

Theme Presentation, EOORC Winter Gathering March 2, 2024

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In the early 1960s, the United Church opened a new congregation every week. Churches had full pews and all you had to do was open the doors. It makes it particularly hard to see our reality today where we close one every week.

Some will claim that we forgot how to share our faith, how to evangelize. But when people come to church as a matter of societal expectation, there is little that is needed by way of active evangelism. You could be downright lazy and still be successful.

Others will claim that people are too busy to come to church on Sundays, with sports and shopping and all sorts of other things they can do now that Sundays are no longer a day of rest. But if your argument is based on the idea that the only reason people will come to church is if they have nothing else to do... that's not particularly compelling. That feels pretty lazy too.

And yet others say to me... it's because people have rejected religion! Religion has a bad name and no one wants to be associated with it. I would have to say that poll after poll demonstrates that people in Canada are saying they are spiritually dissatisfied. They are hungry for meaning and connection with one another, particularly young people under 35. They aren't coming to our churches because we are not meeting their needs.

The context of our world has shifted and we keep opening our doors on a Sunday morning hoping that it's 10am on February 25th, 1962. People have voted with their feet. And I think we, as a church, have failed to pay attention to how the needs have changed. I don't think they are gone. They are just different.

We forgot what it means to evangelize. Our current context is like that of Paul's first travels –

So, what does it mean to evangelize in our context?

Our Christian cousins who have succeeded in attracting people to more fundamentalist expressions of faith have succeeded in part, because they are driven to save souls from the fires of hell. Their understanding of salvation is what drives them. Whether or not you agree with this approach theologically is not actually important. I'm going to ask you to consider what it means when one person approaches another and tells them that they want them to be saved... At its core, it's not actually a theological argument taking place. What is actually happening is that one person is expressing love and care for the other. The person inviting the other person is saying "You matter to me". The person hearing that might reject the invitation, but others accept it because they are eager for connection and for someone to tell them that they matter, that they are not alone.

So, what does that look like for us as Christians who may or may not be driven by the theological principle? Can we express connection and love? In a world where the UN says that loneliness is

now killing more people than smoking and isolation is the primary factor in radicalization and the creation of violent gangs and terrorism.

Creating space for connection and caring is not just a nice idea, I'm convinced that it is a key way we are called to reshape the world and to live into God's light. That's what we're here to learn about together today.

When we start to place the emphasis on how we serve the world in ways that are most suited to our identity and the ministry God has shaped for us, the stronger we are. When we put others needs ahead of our own, it's the work of the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for us to do things we didn't think we had the money or the strength to do.

So today, we emphasize a few things... firstly, we are going to learn about the people who haven't darkened the door of a church for a long time (or ever). We are going to hear about the research done with those folks.

Then we are going to look at some practical ways that we welcome them when they actually make the really big step of walking through the door and choosing to spend their time with us.

And finally, we will look at what it means to know ourselves, our gifts and our ministry.

This is just one of three events we are planning this year to help strengthen our invitation. We will also be looking at how we communicate with those who may be spiritually curious before they make the decision to step through the door of the church. We will also be working with communities of faith on how to better understand themselves, their identity. We hope you'll find some important learning in this process that will give you some things to consider in your own setting and context.

Throughout our session, if you have questions, I'd encourage you to use the chat for this purpose and we will try to get to them as we go along. There will be a recording of this session available afterwards in case you want to go back and listen to something again... and you can share the recording with folks you think might find it useful.