful to be present with you today and to participate in this important learning session with you, the first since I was asked to serve as the Regional Executive Minister. The subject of our workshops today is about building relationships – new ones, diverse ones, deeper ones. I am grateful for the chance to reflect upon Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the text we just heard, particularly in light of today's topic.

While I grew up the child of Roman Catholic Acadian parents, I was born in Oakville Ontario and I've lived most of my life in Quebec. We spoke French at home and I learned to speak English when I was five, watching Sesame Street with my grandmother. I looked around me and knew I was different. At the age of 13, I realized once again that I was different, while every example of society told me that I should be attracted to girls, I was quite obviously not. And while I'm a cis-gendered, able-bodied white settler and carry many privileges, having the chance to be a minority in these two aspects of my life was a blessing for me. It taught me humility. It taught me empathy for those who are different than myself. It taught me to avoid making assumptions about how others see the world. While we may have more things in common than have things that separate us... we are NOT the same... that my experiences are not always the same as yours – and that is a gift from God. Loving our neighbours means we can hear them from the lens of their experience and cherish it.

I don't need to tell you that the church is a minority in our cultural context today. Unlike the time when going to church was a societal expectation and the vast majority of Canadians were doing it as a Sunday morning habit, we need to do more than turn the lights on and unlock the door for people to walk through the door.

The post-war church boom of the 50s that saw the United Church dedicating a new building every week made it so easy for us. We all wish that it was that easy now.

I've often heard people say to me, and I've said it myself... people are just too busy for church. Sundays are filled with sports and activities and shopping... they used to be days of rest when people had nothing else to do.

If you think about it, it's a pretty sad assumption for us to say that people will only come to church if they have nothing better to do. We need a better offer.

Why do you go to church? What do you find there that you can't find anywhere else? What gets you up early on a Sunday to join others in worship? What makes you want to join a prayer circle, bible study or discussion group in the evening after a day of work? What are you finding there?

We need to ask ourselves the questions in light of those in our pews and those who are not yet in our pews. What part of Christ's body do we want to be? What part of Christ's body do we want people to find when

they walk through the doors of our church for the first time? What do you want them to tell their friends about you on Monday?

- Deep Spirituality – did they feel the presence of God?
- Bold Discipleship – did they sense a call to live differently?
- Daring Justice – did they sense a call to help mend the world?

We need to rethink what it means to welcome the stranger... the one who isn't compelled to come to our door by a societal expectation.

There are two ways I envision how live into being the Body of Christ... one, as a Regional Council and the other, as communities of faith.

As we look at the collection of our ministries in this Regional Council, I'd like us to imagine the regional buffet approach:

Maybe I see this so easily because United Church people love to eat together, but I imagine a spiritual buffet of different communities of faith that have different strengths and gifts to offer. That our communities are not all the same. We are not McDonald's franchisees where you will get exactly the same Big Mac if you're in Kemptville or in Salt Spring Island. I like to think that each community of faith is a centre of excellence in one of the spiritual gifts or in their particular ministry. People will travel great distances to find what they need – and not everyone needs precisely the same thing. In a buffet, I might be happy to see some peas, while someone else might not like the taste of peas... let's think about how we give people some clarity about what they will find in our church communities. After all, we are not the Uniformity Church of Canada... we are United in our diversity. That way the foot of Christ's body cannot say "there is no place for me since I am not a hand".

The other way I imagine we can be the body of Christ is how we live our lives in our communities of faith. I love the hymn we just sang – Come in and sit down... I love the idea that we welcome people and invite them to be part of the family. But there is a dark side to this idea... this sense that somehow we need to be welcomed into the church and told what to do... "come in... and SIT DOWN". It would be easier if people who come to our church were exactly like us, thought like us, saw the world exactly as we do, encounter God as we do... but would we just become a community of eyes that say to the hand... I don't need you because you are not an eye?

Many of us know what its like when the body of Christ becomes restricted to the bare minimum – when our communities are composed of essential organs but struggle to live fully into the other parts of the body. We grab the new person who walks in the door and say – Finally! We have an elbow... you'll be chairing this committee! But the person who has walked in is actually a knee or a big toe... but we never took the time to get to know them first. Can we just be open to engaging with them, for us to deeply know them and for them to deeply know us – and that we can be transformed by the encounter rather than immediately telling them how they fit in our plan? Maybe we can make plans together instead?

We are a people of resurrection... the ones who understand deeply about transformation even when that seems impossible. The diversity that comes through the door as the newcomer, the diversity we already find in our pews... it's all very challenging, and it ultimately requires us to feel comfortable with being transformed by the encounter and to be willing to let the Spirit change us too.

Those of you who know me, know that I am an avid movie-goer. I particularly love watching foreign films because they give us a chance to see the world through someone else's eyes and someone else's culture. They offer me the chance to see things I have been blind to – the good and the bad. It opens me up to the world.

In this world, finding a place where two people with different worldviews can share a meal, have respectful conversation, truly listen to one another and develop empathy and caring for the other person, is rare. We naturally gather with those who see the world exactly as we do. But if we do this right, church can be a place where the full diversity of God's creation can be gathered and where we can be transformed by the Holy Spirit... where we open ourselves up to change in the encounter. Where we share our view of the world and of our faith with confidence AND with humility, recognizing that not all of us are the same piece of the body of Christ. That's a unique gift this United Church has to offer. It's why I'm here... and why I'm excited to help build this church with you.