

Transformational Ministry (Churches in transition)

Editorial

By Kenn Stright

OK, take a deep breath and let it out slowly. The topic is Transformational Ministry (Churches in transition). And you want to scream out those seven deadly words: "We never did it that way before!" Actually you need to be calm in your soul and take to heart the words of Jeremiah 29:11.

This is Women's Perspective... and as guest editor I tremble at exploring 'Churches in Transition' from a perspective I cannot embrace but certainly one I can appreciate. My wife is in ministry. She has been in ministry for 30 plus years and is presently seeking to help transform a 19th century congregation into a 21st century witness to and for Christ. Actually she says she's not certain the leadership wants to move forward and address the challenges facing the church. It's a rough journey! And, like it or not, it's a journey we all share as we explore ways of faithfully following wherever Christ may lead us in the years ahead.

Four women of Atlantic Canada will share a small part of their journey and their perspective. Two are presently in full time ministry and two are leaders and elders in their faith communities. They encompass city, suburban, small town and rural. Two have attended the Emmaus Project and this experience has 'opened their eyes' and given them 'burning hearts'.

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In This Issue...

May 2011, Issue 79

Editorial by Kenn Stright	p. 1
Contributors	
Frances Perrin	p. 2
Shirley Murdock	p. 3
Cheryl MacFadyen	p. 6
Cheryl	p. 7
Subscriber News	p. 8

We'll start with Frances. Her small rural congregation has been coping with transition for most of its history... and it hasn't always been easy...

One of the objectives of Emmaus was to help revitalize or recharge Presbyteries and in turn this would help to inspire congregations to change. An old saying goes something like this - Necessity is the mother of invention. Sometimes Necessity is the reason and cause for change.

Forty years ago in the Musquodoboit Valley, our churches were facing a crunch - financially and also a numbers crunch. What on earth could we do?? Sharon Presbyterian Church was the only one that had opted in 1925 to stay with the Presbyterian tradition and not join the newly-formed United Church of Canada for a 50-mile radius. What were our options? We tried a team-effort with every one of the other Presbyterian churches close to us. None of them worked out very well. We were really not in a strong position. The United Church in nearby Upper Musquodoboit was having similar problems and wondering how it could manage to support a minister by itself. The congregation was helped somewhat by the inclusion of the Higginsville United Church as a part of the Pastoral Charge. Even together, these two congregations did not see themselves in a position to be able to support a full time ministry. Could we join forces? One Presbyterian Church and two United Church congregations? What had seemed like a huge rift, large enough to split families in 1925, turned in to an opportunity. There was no way any of us could 'go it alone' so necessity took over and demanded that we come up with a solution to our problems and situation.

Dean was a vacant pulpit at the time and was served by the United Church minister in Upper Musquodoboit and if this effort were to work there would have to be give and take on each side. This was the price we would have to pay for the 'luxury' of being able to keep our respective churches all open and to be able to have regular Sunday services. Our Shared Ministry was begun in 1969 with the blessing of the two Presbyteries involved with each approving the "joining".

How has it worked over the years? We have managed to maintain our working relationship well. Each church is responsible for the maintenance of its own buildings and its own finances. Each church has its own 'government' in keeping with its particular tradition. In addition, we have a joint board which supersedes the authority of the respective congregations in matters affecting all three churches. This Board is made up of all the elders, members of Boards of Managers or Stewards, Trustees and Chairs of such local Committees as Christian Education, women's groups, etc. Representatives of any congregation may hold any of the offices. On some committees, we strive to have equal representation from each congregation. One recent example of this was our last Search Committee which was comprised of two persons from each of the three churches. It has our intention to alternate clergy and, as the long serving United Church clergy person moved on, a Presbyterian candidate was the focus for the search and is newly inducted. These ministers, past and present, have worked hard to accommodate the differences between the two churches and their points of view.

