

## A Message from Rev. Brian:

Here's an article from the United Church of Canada's WonderCafé website on September 4, 2012, by J. Barrett Lee. He writes as clearly and passionately as I could hope to write, so I thought this time I would just let his words speak:

### A Growing Church is a Dying Church

Whenever a congregation goes looking for a new pastor, the first question on their minds when the committee interviews a new candidate is: *Will this pastor grow our church?*

I'm going to go ahead and answer that question right now: *No, she will not.*

No amount of pastoral eloquence, organization, insightfulness, amicability, or charisma will take your congregation back to back to its glory days.

What then *can* your pastor do? She can make your board meetings longer with prayer and Bible study. She can mess with your sense of familiarity by changing the order of worship and the arrangement of the sanctuary. She can play those strange new songs and forget about your favorite old hymns. She can keep on playing those crusty old hymns instead of that hot new contemporary praise music. She can bug you incessantly about more frequent celebration of Communion. She can ignore your phone call because she's too busy praying. She can ruin your perfectly balanced budget with appeals for more funds to be allocated toward mission and outreach. She can take up your precious evenings with kooky new book studies and meditation groups. She can take up your precious weekends with exhausting volunteer projects. She can open your church building to the ugliest and meanest freaks in town, who show up at odd hours, beg for handouts, track muddy snow into the building, leave their cigarette butts in the parking lot, and spill their coffee on the carpet during their Junkies Anonymous meetings.

She can come off sounding like a Jesus freak evangelical, gushing on and on about the Bible and your personal relationship with God. She can come off sounding like a smells n' bells catholic, pontificating on and on about tradition and sacraments. She can come off sounding like a bleeding-heart liberal, prattling on and on about social justice and the need to constantly question old interpretations.

What can she do to grow your church? *Nothing.* There's nothing your pastor can do to make your church grow. She can't save your church. Your church already has a Savior and it's not her. She can push you. She can open doors. She can present you with opportunities. It's up to you to take advantage of them. She can plant seeds and water them. It's up to God to make them grow.

And what if that happens? What will growth look like? Will all those old, inactive members suddenly return? Will the pews be packed again? Will you need start a second service and buy the lot next door in order to expand the parking lot? No. You *might* see a *few* new faces in the crowd. There won't be many of them. Some might

stick around but most won't. Those who stay won't fit in with the old guard. They won't know about *how you've always done it*. They'll want to make changes of their own. Their new ideas will make you uncomfortable. Your church won't look or feel like it used to. You'll feel like you're losing control of this place that you've worked so hard to preserve. It will feel like your church is dying.

And that's just the thing. A growing church is a dying church. It has to be. It cannot be otherwise. The way to Easter Sunday goes through Good Friday. The way to the empty tomb goes through Golgotha. The way to resurrection goes through crucifixion. When Jesus told you to take up your cross and follow, did you expect it to lead anywhere else? What Jesus told us about himself is also true of churches: *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it bears no fruit.*

But what if it doesn't work? What if you let your pastor do all that crazy stuff and nobody new shows up? What if the church still goes under? What if all that time you spend studying the Bible, expanding your horizons, deepening your spiritual life, and serving your community turns out to be time wasted?

[A conclusion from Brian: Wasted? WASTED? When was time spend on your own spiritual development, or on ministry to the community, ever WASTED?

Such a question only arises from a mistaken belief the goal of all this effort is the continuation of the church itself. But is that really the right goal? A worthy goal? The kind of goal that a faithful follower of Jesus would have? I don't think so.

Nothing your or I do can guarantee the continuation of your church. Does that mean it's all not worth doing? Of course not. Our calling in faith is to be faithful, not necessarily successful – in the world's terms.

Work worth doing is the work of ministry – service with and among and between God's people. I truly believe that when we focus on doing THAT work, the health of the church will take care of itself. So let's get on with the REAL work of church!]

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Brian".