

Embracing the Future: Lessons from our Past

In today's gospel, old Simeon and Anna hold the baby Jesus and offer their blessing. After years of faithful living, they now embrace the newborn child of promise. And just as Anna and Simeon embrace the child, so we in Christ's church are to embrace God's vision for the future. Like old Anna and Simeon, the generations that went before us offer us their encouragement for our journey.

Today, we begin a year-long celebration of our 150th anniversary. In some cases, you may have noticed a "plus" sign after the 150. That is because, actually, we could have been celebrating this anniversary three years ago. The record reads:

February, 1859: "Through the Governor's (James Douglas) good offices, Mr. Dallas, the Hudson Bay factor, offered Dr. Evens three lots on the corner of Broad and Pandora as a site for a new church for 'the use of the people called Methodists.'

That was the beginning of Metropolitan Methodist Church. However, it was three years later in 1962, that First Presbyterian was founded – and so we have chosen to wait until 2012 as the year to celebrate our 150th.

Throughout this year, you are going to hear some intriguing bits of history. For instance, the following motion appears in the church minutes of March 1899.

'Moved, that the members of the choir be requested not to attend or take part in public dances, balls, or theatrical performances, and that if they do so, they be notified that they are not longer members of the choir. Carried'

What happened next is conveyed in headlines that appear in the Colonist:

March 14th: A church without a choir—most resigned

March 15th: Mr. Hicks, the choir master, says 'confirm or resign'

March 21st: Choir strike—only 2 ladies present out of 16.

I wonder how that eventually resolved itself. A robust sense of independent thought obviously is part of our tradition!

Fortunately, there have been those who don't take themselves too seriously. For sheer silliness and fun times, it's hard to top the skits put on by The Actimets. Formed in 1947, they are the longest continuous group of their kind in the United Church of Canada. Their crazy rendition of the Three Little Pigs had folks rolling in the aisles. Then, of course, there was Rindercella. Characters included the Pransome Hince, the Mugly Other, the Sad Blisters and the Gairy Fodmother.

These examples all come from the Metropolitan branch of our history. The rest of today's message draws upon something from our First United history.

Fifty years ago, as First United marked its centennial, Rev. A.I. Higgins preached a sermon on qualities of a living church – a church that embraces the future. Much of what he said back then still speaks to today. Drawing upon the work of Campbell Morgan, he noted four key qualities.

First, he said, *a living church will be a church with spiritual growth. Everything that is alive is growing and when growth ceases then decay begins...*

Higgins told about an American woman who was visiting Westminster Abbey. *She looked around and admired all of its wealth and beauty, its plaques and statues of remembrance. Then she asked a very pertinent question. Turning to her guide she said, "How long is it since anybody was converted here?"*

Today, as we look around at this building, we might ask... How long since anybody had a spiritual awakening here? How long since anyone came to a deeper appreciation of the Sacred? For all the beauty of this sanctuary and the numerous gatherings at our church every month, we don't want lose sight of the prime purpose of our being here: the transformation of lives.

As Rev. Higgins noted: *Every one of can ask ourselves...How has the regenerative power of God been working though my heart and broken out in this world in which I live?*

He went on to say that a second sign of real life in a church is that it is in correspondence with its environment... that is, it is engaged with the surrounding community. On this point, let me share an extended passage from his sermon.

I often think of my home church where I was brought up as a boy, in which there was held a Sunday School service at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and church service at 3 o'clock, and that was all.

And there was no young people's work for young people; there was no reaching out on behalf of that church to touch the life of those that were in the community in which it existed. Apart from Sunday church services, the church was out of correspondence with its community.....

If the church is going to exist..., it must minister to the boys and girls as they grow up... We must minister to the business woman and the business man, to the employer...and to the employee, to the aged person and all who need comfort and strength in the sunset hours of life. We must minister to those who are victims of appetite and of passion, to the alcoholic and to the gambler, to the unemployed and to the unemployable.

The church should reach out and witness to those who know nothing about us except that they have seen our church standing here on the street. Surely one of the indications of a living church is that it is in touch with its living human environment around about it, leavening the lump and building up the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Rev. Higgin's first two signs of a living church are well summed up in our FirstMet motto: that we seek to be A Centre for Spiritual Nurture and Community Engagement.

His third sign of a living church should come as no surprise. A living church will be a church of union, because love is a primary characteristic. Higgins says:

*Love never sows the seeds of discord and of strife;
love never creates sects and sections within the church;
love never produces the attitude that will not cooperate and strengthen the work of the church;
love always builds into union.*

Early on in the book of Acts, we see how that love is lived out in the newborn church. The people gather regularly for worship and shared meals. The sick and poor, the orphan and widow, all have a place and are cared for. Love issues forth in practical acts of compassion.

While his first three qualities of a living church came as no surprise to me, the final quality A.I. Higgins mentioned is surprising, especially given the times in which he lived. He said:

Lastly...a church that is alive will be a church filled with emotion. There are many people who think that we should keep away from emotion and the church's life should be rigid, cold and intellectual. But because I am alive I weep, I sing, I laugh and I mourn. It is only the dead that have no tears, no laughter, no music, no mourning...The church without tears and laughter can't be the church of the living Christ who wept over Jerusalem and who wept in the garden.

How human Christ was! He was loving and yet he was angry; he was happy and pleasant at the wedding feast and yet He had tears for Jerusalem. He loved little children and yet he was at home with the rough handed fishermen. His life touched every emotion of life.

And I am sure that he wants his church to be a church that is filled with all the emotions that surge through the human heart; a church where sometimes a tear stains the eye because we can enter into those conditions of men (and women); a church that can laugh because a merry spirit doeth good like a medicine; a church that can be awed by the tragedy of the world; a church where all of the experiences of the individual can be experienced again within the fellowship of the congregation.

Picking up on where Rev. Higgins left off, I believe a living church is one in which people are encouraged to bring their whole self into the life of the church. After all, we are to love our God with all our heart, all our mind, all our strength and all our soul. We don't need to stifle our emotions nor park our minds at the door. As Oscar Wild put it... "Be yourself. Everyone else is taken."

And we can practice a certain openness – an openness of heart and mind – an openness in how we relate to one another, and especially an openness to the leading of the Spirit in our lives.

This afternoon, during Music for Meditation, I hope you will take up the opportunity to reflect upon your own life - your experiences over the past year and where God may be leading you in this new year just begun. This morning, however, as we begin our 150th, we have been reflecting upon our life together. May this congregation continue to be a Centre for spiritual growth and community engagement. May we be known for our compassion and for the full expression of our lives. Then, we will be a church grounded in the best of our past and ready for the future.