

Rev. Rick Koyle

Thunder Bay

March 16, 2008

Homily

Reading the Tea Leaves

I was planning to ask two questions this morning. What do the tea leaves say about the future of professional ministry in this church? And:

What might help the search committee expand the pool of ministers who might be available and interested in coming to Thunder Bay?

That second question was premised on the assumption that by this morning, the congregation would have before it a slate of seven candidates for the Ministerial Search Committee. But that is not the case. So the second part of the sermon will just have to wait.

Perhaps it's just as well. Our new member ingathering ceremony has taken up a good deal of time this morning, and happily so. Lucky thirteen! And we will have a talkaround after the coffee hour, on the subject of the search.

So – to the tea leaves.

What are the signs for professional ministry, pro and con? I will do my best to offer a balanced picture. Then we'll look at a few patterns that may be holding this congregation back. And finally I'll tell you what it takes to get a minister.

Let's consider some facts.

Last year, the Way Forward Task Force developed a long-term plan for the congregation that included full-time professional ministry and new, larger space. The congregation voted to adopt those recommendations and that plan, and approved a budget for the 2007 church year that included a substantial sum for professional ministry. That budget also included a projected deficit of \$24,000.

In other words, this congregation was willing to dip into the cookie jar, to the tune of \$24,000, in order to have professional ministry this year. That is an extremely positive sign for professional ministry – a substantial commitment, backed by money. It's an old principle of fund-raising that people follow their money. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Mt 6:21 (KJV).

At the same time, it has historically been difficult for this congregation to decide which comes first: a professional minister, or a new building – the chicken or the egg?

So far, the answer seems to be a resounding – Yes! But to decide for purple on Monday, and yellow on Tuesday, back and forth, back and forth, is eventually to decide, on no colour at all.

So my question would be: what deeper interest is served, by not reaching an answer to this question of which comes first? What's in it, and for whom, that the congregation's wheel, goes round and round, but never ever comes to a stop?

In a pledge drive campaign this past fall that made at least glancing reference to full-time professional ministry, the church raised \$82,000. That was \$9,000 more than was raised last year, and nearly double what was raised just a few years ago. This most recent canvass managed to set that record without a distinctive theme, without a full Sunday Service dedicated to kicking it off, without any substantial help from your professional minister, me, and without a formal chairperson to run the pledge campaign. Given those handicaps, \$82,000 was a terrific result. Big plus.

At the same time, that \$82,000 figure fell \$38,000 short of its goal. This left the Board in the awkward position of having to choose where budget cuts would come. Among the possibilities entertained, as many of you know, were eliminating or reducing the clerk's position, and/or eliminating or reducing the minister's position. The encouragement was made, from this pulpit, that the minister's position be eliminated, and your Board chose to go down that road, at least for next year.

Several colleagues, when apprised of the canvass shortfall, said they thought that people here might be sitting on their wallets, out of fear that, if the fellowship did get a full-time, settled minister, those opposed to ministry would simply chase the minister out of town, and the commitment and the investment and the hopes and the pledged money -- would all go to waste. That might be worth having a conversation about. If you concluded that that was the case, it would be a real

minus for professional ministry – until you found a solution to the problem, when it would become a plus.

My predecessor, as many of you know, was well-loved. She opened up new possibilities for ministry, in the imagination of many people in the congregation. I think it's fair to say that she brought out the best in the congregation. That's a big plus.

At the same time, it was she who reached out to this church, not vice versa, meaning that the model of professional ministry that she brought to this church was an indebted or beholden model, one that is not likely to be replicated. If a minister comes to you, hat in hand, looking for a job, he or she is impliedly promising to do whatever you say. Such one-off ministries may create expectations of future ministers that can't be fulfilled. That's a minus.

The congregation has enjoyed having the Rev. Ray Drennan, the Canadian Unitarian Council's ministerial settlement representative, come and talk about how to start searching for a full-time settled minister. You have seemed to enjoy most of your interactions with professional ministry over the last two and a half years. On a personal level, you couldn't have been nicer to me. That's a big plus.

At the same time, there have been less than optimal experiences with ministers in the past. Every church and fellowship has those, especially those that have been lay-led for a long time, and are just starting out with professional ministry. But here, what's different is that the pain of those experiences, years and years ago, is still fresh and unresolved, as if it all happened only yesterday. That's a minus, until you do the spiritual work to put it to rest, and then it can become a plus.

The spiritual work involves cleaning up your side of the street, and leaving the other side alone. If you want to know more about how to do that, come talk with me.

So – it's a mixed bag. Some signs seem to tilt toward yes, others toward no.

But there are also some long-standing patterns that, in my opinion, will need to be addressed, before professional ministry stands its best chance of succeeding here.

There is a congregational pattern of postponing homework, or avoiding planning, and hurrying into perceived solutions to problems, which often leads into more problems, and winds up leaving regrets long afterwards. The extension ministry experiment ten years ago seems to have followed that pattern. The effort

to purchase Redwood Church does too. The only thing that would have made that deal work, in my view, was this church doing a lot of homework, long before Redwood Church ever came on the market, “What Do We Most Deeply Desire?” kind of homework, so that, when Redwood did appear, the whole church could say right away, “Yup, that’s the place,” and move fast and cohesively, as real estate deals often demand.

Perhaps this year of interim ministry may come to be seen that way as well. Interim ministry was not well understood by this congregation before you invited me here – may still not be. To put it as plainly as I can, this congregation sometimes seems to find planning -- boring. Then unexpected events put you in reactive mode, not proactive mode, and you wind up scrambling to play catch-up.

