

COMING TOGETHER WHILE APART: BEING CHURCH DURING COVID-19 ©

UCRMN Zoom Workshop

September 23, 2020

Plenary Summary of Rural Café and Comments

Marvin Lee Anderson, Ph.D.

The ‘Rural Café’

The genius of the World Café process, which we have aptly coined as the ‘Rural Café,’ was on display in this Zoom workshop. It made it possible for us to hear face-to-face the spectrum of challenges as well as opportunities for innovation facing all of us in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the different rural contexts for congregational ministry across Canada, it was informative to hear from more than twenty ordered and lay United Church ministers about the specific challenges facing small town and rural pastoral charges in each of the provinces represented: Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. The feedback from each of the five breakout sessions mirrors the engaging and thoughtful discussion facilitated by the Rural Café process.

For your information, the transcribed gist of this feedback will be sent to the UCRMN Executive Committee. The following observations reflect some of the feedback from the breakout sessions in addition to insights and comments specifically offered by Dr. Anderson. Given the gravity of the current pandemic and recent news warning of possibly returning to earlier stages of lockdown or restrictions for public gatherings, the additional observations by Dr. Anderson are meant for your further reflection and study.

The UCRMN recognizes the calibre of leadership reflected among those of you who attended our Zoom workshop, and we hope you recognize that among yourselves. None of our rural pastoral charges, no matter how remote, are immune from this contagious and lethal virus and the deleterious, long-term, social and economic consequences of this pandemic. On behalf of our beloved United Church and the local rural communities across Canada we serve, your serious engagement and pastoral role in community leadership and ministry are needed now more than ever.

The Mixed Message of Staying Apart

Dr. Anderson opened his remarks by stating the obvious yet troubling situation facing Canadians under the siege of this coronavirus pandemic: After months of self-isolation and various degrees of quarantine and lockdown in the most populated regions of Canada, people are starved for social connection and spending time being with each other. In times of crisis or tragedy, the normal response is usually one of urging people to come together to support one another and console each other. To be told and mandated to practice social distancing by signs, “Do Your Part: Stay Apart,” is the exact opposite of what we have been conditioned and expected to do our whole lives, so it is confusing and unsettling to say the least.

The title for this workshop, *Coming Together While Apart: Being Church During COVID-19*, though, suggests that we can indeed still come together while staying apart physically. We marvel at the amazing capacity of actually seeing each other's faces and talking interactively via Zoom, Skype, Facetime and other online platforms. Given the extent and scope of the pandemic, Zoom and other forms of digital technology are making communication and every other aspect of life continue despite the massive disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Yet the very idea of "coming together while apart" seems counterintuitive to our literal and habitual understanding of being together, especially *being in church* every Sunday morning for worship. As remarkable as it is to see and talk to each other thousands of miles away, this title points to an even more profound and inexplicable mystery than Zoom—one that Christians the world over celebrate on World Communion Sunday. This title not only portends the biblical promise of Christian unity which we celebrate on World Communion Sunday; it reminds us of the ubiquitous reality of the mystical body of Christ—which we can experience every single day in *being church*, thanks be to God.

Two Kinds of Churches

Though it may be a brief digression from the Rural Café feedback, another way of comprehending the paradox of "coming together while apart" was envisioned by a fourteenth-century Christian mystic most of you have never heard of, sadly enough. Marguerite Porete was probably one of the most brilliant Christian women mystics of the Middle Ages; she may also have been one of the most courageous. Marguerite never made it to sainthood. Like many prophetic women and men in the long tradition of Christian history, she was condemned for heresy for her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which had been condemned by her Catholic bishop. Marguerite was burned with a copy of her book at the stake in the public square in Paris in 1310—the first victim of the Paris inquisition.

