

Worship and Work

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It is a tradition here at TUMC that the Chair of the Board ALWAYS speaks on the Sunday, after the AGM. Although it is neither the fiscal nor theological end of the church year, the AGM does seem to denote an end and a beginning. On this day we also traditionally recognize and dedicate those who are starting in new Board or Committee positions, so it makes sense that yesterday we looked at and celebrated the year that was and, to day we begin to look forward to the year ahead.

This year, today is also the first Sunday in Lent and much of the service will focus on that as we share Communion today and begin the traditions of lent.

I must admit that I have had a difficult time in knowing what to say this morning and after wrestling with that for some time, I spoke my concerns to Michele. She responded by saying “think of it as a state of the union message.” That made it even more difficult, because what would I be able to say that had not already been said at the AGM or by other people? Wasn’t everything already written in the Annual Report book, the Place of Meeting? Hasn’t everybody already read the Report?

We have all lived through exceptional and unprecedented times this past year. So, reviewing just those events would hardly be interesting or new. Much that we have done over the past year, in spite of the changes that the pandemic has foist upon us, has meant adapting to celebrate and create worship experiences to follow the roads that were laid out before us in our Christian calendar. We celebrated Easter, Pentecost, Gathering Sunday, Thanksgiving, Eternity Sunday and Christmas, just as we would have in a normal year. But it was not a normal year.

The introductory paragraph of the Worship Leaders guide for this week reads, in part: “Our writing team began our work the very week that everything in Canada began closing, canceling, and locking down around us because of the novel corona virus that was about to become much more real to us. -----, we were stripped of our usual resources, surroundings, activities and circles of relationship. Our world changed from week to week and even day to day.----- In the months that followed, the world experienced both deep grief and invitations to new spaciousness of time, as we needed to release so much of what usually fills our lives.”

I believe that is a description of what we at TUMC felt last year at this time too. Although, since then, we have learned that many churches felt that way, in those early days of the pandemic - we felt alone. We were stripped of our usual resources, surroundings, activities and circles of relationship. It felt as if we were on an unknown road.

Medical science and scientists became important in setting our route – and yet we knew we needed to remain faithful to our own faith, rites, traditions and practices that have always given us strength – we needed to worship together – in spite of our “aloneness”.

And, gradually, we came together, our Pastors, church leaders and all in the congregation became resources for new knowledge, ideas and adaptations. We opened ourselves up and with that new ways and roads opened also. We began to act and interact in new ways.

We worked hard.

Some people worked to continue church on Sunday. Our Sunday services become virtual -thanks to the expertise of those with technological knowledge. We started with 50 or so attendees until today we usually have 80 or more worshipping with us on Sunday

morning. We need only compare those first Zoom Sundays to the creative, professional and inspiring services of today, to see the change. New communication tools were developed – TUMC Connects. Committee work and other meetings took place via Zoom. Community – so vital for us – needed to be maintained, so we met by virtually inviting people into our homes to share a drink and a conversation; the Caring team started to call and reach out individually to young and old; we’ve been encouraged by the Congregational Life committee to “tag” someone; the youth and youth sponsors began new and innovative ways to continue to meet and foster growth in Christian values; the Sunday school teachers reinvented ways of adapting the curriculum. Through all of this, we continued to give generously financially. We have had many new experiences; we’ve learned, we’ve been creative and we have grown in ways we would not have thought of without the upheaval of a worldwide pandemic.

We worked hard.

This is not to say that there have not been losses as well. We mourn the loss of meeting in person and long to see each other in the Sanctuary and hear our voices raised in song together. We are saddened by all the illness, suffering and death, particularly in the long term care homes, even initially in our own SCOC; we lament the simple joy of life’s milestones taken away from our youth and children, like out of town trips with peers, graduations, camping, other rites of passage.

Through all of this we worked.

A few weeks ago, a phrase in a paragraph in TUMC Connects, jumped out at me – a simple phrase, that I, like you have heard before. This time it resonated differently with me: The phrase was: OUR WORK AND WORSHIP ARE ONE. The work that all of us have been doing in

this new reality is not FOR worship, but IS our worship. OUR WORK AND WORSHIP ARE ONE.

The many hours we have spent learning how to best use new technology, the hours spent adapting Sunday school curriculae, the reports written, the masks and quilts stitched, the meals prepared to share and the inspiring and memorable sermons preached – all are acts of worship.