Frances Perrin is a retired School teacher, school administrator, mother of four, blueberry farmer, elder, church organist, past moderator of Presbytery, Chair of Ministry Committee and so much more!

Churches are in transition but so too are those who lead them. Changing times have called for changing roles, and Shirley's story is simply one of many that expresses how much we have to 'change' to address the needs of the church...

Transition is a nice alternative to that horrible "C" word – change... but the fact of the matter is that life is in constant flux and the only thing that remains constant is God Almighty who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

My story starts in 1973 when I graduated from Ewart College and chose to follow my husband into ministry rather than accept an appointment as a deaconess in our church. Like ordained ministry, we needed at least a ½ time appointment in order to be designated and that didn't happen until 1996. .

My personal and professional ministry came with the ring of the phone in September 1996: "I think you should apply for the AMS position of Executive Secretary that has become vacant and you need to attend their annual meeting." I went to the meeting later that month, met the personnel committee, appeared for an official interview in February and - after 23 years – was designated to the Order of Diaconal Ministries in April 1996. Change – now known as transition – had taken place.

A rural pastoral charge just down the road and around the bend from where we lived in Cape Breton suddenly became vacant and I offered to do some Sunday supply. That began the first Sunday of January 1999. Sunday supply became stated supply for 3 months and a bit.

I was a guest at WMS Council at Crieff Hills in May 1999 and I received a phone call from the Interim Moderator for that same rural charge saying "they want to call you full time". That "C" of transition affected the church because that was the first time in the history of our church that a Diaconal Minister was called to provide full time pastoral care to any congregation. No one knew for sure it could happen, but no one could tell us why it couldn't happen, so it did and a new path was opened.

What began with 7 congregations, a combination of Presbyterian and United, transformed into a one point charge with the challenge of sustaining fulltime ministry in an aging population where young adults and middle aged men left home to 'go west', where deceased members were never "replaced" with new folk, where million dollar homes were built along the water but the residents never wanted to be part of the church or even the community. Gone are the days when folks moved into a community and became part of it – another "C" transition that isn't what we hoped for.

It was June 2009. The Kirk Session gathered for a regular meeting. There wasn't enough money to carry on full time ministry much longer – the elders asked for permission to discuss this issue without the presence of their minister – who would be directly affected by any plan they would put in place. Permission granted. They also requested clergy guidance so a former IM was invited to guide them and support them in their most difficult choices. Later the Clerk of Session

phoned – there’s another phone call that changed the path of my journey. With deepest regret, the session realized they must sever the ties, effective December 31, 2009.

Our national church has a new policy – not completely new but one that we hear about only as needed rather than preparing for it’s influence earlier on.

A transition agreement was drawn up, agreed upon and signed.

The pastoral charge was preached vacant

That congregation and those people had been such a huge part of my life for such a long time – they had walked with me through this amazing journey of ministry – we all grieved - yet we all had to face tomorrow and it was scary!

Another phone call, this from another congregation within the same presbytery: “our minister announced today that he is leaving us. Will you come and shepherd us?”

**When the ‘old’ no longer works,
we need to be resourceful,
and flexible in creating the ‘new’.**

That phone call resulted in a huge “C” transition as I accepted a call, moved out of our home and into the manse and began a new life where I became the resident minister and my husband became the ‘clergy spouse’ – a total role reversal and a tremendous “C” transition.

Our presbytery hosted GA – a huge task but a wonderful experience. The theme – sailing into the future. The Presbytery began viability discussions knowing the “C” transition must happen to sustain a Presbyterian presence, witness and ministry. “C” has become our life, our focus, our goal and our drive... to seek God’s will for what the unknown future will hold – and we don’t have the answers