Most of Marguerite's book is a dialogue using the language of the troubadour tradition of *fine amour*—courtly love, a love through which the soul becomes 'refined' to the point of mystical union with God, who is Love. Marguerite said there are two churches: Holy Church the Less and Holy Church the Greater. The first is Holy Church the Less, which stands for the visible institutional church. This Church is founded on Reason, which was epitomized for Marguerite by the medieval scholastic discourse peddled by the theologians and monks of her day. The real aim of Porete's *Mirror of the Simple Souls* is to expose the narrowness and pettiness of Reason when put in the presence of Lady Love, who is portrayed as a feminine voice of the divine.

The members of Holy Church the Less, Marguerite says, are arrogant and self-deluded in thinking they can 'have' God by naming him and offering reasonable explanations about his being and will. Meanwhile, the other church is Holy Church the Greater. This is the hidden church which is comprised of all those 'simple souls' who live by love and whose mission is to convert the church of Reason to the reality of Love. Marguerite's Holy

Church the Greater sure sounds a lot like the ubiquitous and mystical body of Christ in which and by which we *are* the church universal.

Where is God, if our churches are closed?

We have never experienced in our lifetime the forced closure and shutdown of communities of faith in order to contain a pandemic. This lament was loud and clear in our breakout sessions. For rural and small town membership churches, however, this has been devastating particularly because of how pivotal the church building is for all of those congregations. That is where they/we worship on Sunday mornings and where we/they conduct funerals to potluck dinners and every other traditional activity.

The United Church of Canada is recognized as a community hub church in general and the local United Church congregation that is still active in many rural communities across Canada is central to the social life of its community and residents. This is obvious, and United Church folk pride themselves, rightly so, for all that they do through and in their church, which usually means their church building.

If we focus on the subtitle for our workshop, “Being Church During Covid-19,” we shift our attention from our loss and grief from ***being in church*** to ***being church*** during this difficult and truly unprecedented time. How can we make that shift for ourselves and for those with whom we worship and live in community? We can experience the spiritual reality of Jesus’ promise to be with us via the Spirit and his Kingdom as we heard from Annette’s reading our closing Scripture from Luke 17:20-21, i.e., that “God’s kingdom is here with you.” Or as some translations suggest, “among you,” “in you.” (Don’t overlook those prepositions, they’re as integral to the grammar of our language as they are to the grammar of our faith.)

If we can give more of our prayerful attention to *being church* while denied the opportunity to meet together physically and socially in our church buildings, we might experience more of the spiritual reality of Marguerite’s Holy Church the Greater, and simultaneously recognize and give humble witness of the *church being in us*.

From Doing Church to Being Church

Perhaps one of the things we can learn from this pandemic is the importance, if not the priority of *being over doing*. As United Church folk we are by our very nature hard workers and “do church” as well as anyone, if not better. We can be proud of that. But we can also be too invested in that. As mainline Protestants, we are much more preoccupied with what we can do through actions and deeds, and not as keen on the traditional spiritual disciplines of contemplation and meditation practiced by some of our monastic Catholic and Buddhist friends, for example. Both are integral to being a Christian. If we sacrifice being *for* doing, however, we risk losing ourselves and compromise the efficacy and joy of what we do.

As two well-known Christian mystics and saints remind us, God wants nothing more than us to honor who we are and who God has called us to be. When we live from that place in our soul, we take joy and pleasure in making holy and good what we do, instead of trying to do what we think is holy and good. First, we hear from the famous spiritual author and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, from his chapter entitled “Being and Doing” in his book, *No Man is an Island*:

It is useless to try to make peace with ourselves by being pleased with everything we have done. In order to settle down in the quiet of our own being we must learn to be detached from the results of our own activity. We must withdraw ourselves, to some extent, from effects that are beyond our control and be content with the good will and the work that are the quiet expression of our inner life. We must be content to live without watching ourselves live, to work without expecting an immediate reward, to love without an instantaneous satisfaction, and to exist without any special recognition. It is only when we are detached from ourselves that we can be at peace with ourselves. We cannot find happiness in our work if we are always extending ourselves beyond ourselves and beyond the sphere of our work in order to find ourselves greater than we are.

