

Summary of “Ministry Beyond Our Walls: An Invitation”

We have a mission. It is concise and clear. We repeat it almost every time we gather for worship:

*We want to deepen our connection with our God, our neighbour and ourselves;
expanding our capacity to love as taught and embodied by Jesus.*

Our faith began as a movement. Jesus didn't stay in a synagogue with the expectation that seekers would come to see him in his wonderful house of worship. He went out and met them where they lived. He went to their houses, sat at their tables, broke their bread and connected with them on their terms. This is not to say that we should consider abandoning our Sunday practice; it is often a highly meaningful expression of our life together. Our current format exudes warmth and a varying style that is broadly welcomed. For some, coffee time afterwards has become a touchstone of their social life. In other words, what we are doing **within** our walls is working for us. Our needs are being met. **But given that our faith began as a movement, is meeting our needs enough?**

How We Traditionally Measured Success

Most of us are accustomed to measuring a congregation's success by counting the number of people in the pews. According to this approach, if the building is full on Easter Sunday, the service is a success. Further into this paper we will explore a different approach to measuring success, but for now, let's consider the traditional framework.

When we focus on congregational size with a mindset that “bigger is better” and we see that our numbers have reached a plateau, one of the questions we feel compelled to ask is why our numbers aren't growing? If what we're doing at Gordon works so well for us that we express “considerable satisfaction”, why aren't the pews overflowing? The slight growth Gordon United experienced in recent years may have stalled, but it is important to note that we are doing quite well in terms of numbers. Notably, we are doing much better than Presbytery as a whole, where average attendance dropped 22 percent from 1993 to 2003. **But even if our numbers are comparatively healthy, is this the way we should measure success?**

A Different Way to Measure Success

In our mission statement, where do we find success connected to the number of bodies in our pews? In reflecting on the life and ministry of Jesus, when are numbers used as a sign of success? Where do we hear Jesus say, “That was a good year, membership went up twenty percent”?

Yet we closely associate success to membership statistics: we are attending, but are we actively seeking to deepen and grow? It is not to say that traditional services can't be entertaining. Rather, it's to say that services are first and foremost vehicles to **deepen relationships**. In this sense, the success of a congregation is measured by the degree to which we live out our mission. There is more success to be found in a church composed of 16 people who proactively embody their sense of mission, than in a church of 160 well entertained, friendly, attendees. **In other words, we should relate success directly to embodiment of mission and only indirectly to numbers attending worship.**

Success as Embodiment of Mission

The forward looking plan that follows was formulated by your Session with an understanding that success is best measured by **embodiment of mission**. Throughout this paper, the Session of Gordon United offers an invitation to our faith community – an invitation to recommit to our mission and broaden our understanding of who we serve.

In the hopes of better sharing our understanding of the gospel of Christ in ways that speak to those not involved with the church, your Session is recommending a **six point plan**. Ultimately, it is hoped that these action points

will lead us to develop relationships that will assist others and ourselves in deepening our connections and expanding our capacity to love. In other words, our hope is that this plan will better enable us to live our mission beyond our walls.

Our Plan: Ministry/Mission Beyond our Walls

Action One: Declaration of Mission

Although we quietly fulfill our mission statement in many ways, it is seldom expressed in our day-to-day decision making. Our first step involves pulling our mission from the background to the foreground, so that it is front and centre in our decision making. This will feel awkward at the outset, but over time it will increase our clarity and strengthen our commitment.

Whatever the decision in question, the tie to our mission will at times be obvious and at other times subtle, but either way, we need to constantly remind ourselves of **why we do what we do**. Otherwise, we will likely focus on maintaining our institution rather than living our mission.

These activities are not the same. Our institution (the building and the way we do things) should be in service to our mission, not the other way around. The good of bricks and programmes lies, not in themselves, but in the way they assist us in deepening our connections and our capacity for love. One of the dangers for any congregation rests in making the bricks and programmes an end in themselves. By continually and consistently going through the process of articulating how all our activities flow from our mission, we are more likely to remain mission focused. The more we remain mission focused, the more we will actually live it.

Action Two: Wide Consultation

Individual members of our congregation are involved in a great number of endeavours beyond our walls. However, our congregation as “Gordon United” has largely remained within our walls for decades.

In moving beyond our building and reintroducing ourselves to the surrounding community, it would be best to begin by listening. To that end, we will seek conversations with (1) members of the Langford council; (2) leaders in local schools; (3) staff at the social service office; (4) local service clubs; and (5) unchurched friends of members of the congregation. Our intent will not be to recruit, but rather to better understand needs and eventually identify specific gaps that we could help address as a reflection of our mission. It could be that we hear about a need for youth programming. It could be that we hear about a need for quiet space. It could be that we hear about a need for single parent mentoring. Our mantra will be: Ask and Listen, then Offer.

Action Three: Web and Email Based Ministry

Many people are turning to the internet as both a means of communication and a source of information. If we are to be a regional resource for spiritual growth in the liberal Christian tradition, it is essential that we move into this genre. Information should move out, including weekly sermons, daily selected quotes and special event notification. This should be made available to all interested parties, both within and beyond our walls. It should include a vehicle for timely responses, possibly leading to short email exchanges and, if desired, face to face conversations.

Action Four: Community Presence

Simultaneous to consultations with the wider community and following development of a basic web site, Gordon United will begin the process of marketing itself within the Western Communities. Key messages will be delivered based on a comprehensive marketing plan with the intention of raising awareness of the congregation’s

message and work. This would include a review of our resources, and our facilities, particularly regarding our curb appeal, community profile and worship space.

Action Five: Excellence Events

There are events within our existing ministry that appear to be particularly meaningful among people who aren't regular participants in our congregational life. As part of our plan, four of these events will be given particular attention, becoming a focus for personnel, volunteer and financial resources. The events will be well advertised, both in the media and through intentional word of mouth. Because feedback and reflection are essential in achieving excellence, the four events will be subject to the type of expectations and critical attention that is not usually afforded our church programmes. The four events are:

Advent and Christmas Services
Fair Trade Craft Fare
Christmas Play/Choral Night/Carol Sing
Good Friday and Easter Services

These events were chosen based on three factors. First, they tend to draw people who seldom if ever attend church: people who are either looking for a seasonal worship experience or who have come for a specific event tied to a loved one. Second, the events are closely attached to our mission, whether by providing in-depth experiences of the Christian story (Christmas Play); or pragmatic ways of loving our neighbour (Fair Trade Craft Fare); or special worship experiences that centre on our connection with God (Christmas and Easter services). Thirdly, we as a congregation are on "display" in that we are being watched at these events, by first timers and other casual members of the community, who may be looking for Christian role models. (Other events of our congregational life will not be ignored; it is only that these four events will receive particular focus.)

Action Six: Alternative Worship

Based on the outcome of consultations with young families and a review of what other congregations have tried, an alternative worship service will be customized to meet stated spiritual needs. This would probably occur on a week day evening and include a simple meal, followed by a time of interactive worship. The event would likely not exceed an hour and fifteen minutes, start to finish. Through this event, participants would share a community experience supplemented by regular webpage and email contact. This, for many, will be their continuing core connection to our ministry and the church, other than some participation in time-specific programmes like the Christmas Play and the Fair Trade Craft Fare. This alternative worship would not impact our regular Sunday morning pattern.

Invitation

The invitation from your Session is to discuss, augment and embrace the ambitious plan outlined in this paper. By adopting and implementing these six action points, it is hoped that we, the people of Gordon United, will experience a growing sense of commitment to our mission within and beyond our walls, leading our community along a meaningful, inspiring, faithful path.

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