In the church, we know certain things

God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. There is hope – for life abundant and life eternal and all the days in between. There is promise – that we will never be left on our own, never abandoned or forsaken but always in his presence, under the guidance of his spirit. There is work to be done and we are all called to be part of it. God has a plan – before we were formed in the womb God knew us, consecrated us and set us apart to fulfill the divine will. We are God’s children,

brothers and sisters in Christ, the kingdom our inheritance. We have a choice – to sit back and do nothing and let the church disintegrate before our eyes – or – stand firm in faithfulness – stand on the edge of the unknown and be part of the “C” transition – listen for the still small, yet sometimes loud and persistent, voice that will guide us along the right path as we seek to sustain the church of Jesus Christ and be brave enough to understand that the church today will not look like the church of tomorrow. If our ancestors came to life today – how would they respond to what happens in our churches today? If we were granted the privilege to revisit the church 100 years from today – how would we respond to what happened in our absence?

“C” Change that becomes transition happens – whether we realize it or not. We are not the same persons we were yesterday or will be tomorrow. When change happens in secular society, we rejoice – we celebrate – we enjoy the newness of what comes next but when it is suggested in the church we immediately put up barriers and list the reasons (excuses) why we have to stay the same. Staying the same has brought us to this day when we can’t stay the same anymore.

We can remember the joys of the past. We can reflect on what was – but we can’t go back there – so the only alternative is to move forward and keep step with “C” transitions that will ensure there is a church tomorrow – next year – down the road and around the bend.

Who will lead us? Who will guide us? Isn’t that a similar sentiment from the disciples when they found themselves without Jesus in their midst? The church flourished from the original 12 devoted yet human followers – we have more than 12 today, albeit less than 100 years ago – but we are not dead yet!!!

“C” Transition is reality – our only choice is to be part of it or hide away from it. If we choose to be part of the solution, we will experience renewal, restoration, reformation and all the blessings that will encompass.

Shirley Murdock is married to Rev. Lloyd, mother of two, grandmother, past moderator of Synod, clerk of Presbytery and new minister at St. Paul’s, Glace Bay.

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?” Exodus 14:11

When times are tough, or when we find ourselves out of our depth, or in the wilderness, we look to what seems to be secure. Often what we knew seems to be more secure than what is coming. For the longest time the church seemed to be safe in holding onto the way things had been done... even in the face of the changes that have come about as technology exploded and travel became faster and easier...

We could always count on certain givens - people would come to church for holidays and times of change in their lives. And a church supper would always bring people through the doors to support ‘our’ cause. It seems we, as people, don’t make a change until we have to.

One of the changes that may be hard for us to give up is the fact that the community does not support the church as an institution the way it used to. The church has to struggle for a share of the attention that people have to give. And it is not an easy battle.

Many of us want to find a simple solution to the decline of traditional church life, laying the blame at the door of ...sports on Sunday, or the break down of the family, or the new highway that hastens travel to Cape Breton (or Toronto, or Bangor, or whatever your shopping Mecca or family destination happens to be).

People are faced with the prospect of making far more choices than they had before. And there is no longer the feeling that you should do what is ‘better’, rather what is more ‘enjoyable’. After a long and challenging work week many families and individuals would rather spend Sunday as a Sabbath from the rat race, rather than “take up their cross” in the fight to keep another institution functioning.

Those who have served long and faithfully in the Church of Jesus Christ may feel at their wit’s end. How can the practices which once brought such comfort, joy and security now seem meaningless? How do we convince another generation that faith is not as outdated as a Commodore 64?

Our presbytery (of New Brunswick) has been struggling with how we define ‘success’ in ministry. Two churches in Saint John have amalgamated to form a larger congregation with one building to maintain. Grace Presbyterian Church is joyful and energetic as ministries are carried out to suit a variety of age groups. Not so far away, in the same presbytery, small churches in small communities serve God with as much faith and diligence but, to their sorrow, find children and youth staying away along with the young adult crowd. Even in the face of such distress in the life of the church, the sick are visited, the poor receive care and the widows are helped.

Sometimes it seems that the buildings (that are such a treasure to so many) are, in fact, a burden to carry. These old buildings need to be heated, maintained and cleaned, and the average Presbyterian is not as young as she used to be. We can build worry on worry and ask “what is an empathetic pastor to do?”