Second, we hear Merton’s wisdom echoed from the famous fourteenth-century Catholic theologian and revered Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, whose sermons and writings had a profound influence on Merton himself:

People should not worry so much about what they have to *do*, they should consider rather what they are. If people and their ways were good, their deeds would shine brightly. If you are righteous [just], then your deeds will be righteous [just]. Do not think to place holiness in doing; we should place holiness in being, for it is not the works that sanctify us, but we who should sanctify the works [make holy what we do]. However holy the deeds may be, they do not sanctify us in the least in so far as they are deeds, but rather, in so far as we are and have being, just so far do we hallow [bless] all that we do, whether it be eating, sleeping, waking or anything else... Therefore, note that all our endeavours should be devoted to *being* good, not caring so much about what we do or what kind of works, but how the ground of our works is.

From Church Buildings to Building Church

As heard frequently in the reports from the breakout sessions, the question of *when* rural congregations and communities of faith might return to their church buildings remains. This uncertainty, however, begs another question that surfaced in our discussions, one not far from the lingering doubts among many rural churches about the ‘survival’ and future viability of their congregations. The fears surrounding ‘survival’ were directly and cogently addressed by Dr. Anderson in his resource, *Alive and Kicking: Revitalizing Rural Ministries* (2008), commissioned by the General Council Office when Marvin was

in charge of the national portfolio on Rural Ministries. Those fears and the anxiety about closing one's home church are usually bound up with the twin demands of maintaining the church building and keeping a paid accountable minister.

Dr. Anderson reiterated the title of the section in *Alive and Kicking* addressing this first concern: *From Maintenance to Mission: From Church Buildings (as Noun) to Building Church (as Verb) in Community*. This proposed shift in emphasis overlaps with the two focus questions of the Rural Café in response to the crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Quoting from *A&K*: "The work [of upkeep] may maintain the present buildings for now, but it hardly solves the problem of whether to keep the present structures and renovate them, sell them, or demolish them. Even though considerable sums of money are often spent on maintenance of aging buildings, it does not resolve whether those same buildings are suitable for the current needs of ministry, let alone future mission and outreach."

As Dr. Anderson mentioned on Wednesday, the former Maritime Conference circulated a questionnaire to find out exactly how people felt about their church building. The mere fact that they received 75 completed questionnaires from the 100 distributed in total is indicative of the wide range of feelings and strong emotions that United Church congregants generally have about their churches. Their full report, "These Walls Will Echo Praise: A Spirituality of Church Buildings" (2005), speaks to the rich repository of meaning and memory in the sanctuaries of our home churches. When we close and decommission these historic churches, the pain and grief of losing these 'church homes' is palpable and permanent. No minister relishes the thought or necessity of having to close a church; Dr. Anderson lamented the same in closing one of his United Church congregations in a three-point rural pastoral charge in the former Erie Conference.

It's been fifteen years since this Maritime Conference report on the import of our relationships to our beloved and historic church buildings. Just as the pandemic is moving us forward, whether we like it or not, our rural congregations and communities of faith can discern whether and how they choose to move *forward*, *through* and *beyond* the limitations incurred by the Covid-19 pandemic— again, prepositions matter. While we are eager to return to worshipping and conducting a variety of services and potluck suppers in our church buildings, going back to them brings with it the comforting fiction that in going *back* into them, we will be able to pick up and resume normal church life.

We may wish to reframe this situation and not only reconsider the meaning and significance of our relationships to our beloved church buildings, but more importantly, the significance of our relationships to each other in building church and community in *being* church. As Dr. Anderson suggested, relationships are the stuff of ministry, and how we maintain and nourish them while responding creatively to the disruptful changes from Covid-19 must be our foremost priority.

