

President's Address

Pacific Mountain Regional Council 4th Annual General Meeting 2022

Rev. S. Blair Odney

It's not very often that the presiding officer of a region gets to address the regional church in this context, three times.

I'm thinking about the soils of my foundation. The dry range land of Southern Alberta. The fertile farmland of Central Alberta. The rich and rocky sands of the vineyards of the Okanagan. The warm gentle sands of Shediac Beach and Naramata Centre, Wreck Beach and laPenita and Zipolite. The cement dance floors of 579 Seymour Street, the Hindeberg and the Pumpjack. The soils that have nurtured the messiness, the compost of my becoming. After so after all that's said and done, maybe my words today will become worm castings.

But let me begin with a word of scripture

"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

In the summer of 2006, I was not the only one in this room who served as a commissioner to the general council in Thunder Bay. The right Reverend Peter Short chaired as moderator. There were proposals and decisions that are still confounding the church today. But two really important moments stand out for me.

We were discussing the adoption of a new statement of faith. Former moderator Bill Phipps and the then current President of London Conference – whose name escapes me. (interesting Ibi, we don't remember someone's name we remember what they do).

With Bill Phipps standing right beside him, the president of London Conference, one of the most theologically conservative conferences in the country, spoke the most beautiful testimony. "After 20 years of feeling completely isolated from my church, I can sing this Song of Faith." It was the second time that summer the council went completely silent. When the votes were cast, the decision was nearly unanimous. In its 97-year history, the church has never been so decisive.

If you want to know what the church believes about - God, Jesus, Mary, Spirit, Sin, Grace, the church, the bible, sacraments, death - in Kispiox, and Bela Coola, Timmins and Hearst, Quebec City and Dartmouth – read "A Song of Faith."

The second thing we did, after a compelling, court-disrupting and impassioned plea from Keith Howard, was to adopt the Emerging Spirit Program. You'll recall the "wondercafe.ca" website promoting United Church ministries, with every church across the country enjoying its own page. Remember the funky magazine ads. That website dared to host troubling and compelling conversations about the issues that mattered to Canadians, then. We came to realize that by hosting these conversations, the church was making a tacet promise to walk with Canadians as they dealt with the issues. And that's where things broke down.

The whole program promoted an aspirational sense of who we wanted to be, but when curious visitors showed up in our churches on any given Sunday, the culture implied in the ads and the website, was not consistent with the culture in most of our churches.

We were clinging to our former ways and we learned quickly what business analysts already know: a great marketing strategy can quickly dismantle a badly run business.

15 years later, God is still out in front, insistently saying to us, FORGET THE FORMER THINGS – DO NOT DWELL ON THE PAST. SEE, I'M MAKING A NEW THING. NOW IT SPRINGS UP, CAN YOU NOT PERCEIVE IT?

I actually don't think that God is kidding. Let's just look past ourselves and into the cultures that thrive around us. God is already creating lived experiences of a Song of Faith way outside the church. It doesn't matter where I go, in a grocery line up, in a doctor's office, in a corner pub, whenever anyone finds out what I do, they want to talk, and invariably when I find words to describe the kind of mystery inherent in A song of Faith, please want to be claimed and held by it. These are the conversations that excite me the most. The kind of God we sing about in A Song of Faith, is already tilling the soil for the seeds to be planted.

Jeff told us about a simple invitation to cook a meal. No one could have concocted that movement. That is spirit work. I'm working with a student at VST who has asked to create intercultural worship experiences. I encouraged to participate in the Hyack Festival in New Westminster to see where the possibilities or relationship might be. He came back saucer-eyed with the possibilities. It's not a coincidence the Hyack office is right across the street from the church. We lament that there aren't men in our congregation, and a transformative mens group, part of the worldwide Mankind Project, grounded in ceremony and ritual, meets every Wednesday.

The rainbow chorus of New Westminster, created for people in the queer community, and their allies, with a mission of blending voices and changing hearts has its debut concert at the end of this month. Hosted by one of Vancouver's most beloved Drag Queens. Many have expressed an interest in the new thing that God is creating in New West.

Just a week ago, I had a beautiful conversation with a colleague who recounted a moment of lament that there were no youth in his church. He said, but I did get a request for a group of youth wanting space to create a few posters protesting old growth logging. Turned out to be a huge group of young adults, preparing a major march. They may not be singing Jesus songs on Sunday, but they'd take a bullet for the old growth forests. With tears my colleagues said "isn't that Christ?"

As a gay man coming out in his 50's, I experienced the radical hospital we try to offer in church, among the intergenerational group of guys who hang out at the Pumpjack Pub on Davie Street.

God is also creating lived experiences of A Song of Faith, inside the church too. We simply need to look beyond what we have always done. What emerging spirit promised, is happening in Weird Church and Wild Church. Every celebration of an affirming ministry of the United Church of Canada, God is doing the new thing.

At the re-opening of St. Andrew's Wesley United Church, we watched a beautiful new community partnership with Chor Loeoni Men's Choir.

Even here, when the people young people in our midst teach me about loving myself as I acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples' lands, and take responsibility for my ancestors' actions in colonialism, God is ahead of us.

All of this is Spirit Work, long before we ever got there.

I want you to think of all the biblical stories you know about Jesus meeting with people. Sometimes they came to him. Sometimes he went to them. The encounter is completely consistent.

Jesus meets them where they are. At the well in the heat of mid day. At the home of a tax collector. On a walk about looking into a sycamore tree. The Syrophenician woman who throws herself at his feet. A man laying at the pool of Siloam for 38 years. Legion, naked, in the rocks, scaring away frightened lookie loos

Jesus meets them where they are. Not where he thinks they should be, but where they are.

It's a loving encounter. It is a gracious encounter. Jesus loves them for who they are, and that love is transformational. And then he invites them into the next best version of themselves.

As beloved followers of the living Christ, the new thing that God is creator is waiting for us to respond. Go into the world. Love. Love God's people for who they are. Watch how this new thing, love on the ground changes them, and then invite them, in love, into the next best version of themselves.

This is our job. We don't really have any other.

God is waiting for us to catchup.

Blessings, always.

Blair



With Children at Regional Meeting, June 10, 2022