Walk with those who mourn

Weep with those who weep

And then find a way to turn a burden into an asset.

If the building is too much for one group to handle, let others come and use the building too! Take a struggling mid-week group and turn it into a series of intergenerational gatherings. Examine the time rotations in multi-point charges to see what changes can be made. Becoming frustrated does no good and giving way to despair gets you nowhere. Ministry has been very late in changing its face, but with the grace of God we can meet the people in our towns where they live.

Cheryl MacFadyen is presently serving in the St Stephen/St Andrews charge in NB. She is married to Ken and has 3 sons. She graduated from Ewart College in 1982 and received the Special Basic Certificate from Knox College in 1999.

How do we convince another generation that faith is not as outdated as a Commodore 64?

A final word comes from another Cheryl. Cheryl takes us on a whirlwind journey down the Emmaus Road... well, actually, through the Emmaus Project and the challenge for the Presbyterian Church as it faces an uncertain future. Cheryl tells us that her eyes were opened and her heart burned through the activities which were part of Emmaus – singing, prayers, spirituality Centre, Communion and worship including sermons on transition from the various perspectives of the organizers.

My name is Cheryl; I am a beloved child of God and I am baptized. When Derek McLeod was visiting friends in Kenya, he said that they would always introduce themselves to him by telling their name and something about their faith. He challenged us: “what will you say about your faith to the next person that you meet when you get home?” He told us that he introduced the concept to his congregation in Toronto and at the end of the service, a man said to him “My name is Albert, I’m an accountant.” Derek said, “We’re working on it!”

At the Emmaus Conference, we worshipped as a group 6 times. I don’t think I have ever heard 6 sermons in such a short span of time! In the spirit of Open Eyes and Burning Hearts, the Emmaus theme, I would like to share with you some words that challenged me as I listened to the preachers.

Rev. Wesley Denyer, “I don’t know what the church will look like in fifty years, or even in twenty-five years. But I’m not worried about the church. We have companions on this Road to Emmaus journey. We have each other, we have the Risen Christ, and we have our relationship to God; and we’ve been through wilderness times before, with just exactly those same companions, Christ and each other.

Lori Ransom challenged us with these words: “As we continue our journey on the Emmaus road, let’s think about how we, in our communities of faith, accept other peoples’ forms of hospitality, and ask our selves how far we are prepared to step out of our comfort zones, to meet people where they are, and offer hospitality...”