From Walls to Wells: Digging Deeper for 'Living Water'

Instead of 'walls,' maybe, just maybe, it is time for us now, especially during Covid-19, to prayerfully reflect and dwell on the 'wells' from which we draw our 'living water.' The title of the book by the well-known Peruvian liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, comes to mind: *We Drink from our own Wells* (1984). As one of my ministry colleagues recently described how he is responding to Covid-19, he recommended we need to "go deep first...and then wide." One of his congregations has decided to start opening 'discipleship bootcamps.'

One of our facilitators for the Rural Café, Rev. Martin Dawson, stressed the imperative of learning how to listen again. Amen. Maybe this quiet and confined time, restricted in what we can do and whom we can see, is a time to go deeper in prayer and silent contemplation, in reading and study, on our own and with others (in our bubbles), thus *letting* ourselves reflect and become more introspective. While during your daily devotions or while washing dishes, mindfully 'going inside' and trusting this silence is indeed hallowed and holy ground. Speaking of discipleship *and* silence, Rev. Dr. Catherine Smith, one of our other facilitators, distills the wisdom of Quaker Thomas Kelly's line, "Lead a listening life," in her recent article in *Mandate*, "The Doorway to Discipleship." <https://hemofthelight.com/our-speechless-hearts/>

We came together for the Zoom workshop so that we could tell our stories and carry our faith forward. But sadly enough, most of us do not recognize the power of our own stories and narratives, whether in response to Covid-19 or in reviewing our lives lived, regardless of the generation to which we belong. Rev. Donna Mann, another workshop facilitator, reminds us of this in her new book, *Discover Your Story: Family History or Memoir*. We live in a celebrity-infatuated consumer culture, so our own stories seem to pale in comparison to those of the stars and big names we chase and read about in *National Inquirer*. As Eckhart noted, we "should be devoted to *being* good, not caring so much about what we do or what kind of works, but how the ground of our works is." It's time to go deeper and wider into our own ground, where Eckhart assures us God is, and where Jesus promised springs of 'living water' lie.

Overcoming Adversity

About the only time we hear about "overcoming adversity" is when a sports broadcaster is singularly praising a star athlete for dealing with a serious injury or other obstacle in the way of that athlete's ambitions. With the surge of more Covid-19 cases, it is obvious that virus fatigue is taking its toll on most of us. The rise is now spiking among young people in their 20s-30s, of whom many have been spared the unmitigated 'adversity' of racism and underemployment that most of their peers among indigenous youth and marginalized black communities experience every single day. (Having said that, the rapidly accelerated rate of young people committing suicide in Canada today is nothing short of alarming, many of whom are indigenous.)

We will learn far more about the true nature of biblical faith in facing adversity from the literary narrative of the apostle Paul. Given the precarious situation of his itinerant ministry, Paul could not always earn enough to support himself, especially during periods of imprisonment. Paul was well acquainted with adversity and his dependence on others' generosity ("I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Philippians 4:12; see also 2 Corinthians 6:5, 10).

Yet we need to *unlearn* our learned cultural aversion to adversity and suffering, with which we have been indoctrinated as consumers. By its very nature, consumerism makes us averse to being inconvenienced in the least and resentful of having our best laid plans disrupted. First world problems. Pandemics are indifferent to such naïve fictions.

All of us have heard contemporary versions of Paul's resiliency and other biblical stories from the lips of our own parents and grandparents and from reading the records, journals, and diaries of our ancestors who survived or did not have survive the Depression and Dust Bowl years of the 'Dirty Thirties,' PTSD after serving in recent wars, the Spanish flu, etc., etc. Drinking from our own spiritual wells warrants rereading and retrieving other biblical stories of faith as recounted in the 11th and 12th chapters of the book of Hebrews as well as those of historical saints and 'simple souls' comprising the Holy Church the Greater.