And long afterwards, when all the dust settles, there is an unfortunate habit of blaming -- individual people, or institutions. You know that blame is useless, as well as self-indulgent. It discourages looking more deeply inward and learning the valuable lessons that every experience can provide.

Second pattern: Group action concealing hidden, private reservations. The vote in favour of the Way Forward plan, for example, may not have committed everyone to that plan, as totally as it may have appeared. Some committees, for another example, may still be making up their minds, how they feel about professional ministry, nearly three years after that experiment began. As long as those reservations remain hidden, they can’t be talked about, or better understood, or perhaps even resolved.

Third pattern: Support for new projects is intermittent. We had to cancel a class on modern scholarly views of Jesus for lack of interest. In some churches, such a proposed course would automatically be filled, right away, for a variety of reasons – perhaps as a gesture toward the new minister, perhaps out of intellectual curiosity, or a simple desire to come to a better understanding of this puzzling character, Jesus. Search committee efforts keep encountering bumps in the road. New ventures struggle to find volunteers. Service is perceived by some as a chore and an imposition, not as the joy it really is.

Fourth pattern: This fellowship has been built so firmly on a model that exalts the individual that it seems sometimes hard to even think in terms of “we” rather than “me.” Conversations are really inspiring that emphasize what’s best for the whole congregation, not just a single individual or small group: community-minded conversations. It is said that one good reason to come to church is to get over ourselves. (Actually, there are almost no bad reasons to come to church.)

I am glad to tell you that many conversations at the board level this year have been characterized by this community-mindedness, this largeness of spirit. Many of the differences of opinion on this board, which has had its share, have resulted from one person's largeness of spirit bumping into someone else's largeness of spirit, coming at the problem from a different angle. You have been well and ably served by this board.

But you may be burning out your Board, with still a third of the church year to go. Many congregations make a habit of burning out their leaders, and those are congregations that have trouble getting anywhere. I hope you don't get into the burnout habit here.

Fifth and final pattern: controversy as an end in itself, controversy as a default mode.

Sometimes I wonder, half-seriously, if what gets worshipped around here is conflict, with folks just wandering around, spoiling for a fight. That can turn into a career, if you don't look out.

There was once a small town with one lawyer, who was struggling to make a living. Then another lawyer moved to town, hung out his shingle, and the two of them did -- just fine, thank you.

Don't let controversy become your default mode. Long-time fellowships are notorious for that kind of crankiness.

What does it take to get a minister? Three things really. Money, manpower, and motivation.

As for money, the canvass came up \$38,000 short.

As for manpower, efforts to set up a search committee last fall, and this spring, have had difficulty recruiting volunteers. A few days ago, when the count of prospective new members was up to seven, I suggested to David Belrose, why not just welcome our seven brand-new members and declare them the Ministerial Search Committee? David somehow did not think this was a wise idea.

As for motivation, that's more complicated. Some here want professional ministry very much, others do not, and many as usual occupy the great middle. But a simple bell curve doesn't tell the whole story.

It is a truism among ministers, a dirty little secret if you will, that a relatively small number of members, if they are determined enough, can sink any ministry -- even the best. Rev. Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained by a denomination in North America, was the minister of a Universalist church in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in the 1870's. She loved them, they loved her, the church was growing, and the Board was 100% behind her.

But one man in the congregation thought women should not be ministers. He started a campaign whose slogan was: "What you need here is a good man." Olympia Brown's biographer calls him a "raucous crow," and he pecked and pecked and pecked for years -- until she resigned.

What can a church do about the tyranny of a minority? You can turn to the real, backbench leadership of the congregation, the wise old souls who have been around forever, and always take the long view. If they are willing to step in and make their wisdom known, on behalf of the whole congregation, well and good. If they are not willing, or if they do not exist, or if they do exist but are part of the problem rather than the solution, then the congregation is in trouble.

Let me close with a story about one such, wise old backbencher. Call him Mr. Smith. His family had helped found this particular American church a century ago. He'd been involved with it all his life, served on the board, chaired committees, raised money, and so on. He'd had some health issues a while ago, and his doctor said take it easy, so he was a little less connected than he had been.

The church had gotten a new, young minister the previous fall. Average Sunday morning attendance was up ten percent. Attendance for children's religious education was up 25%. The building got a fresh coat of paint. And now, in the spring, the new minister brought four proposals to the last board meeting of the church year.

Old-time members were surprised to see Mr. Smith out for a stroll that evening. He explained he was just dropping by the church "to see how we're treating our new minister."

The minister proposed: To move the pulpit a couple of feet to the side, for better sight lines. To explore the possibility of having two services on Sunday morning, because 80% of the good seats in that church were usually filled. To set up an outreach program for senior citizens in the neighbourhood. And, to develop a new program involving foreign missions, which that church and its denomination had long supported.

To the minister's surprise, the board discussion soon turned pretty sour. He thought he'd done his homework. But objection after objection kept popping up. Finally, as the evening was drawing to a close, and all four proposals seemed headed for defeat, he turned and, almost in desperation, said, "Mr. Smith, we haven't heard from you this evening. Do you think any of these ideas has any merit at all?"

There was a silence, and then Mr. Smith said, "Young man, as long as you continue to preach the gospel, and the people keep coming through those doors, I think that this congregation will support anything, that you honestly believe will make us a better church."

Ten minutes later, with no further input from Mr. Smith, all four of the minister's proposals passed, unanimously.

There's nothing wrong with this, or any church, that a handful of Mr. Smiths couldn't cure.

May it be so.

Amen.