Many years ago, on our first trip abroad together, my husband and I went to Greece. When I say many years ago, I mean that it was in the early 1970's. To those of you closer to my age you may remember what it was like to travel before the availability of any cell phones, Google Translate, GPS or any modern means of communication. To those of you too young to remember, I ask you to use your imagination.

We were on our own!

We had rented a small European car and spent 2 weeks driving around the Peloponnese Peninsula with only a map -printed in Greek- which neither one of us spoke -to guide us. We had done pretty well and had meandered through countless picturesque villages on narrow and hilly roads. On our last day, shortly after lunch, we realized that we were running a bit short on time as we needed to be back in Athens, to return the rental car and prepare to fly home the next morning.

Picturesque roads, although interesting, aren't usually built for speed. As we were driving along a road in a valley, we noticed what looked like a much faster, straighter road running parallel to us, but above us up a rather steep embankment. We hadn't seen any access ramps to the road, but being optimistic, thought we must come to one which would get us on that highway and thus save some time. We drove along for a number of km., but no access ramps appeared. Suddenly, a car travelling a short distance ahead of us made a sharp turn to the left,

crossed the oncoming lane and, lurched straight up the embankment and disappeared onto the road above us. Roger, being much bolder and more adventurous than I, immediately followed suit. He turned left and started up that embankment as well, while I sat horrified, certain that our car would flip backwards, as the earth beneath us was soft sand and gravel- or worse yet, we would be met at the top by a battalion of armed Greek traffic police waiting to arrest us.

Neither, of course happened. In spite of flying gravel and sand, the tires gripped and we made it onto a smooth, straight, four lane highway which took us right into Athens in time to meet all our obligations. There were very few other cars on the road and we never did see any access ramps.

When you feel somewhat alone or are in uncharted territory, you assess the situation, look at what others may be doing, gather resources and take action.

And that is what we did together at TUMC.

Now as we look back, we can see that we were not alone. It was a matter of finding that access ramp.

With a new Church year, we are starting on another road and looking ahead as to what this year will bring. Perhaps we are a little more cautious now in predicting the future. Some anxiety is still with us. Vaccines are now being distributed and that gives us great hope. But variants are also starting to proliferate and that causes concern.

But we are moving forward and already there are many projects and activities being planned. We have committed to refurbishing the roof and we are confident that we will find the funds to do that, but we will need to work closely with our partners for that to happen. A conversation on Creation care has been started. The Board has

committed to an energy audit of our building with the hope to eventually have a greener footprint. The poor, vulnerable and needy will continue to be with us and we will seek ways to meet those ever greater needs, both in our city or through continued Refugee support.

Will we be able to physically get together once more?

Will the Greeters at the Church door welcome us with hugs once again?

Will we decide that some or many of our activities can be better managed virtually with less in person meetings?

Should we be moving away from so much volunteering and move into hiring people for specific jobs, as many churches do?

Should we do all of these?

Questions remain. There will be bumps, unknown detours and as yet unrevealed challenges.

A few weeks ago, John Frank-Epp created a picture for us of the congregation at Phillipi. He described it so vividly that we felt we could almost join that small group of early Christians that met in Lydia's large house. He said they were diverse, looked after the needs of the poor, had some differences of opinion but cared for each other; they were Christ centered, knowing that they were a model in a non-Christian world.

I am not so optimistic to think that 2000 years from now someone will look back at us, but I wonder if maybe 200 years from now, there may be someone looking back at Mennonite history who might describe a small urban church in a large Canadian city in the year of the 2020 pandemic – saying they were diverse and welcoming, they learned how to be community in new and different ways; they met, not in person, but they were able to connect and care for each other virtually, they

were Christ-centered, kept or adapted traditions of their faith and learned new ways to grow. They worked hard and their work and worship were one!

They found an access ramp that led them to a new and richer road.

I wonder --?

AMEN

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) How do you think technology that we have learned and used to conduct the worship and work of TUMC during this pandemic will impact our Sunday worship and other activities once we re-open the Church and are able to return to in -person gatherings?

- 2) In what ways has the TUMC community been impacted by this time of isolation and restrictions during the pandemic? Do you think there may be long lasting or permanent changes?