Overwhelmed Clergy

One of the other concerns voiced in the Rural Café was how the pandemic has made the burden of ministry even more onerous and stressful for ministry personnel, part-time or full-time. The demands of being a minister were already demanding before Covid-19, but now the minister is expected to get up to speed and provide services on Zoom. For some, Zoom or Facebook is easier and even more effective in providing worship and in reaching out to more people than would normally attend a Sunday morning service in person; for others lacking the technical know-how, digital programming is simply too intimidating for them, not to mention many of their older congregants.

In general, the historic and ongoing clergy-centric orientation of The United Church has expected too much from ordered ministry personnel, more of whom are part-time, often resulting in burnout and conflict among other problems. From the vantage-point of rural pastoral charges, the fears and anxiety as discussed in the *Alive and Kicking* resource seem to pivot among one or more of three constant worries: 1) about the ability to financially *keep* a paid accountable minister, 2) 'losing' a good minister we already have, and/or 3) trying to find someone to 'fill' the pulpit on Sunday morning. The downside to this clergy-centric expectation is that many members of congregations cannot let go of *not* having a person at the front of the church. Not God forbid, but (some) congregants forbid...a so-called 'empty pulpit.'

In the vacuum that might be left in those increasing rural churches where a paid accountable minister, lay or ordered, is not available, the idea of a Table Church is

promising and practical. For example, Rev. Dr. Catherine Smith will be circulating a more defined description of this proposal on her website: hemofthelight.com. Catherine recognizes that the pandemic and the diminishing size of many rural congregations make it essential that we become more nimble and imaginative at *being* church. In fact, we are no longer approaching the time when we need to be the church in different ways; we're right smack in the midst of it!

Should a second wave of the virus restrict gathering in the immediate future, the idea of Table Church is to encourage small worship groups of 4-6 lay people to meet on their own. It is not meant to replace the weekly online or in-person gathering for worship. This group can arrange an opening prayer, a chosen Scripture text (with a couple of paragraphs of background), a simple way of praying for one another and the world throughout the month, and a closing blessing. God only knows how often this has happened throughout the course of Christian history and still happens around the entire globe. Glimpses of the early church and the Jesus movement, and Marguerite's Holy Church the Greater yet again, eh?

Resistance to Wearing Masks

Probably the most contentious and potential conflictual issue surfacing from the Rural Café was the expressed concern about increasing numbers of people who refuse to cooperate with Public Health orders in wearing masks in public. While it may not be as problematic or dangerously widespread as it is in some areas of the United States, this resistance is now more vocal in staged protests across Canada, from B.C. to P.E.I. The refusal to wear masks (and practice physical or social distancing, for that matter) poses serious health concerns. Even in the quiet and placid atmosphere of most Canadian small towns, it can erupt in interpersonal and community conflict. When fellow congregants in a United Church, for example, insist on the same 'right' to not wear a mask when entering a church building, it raises two questions: 1) how ministers and congregations choose to deal with this effectively, and 2) how to interpret and understand this often defiant if not deviant behavior.

With respect to the latter question, Dr. Anderson offered an anecdotal yet hopefully accurate generalization which differentiates how Canadians and Americans think about the role of government and scope of personal freedom. As we all know, the colonial maxim, "Peace, order and good government," was the definitive phrase in the *British North America Act* of 1867 (now called the Constitution Act, 1867). It offers a vague and broad, though often contested, definition of the Canadian Parliament's lawmaking authority over provincial matters. It is frequently cited as the Canadian counterpart to the promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in the United States Declaration of Independence.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/peace-order-and-good-government>

Granted, the geographical variability of where and to what extent Covid-19 cases are surging or declining also determines, of course, whether these protocols are in place or actively enforced, adding to the confusion and often lack of compliance with them. The

above juxtaposition, however, speaks volumes to the inherent cultural differences in attitudes and values between Canadians and Americans in deferring to protocols by Public Health or their local government. When one's 'right' of personal freedom gives an individual the moral license to do whatever one wishes without respect of laws or protocols or other people, the value of a 'rugged individualism' is vaulted over the principle of the common good, commonweal, the social contract, or community. Tragically enough, we are witnessing the pernicious civil and health repercussions of this abuse of personal freedom where this 'right' is allowed and frequently championed, resulting in the uncontrolled and deadly spread of viral transmission.

