

May 5, 2024
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Meditation: "Boundaries, shmoundaries!"

One of the expectations that the United Church has of its ministers is that they will serve the wider church at the regional and/or national level. It is also hoped that at least one lay person from every pastoral charge, depending on the size of the congregation or congregations, will also serve at the regional level. That service may be on a committee, or as a resource person for a committee. I serve on the congregational support commission of the region. We have a resource pool of lay and ministry personnel who serve as pastoral charge supervisors.

Some of you may be wondering what the congregational support commission does. Well, let me read to you our mandate, right from the regional website. The Congregational Support Commission carries primary responsibility for the relationship between communities of faith and the region and their partnership on matters requiring a decision by both the community of faith and the regional council, other than the pastoral relationship.

The responsibilities of the Commission include:

- The articulation of ministry and mission;
- The use of financial and property resources;
- Local governance;
- The overall health and well-being of communities of faith, such as changes in the life cycle, dealing with real property etc.

The Congregational Support Commission assigns a member of the resource pool to resource a community of faith on matters requiring a joint decision.

The Congregational Support Commission will meet with representatives from a community of faith before acting on requests from the community of faith or exercising oversight and discipline of it.

See **The Manual, 2024** Section C.2 references for responsibilities delegated to the Congregational Support Commission.

The Commission is accountable to the Executive through:

a) A representative of the Commission who also serves as a member of the Executive (may be the Chair but not necessarily so); and

b) The timely provision of minutes of its meetings according to the format established by the Regional Council Executive.

The commission meets at least monthly. Sometimes there are pressing matters that require a meeting between our regular monthly meetings – say an offer on a piece of real estate that has to be responded to within a few days. Most of our meetings occur on zoom. This saves us hours lost to travel, and savings on carbon emissions. But, twice a year we try to meet in person. These in-person meetings offer an opportunity to spend most of a day together to, not only cover our regular business, but to do other work too. One of the things that came out of this other planning was the financial compensation for pastoral charge supervisors. This came about because some lay-led congregations who had no ministry personnel depended on pastoral charge supervisors to be present for congregational meetings, board meetings, and trustee meetings, sometimes for years or even decades, without any cost to them. The other reason for compensation was to make it more attractive to serve as a pastoral charge supervisor. The pool of volunteers has been shrinking, and the demand has been growing, so there is a shortage, which means some people are serving as a pastoral charge supervisor for more than one pastoral charge. The hope was that compensation may lure some retirees into serving as supervisors.

Boy, that is a long way to say that, this past week we held an in-person meeting right here at Dorchester United Church. Seven people were here, and two more joined by zoom due to having sick children at home. In the afternoon we were talking about how best to support the many, many congregations that are struggling either financially, or with a shrinking pool of disciples to serve on committees or boards or helping greet people at the door. One of the ways we try to help is to encourage congregations to complete and regularly review their profiles, especially their living faith story. It's not just a make work project. It's about discerning your place within God's call – it's about making sure each congregation is clear as to what its mission is. See where I'm going with this?

Remember a couple of weeks ago when I starting talking about mission, and asked you to write, in twelve words or less, including a verb, a subject of the action, and an outcome, for this congregation?

What we have learned as a commission is that few, very few congregations have a mission or know what their mission is beyond keeping the doors open for the last member's funeral service. This is a church in crisis.

I asked for people to submit their mission statement for DUC either on paper or through electrons by last Sunday. Out of the forty or so people who were here in person, or online, two weeks ago, I received six replies. One was a heartfelt description of what the church means to them, one was a list of things that churches in general do, one was an idea for a potential future vision of the congregation. In fact, only one was really what I would call a mission statement, and only after I did a little editing. Boy, am I ever glad I am not a teacher, because it appears that I am not a very good communicator.

So, do you want to hear the one mission statement I did receive? Promoting Christian values in Dorchester. Sounds a little more formal than what Barbara and I came up with – Feeding souls and bellies in Dorchester and beyond.

The responses reinforced for me what we talked about at our commission meeting last Wednesday. Few know what their mission is, if they even have one, other than to keep the doors open for the final funeral. There are many congregations, not just in our region, not just in our denomination, that have become little more than social clubs with a chaplain who delivers a worship service on Sundays. There are many congregations who exist solely to serve the aging and dwindling number of members of the congregation itself, and that's a problem.

Don't just take my word for it. You can ask God, or at least read scripture for confirmation. Simon, called Peter, was staying in Joppa when Cornelius, a Roman Centurion in Caesarea, sent for Simon Peter to come to his home. Now, it was considered improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider. God was God of the Jews, the chosen people. God sent the prophets and Jesus to the Jews. It was all about the 'in group.' But just before the emissaries from Cornelius arrived, Simon Peter had a vision that led him to

understand that nobody should be considered profane or unclean because God made us all – Jew and Gentile alike.

It was this vision that enabled Simon Peter to go to Cornelius' home without hesitation. Once there, Cornelius made clear the reason for Simon Peter's presence. He, and a great number of his friends and relatives, wanted to hear from Simon Peter about his God. Simon Peter shared the story of Jesus and his ministry, and of God resurrecting Jesus from the dead, and the promise of forgiveness and new life available from God. And while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on all those gathered. And Simon Peter had an epiphany – these outsiders, these Gentiles having been baptized by the Holy Spirit in the presence of the Jewish brothers and sisters that had gone with Simon Peter to Cornelius' home, should also be baptized with water and accepted into fellowship in the movement known as 'The Way.' What the Jews saw as an exclusive 'club', God saw as an inclusive reality. The boundaries that humans had made, boundaries of race and class and creed, do not exist in God's eyes.

All those congregations who believe that the church exists solely for their own benefit take heed. The church exists solely for God's purposes, and that includes all people. The church sorely needs to rediscover its mission in the world. It needs to rediscover its mission in each time and place, for without a clear definition of its mission, it has floundered. There is one other lesson from scripture, and that is that even if we think we have the final answer, God has some surprises up God's sleeve, because God is not done with us yet. And for that, we give thanks. Amen.