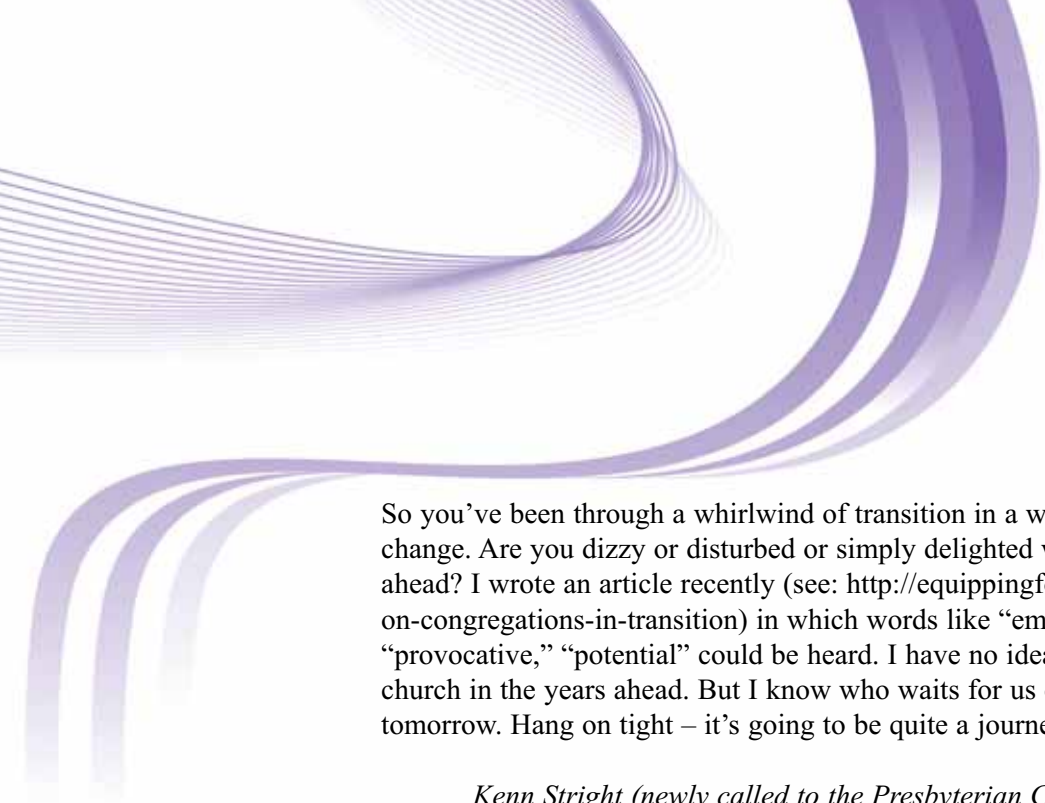
Marty Molengraaf: “I SEE YOU! These words are regularly used by people in African villages when they greet each other... ‘I see you’ means exactly what it says: I honour you. I recognize you. I see you in relationship to me. Some times on the Emmaus Road we see our fellow Presbyters and we say “I see you” as a friend, I see you as a sister or brother in Christ...”

Kristine O’Brien: “Change is, of course, on everyone’s mind this weekend. The church needs to change, we say; the presbytery needs to change, our congregations need to change. Some of us are wrestling with what to do now that we are inspired to do church differently. How is it that we can change what we do together in our presbyteries?”

Derek McLeod: “Look what happens to the disciples when it all goes wrong. We find them going to Emmaus. Thank God they never get to Emmaus. They are met on the road and stories are shared, bread is broken, and broken hearts become hearts on fire. . Jesus turns them around. And then what do the disciples do? They go to Jerusalem and wait. Because Jerusalem, Jesus promised, was the place to begin. Jesus said to them you’re going to need an Advocate, you’re going to need a Comforter, you’re going to need a Holy Spirit, and you’ve got to go to Jerusalem and there you will get what you need.”

All of these words were a challenge to me and motivated me to understand that there are practices in our church that I can do better.

Cheryl is one of eight who are the Emmaus Team for the Presbytery of Halifax and Lunenburg, along with being an elder, music director, Synod treasurer, deputy clerk of Presbytery...



So you've been through a whirlwind of transition in a world of constant change. Are you dizzy or disturbed or simply delighted with the possibilities ahead? I wrote an article recently (see: <http://equippingfor.ca/article/reflections-on-congregations-in-transition>) in which words like “empowering,” “provocative,” “potential” could be heard. I have no idea what awaits the church in the years ahead. But I know who waits for us on the other side of tomorrow. Hang on tight – it's going to be quite a journey!

Kenn Stright (newly called to the Presbyterian Church of St. David from the Synod of the Atlantic Provinces staff where he served as the Mission and Educational Consultant)

**Check out the PCC's newly updated and revised 'Resources for Congregations in Transition' at www.presbyterian.ca for resources for congregational change such as:
General Transitions; Opening a Congregation; Clustering; Merging; Amalgamating; Resizing; Renewing and Closing"**

Women's Perspectives (WP) strives to keep women in touch with each other and share their theological perspectives, biblical insights, special interests, joys and concerns with the whole church. WP is published 6 times yearly. It is written by guest editors and overseen by WP Committee, in co-operation with the Women in Ministry Committee.

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