Will they ever come back to church?

Three questions:

- 1) There is more and more interest in reinventing a new monasticism for contemporary Christians. Is there something about this phenomenon that resonates with unchurched people and younger people for whom the traditional institutional church has not the same meaning as it does for many of us older members?
- 2) For those faithful members of our rural church families in which younger people are still involved, often because of their family connections to those congregations, will those younger people still want to return to the church building?
- 3) How best do we take advantage, as reported in some of the feedback, of the renewed interest in *being church* as opposed to *being in church*, that has resulted from the refreshing array of innovative programming on Zoom and other online platforms directed at all generations? How can we use the demonstrable skills and competence of those younger members in getting all of us up to speed on digital tools and online programs for our rural congregations? This may well be one of the most promising initiatives, if not 'gifts,' from Covid-19.

Being Consumers vs. Being Church

None of us may think our primary sense of identity is wrapped up in being consumers. We're certainly spending much less now because we're not shopping and buying as much, except online! But to the extent that we have let our identity be defined and dictated by *being* consumers more than a whole host of roles and obligations that normally give us identity, meaning, purpose and pleasure, we have forfeited and neglected *being* who we are called to be in *being church*. Rather, we are and are meant to be: Christians, citizens, elders, mentors, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, companions, daughters, sons, friends, etc. By being consumers in how we think and what we do, including spiritual consumers, we sadly forfeit the "better angels of our nature," the creativity, initiative, resiliency, collaboration and imagination that many of our ancestors faithfully demonstrated. Consequently, we lose out on the cumulative wisdom they earned and learned and are all too happy and ready to pass on to us by way of their stories and lives.

In his concluding comments, Dr. Anderson suggested that the pandemic Covid-19 is symptomatic and consequential of climate change. At the same time, the pandemic has

also revealed the political hostility and divisiveness in the increasingly militant polarization around wearing masks and maintaining social distance, becoming more widespread in the U.S. As we reflect on our title, “Coming Together While Apart: Being Church During COVID-19,” we have heard in the stories from the Rural Café the necessity of re-imagining how we can meet and greet and eat the ‘living bread’ while not being physically together in the sanctuaries and basements of our church buildings. Besides the increasing death toll and active Covid-19 cases we hear about daily, it is clear that the pandemic has also laid bare two other contagions: the proliferate viral spread of both *polarization* and *ageism* (towards both older and younger generations) that inflicts the body of Christ—from which our own rural communities and United Churches are neither immune.

With the courage and compassion of the Holy One who dwells among us, may we prayerfully and prophetically work together to reconcile and restore community among those who are divided along theological and political hardlines, and among those whose age and generations segregates them from listening to and learning from each other. May we help them *come together in ways they may have never imagined and thought possible*, though still apart. Amen.

Resources:

- Donna Mann and Carolyn R. Wilker, *Discover Your Story: Family History or Memoir* (2020)
- Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation [Meditations@cac.org]
- Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* (2015)
- Rev. Dr. Catherine Smith, “The Doorway to Discipleship,” *Mandate* (2020), The United Church of Canada: <https://hemofthelight.com/our-speechless-hearts/>
- Marvin Lee Anderson, Ph.D., *Alive and Kicking: Revitalizing Rural Ministries*, General Council Office, The United Church of Canada (2008): <https://ruralchurchnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/alive-and-kicking1.pdf>
- Marvin Lee Anderson, Ph.D.
Website: www.ruraljustified.com
E-mail: marvin@ruraljustified.com
Phone: (416) 778-8046