

## Reflection: *Deepening*

In various committees and groups at Gordon United, we've been trying to focus our energy and attention on the stated mission of our church: the mission we repeated at the beginning of the service, as part of our Call to Worship. So I've been asked to help you reflect on that Mission Statement, and over the next 6 weeks, that's what I'm going to try to do.

I want to begin by asking you to reach back in your memory to when you were baptized. Does anyone here remember their actual baptism? For many of us, it was when we were infants. I'm told some people do remember episodes in their lives that far back, but I'm afraid I don't. Was anyone here baptized as a child, rather than as an infant? As an adult? Lew shared his baptism story with us in the last *O Live* newsletter; there may be others of you who have similar stories.

Now I want you to think about confirmation – what some of us think of as “joining the church”. In the United Church of Canada, baptism is a sacrament of belonging – an offering of God's grace to all who wish to be a part of Christmas community. We recognize, though, that it is often a choice made for people by their parents; so we ask that as people grow older, they make a mature decision to be a full part of the community, with all the privileges and responsibilities that are involved. Sometimes that happens when we're in our early teens, sometimes later in life – and sometimes a little bit earlier. I was confirmed at 16. I could have been confirmed earlier, but I was too full of questions at 13 or 14 to feel comfortable making a statement of faith in front of the whole congregation. By the time I was 16, I had learned that asking questions and having doubts is a part of the life of faith. My confirmation class consisted of myself and a bubbly, irreverent woman in her 30s, who kept asking questions our rather reserved, traditional minister had a bit of a challenging time with! But bless him, he stuck with us, and helped guide us to answers we could live with – or, if there were no answers, helped us live with the questions.

Think of yourself at the age of your confirmation. What did you look like? What kinds of clothes did you wear? How was your hair cut? Who were your friends? What kind of music did you listen to? Are you the same person now as you were then? I'm guessing not. While I was visiting my parents after Christmas, I came across a picture of myself with an old friend. We were 17: skinny as anything, with long, feathered and teased hair, big old owly glasses, skinny jeans and bomber jackets – typical late 80s. I'm not the same person I was then – on the outside, or on the inside.

I'm guessing you've changed as much as I have since the age at which I was confirmed – probably more. What I wonder is, has your faith changed too? Do you believe the same things you did back then? Is your understanding of the Bible the same? Do you pray in the same way? Do you see the same kinds of meanings behind events, both good and bad? Do you serve your church and

community more, or less, or about the same? The apostle Paul once said, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” (1 Cor 13:12)

Has your faith and your practice of Christian living grown since the time you were baptized and confirmed? Or are you stuck, needing help to continue the journey? Our mission statement begins with the longing to “Deepen our connection with God”. I’ve said before that for me, growing the church means something different than just getting more “butts in the seats” – to quote Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*. Don’t get me wrong; I’d love to see more people here on Sunday morning. But for me, growing the church means that all of us will grow – so that, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, we are “filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that [we] may live lives worthy of the Lord...as [we] bear fruit in every good work.”

There are so many ways in which we can connect to God. There’s a wonderful website called “30goodminutes.org” which provides little video clips of people reflecting on the life of faith. In the space of about 20 minutes, I heard stories of men and women who connected to God through sitting with a dying garter snake, enjoying music with their toddler, playing the harp, lighting a candle, and cooking a meal. How do you connect to God? Do you connect to God through the Word that is read and spoken each Sunday – through Scripture and sermon? Do you connect to God through your own private times of devotion and prayer? Do you pray aloud, or do you meditate in silence? Do you “pray at the end of a pen”, by writing? Do you connect to God while walking, exercising, singing, dancing? Do you connect to God while serving the poor, or while talking with a trusted friend?

If you’re not sure, I want to invite you to take some time to think about that. Maybe you need some help deepening that connection: a different kind of worship, an opportunity for spiritual direction, a more in-depth encounter with the Bible, a new spiritual practice, a new set of people to explore faith with. That’s what we’re here for, at Gordon United. Don’t be afraid to ask for what you need to nurture that connection. If we can’t offer it ourselves, we’ll point you in the direction of resources that can help you.

Baptism is not the end-point of Christian living – though it is the sacrament on which all else depends. At baptism, we are welcomed into the family of Christ, through a visible sign of the inclusive, unending love God has for each of us. That’s the beginning of our active ministry. After Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit of God literally *threw him* out into the wilderness to wrestle with evil, to make some sense of his calling, to depend on the Spirit of God for life and health. Baptism is not the end; it is the beginning. In the next few weeks, we’re going to talk some more about this Mission Statement of ours, and that simple-sounding but challenging command to love in the Spirit of Jesus. In the meantime, I’m going to give you a couple of ideas on what you might do, in the next few weeks, to deepen that connection with God.

If human imagery is helpful, I'm going to invite you to stop every now and then, take 5 deep breaths, and visualize yourself being held by the person who loves you most in the whole world – and then, remember, this is how God loves you – and even more. Hang on to that image as you move through the day.

If human imagery isn't helpful to you, stop, and breathe, and simply visualize something that brings a sense of peace: a quiet lake, the sound of a songbird, a slowly blooming flower, the warmth of spring sunshine...and remember these words from the Psalms: "Be still, and know that I am God".

Let yourself sink into those images, and know that whether you feel it or not, you ARE connected to God – the God who will never leave you, never forsake you, whose love for you is without condition, and without end.

Our mission as a church begins with our connection to God. Without it, we're just another social club or service organization. May we, as a community, find ways to help each other deepen our encounter with the Holy One, who created us and gave us life. Amen.

Some resources for the journey:

Online:

[www.30goodminutes.org](http://www.30goodminutes.org)

[www.practicingourfaith.org](http://www.practicingourfaith.org)

[www.d365.org](http://www.d365.org)

Books:

Space for God by Don Postema.

How the Wild Things Pray by William Cleary

Inviting God In by Joyce Rupp

The Spiritual Formation Bible by Zondervan Publishing.