

## PRESENTATION: Where Is God Calling Manitou?

Friends-- I have something really marvellous to show you, as people who are sitting in a United Church...

- **SLIDE: MANITOU CONFERENCE MAP**

You are sitting in a United Church *in Manitou Conference*. Manitou is the big chunk of Green in the middle of the screen. That is the *Manitou Conference* of the United Church of Canada. It's large. Lots of trees. And rocks. Trees and rocks, rocks and trees.

In early June of this year, Manitou Conference gathered in Kirkland Lake to do some of the business of the church. And a big part of that exercise was asking ourselves—prayerfully—***Where is God calling our churches in this time and place?*** The answers may surprise you. Because, put briefly, there are two directions in which we believe our churches are presently being called. They're printed in your bulletin:

*We believe that God's radical hospitality calls Manitou Conference:*

- *To journey into new ways of being church*
- *To understand and engage with our neighbours' struggle for dignity and economic justice*

The second part is tough, “engaging with our neighbours’ struggle”—but the first part is **even tougher**, “journeying into new ways of being church.” Because, if you hadn’t noticed, the church needs to change. But, as if we didn’t know, it is VERY VERY difficult to change the church. There’s a quote printed at the beginning of your bulletin that tells us why: **“The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers.”** Words said by John Calvin’s protégé Theodore Beza, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

--Isn’t that an amazing quote? And it’s true, you know. How do I know it’s true? Because the guy who said it was named Theodore Beza-- and *Theodores are pretty much never wrong*. **“The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers.”**

Of course, the metaphor of the church as an anvil is very useful—because *an anvil* is big and heavy and hard-to-change. And the church is an institution, and *an institution* is big and heavy and hard-to-change. That’s what institutions are like-- because that’s what they’re for. Basically, institutions are about *preservation*. Institutions are designed to preserve ideas and practices, through the use of courts, and laws, and doctrines, and structures, bills, declarations, and creeds.

- **SLIDE: REAL ANVIL PICTURE**

The image of *the church as an anvil* tells the story of the church—you don’t shape the anvil, the anvil shapes you. And in a similar way, *you don’t shape the church*—but what you do for (and perhaps against) the church *is very likely to shape you* ...in all sorts of ways.

But there's a point at which comparing the church to an anvil breaks down. Because here we are not talking about swinging a hammer at the anvil and breaking it down from the outside. When Manitou Conference gathered earlier this year, we were saying, "**How do we need to reshape our church (our anvil)—from the inside? *What is God whispering to us about what our new anvil will look like?***"

- **SLIDE: "ANVIL BOX"**

--Here's where it gets interesting! Just this past June, we did some visioning. We asked people to go wild with their imaginations. Fueled by prayer, caffeine, and a significant lack of sleep, we asked members of the church from all over Manitou to dream up newspaper headlines for June of 2013—two years into the future. *Dream, Friends! Dream out loud! Get outrageous! Let your faith tell you preposterous things about the future of our church!*

Now read quickly, because you are about to see headlines from the North Bay Nugget--  
**Headlines from the future!** *Ask yourself if you, too, hear the Holy Spirit calling the church in these directions!*

One interesting theme that we encountered is that we in the church-- we are tired of our buildings. We are tired of too many churches -- too much brick-and-mortar taking our energy and our money -- and essentially hiding God away behind walls. So look at some of these:

- **MANITOU CLOSES CHURCHES—EMBRACES REGIONAL MODEL**
- **UNITED CHURCH BECOMES MORE THAN IT'S BUILDINGS!**
- **HOLY HAVENS GOING CHEAP**

We want to get rid of some of our buildings. Imagine that: *Our churches are what is getting in the way of us being the church!* So much so that some of us began to dream wildly of pyromaniac vandalism:

- **ARSON DESTROYS ALL OLD CHURCHES**

And maybe someone had Trinity and St. Andrew's in mind with the next headline:

- **TWO CHURCHES SHACK UP!**

--Instead of getting together for a couple months of a summer fling, someone apparently thinks we should just get honest and "shack up" permanently!

Some people think we just need to get out of these buildings altogether:

- **CHURCHES SOLD TO RIGHT INJUSTICES**
- **UNITED CHURCH TAKES IT TO THE LAKE!** (The great outdoors, where so many of us find the Holy Spirit waiting for us!)

But not everyone thought that we simply *want our buildings to go away*. Many people apparently recognized that our church buildings are a great resource, a richness given to us by God that should serve greater purposes, bigger missions, and outreach:

- **UNITED CHURCH BECOMES GROW OP** (Hmmm... What do they want us to grow?)
- **LOCAL CHURCH BECOMES “SACRED COFFEESHOP”**
- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH BECOMES COMMUNITY RESTAURANT** (Feeding bodies and Spirits!)
- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH IS NEW RECREATIONAL COMPLEX** (Strengthen spirits and build muscle!)
- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH BECOMES COMMUNITY GARDEN** (Teach the community how to grow and share food!)
- **MUSIC STUDIO GRAND OPENING IN UNITED CHURCH** (A Way to share our legacy of music in a wider way!)
- **CHURCH BUILDING BECOMES AFFORDABLE HOUSING** (almost sounds like something Jesus would do!)
- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH CONVERTS BUILDING INTO LOW INCOME HOUSING** (I’m sensing a theme!)
- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH REPLACES PEWS WITH COTS AND SHOWERS** (God seems to be telling us something!)

I don’t know about you, but I think this is amazing—and inspiring, even though it’s a little scary, too. Somehow, with this “newspaper headline exercise,” we freed people up to dream big, just because we placed these ideas into the future. Only two years into the future, but even a couple years from now *is fair game for faithful visioning*.

Many of our dreams were about new places that we think Jesus is calling us to go—and a newspaper headline helped us to get there in our mind’s eye:

- **UNITED CHURCH GOES MENTAL**

You might say *we went Mental a long time ago*—(which isn’t necessarily a bad thing!) But this headline was actually intended to draw our attention to the spiritual and social needs of people who struggle with mental health issues.

- **UNITED CHURCH OFFERS GOOD NEWS TOURS** (another way to get out of the buildings!)
- **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL A PART OF EVERY UNITED CHURCH** (Do we need to direct more of our energies to advocacy for human rights?)

- **HARPER DELEGATES ERADICATION OF POVERTY TO UNITED CHURCH** (It wasn't enough that Jesus wants us to fight poverty—now the P.M. is getting in on the act!)
- **CHURCH OFFERS MICRO-LOANS!** (A hand-up, not a hand-out!)
- **VIGIL TO END POVERTY REPLACES CHURCH SERVICES** (It makes me ask myself: If we gather to pray for wide-scale economic change, who will show up to pray with us?)

And how about this one?—we're talking about the church as a blacksmith's anvil. Maybe we should get *more with the times*:

- **“TWITTERING” FOR GOD!**

The theme of our conference was *God's radical hospitality*—how we must learn to open the doors that God never asked us to close. Amongst those doors is the barrier to gay and lesbian people:

- **MANITOU BECOMES AFFIRMING** (or—to put it even more bluntly with a “*Toronto Sun*” or “*News of the World*” tabloid-style headline:)
- **UNITED CHURCHES GO GAY!**

My favourite headlines are the ones your about to see. Because when you enable peoples' imaginations, you don't know what will happen, or where they'll go! And your Brothers and Sisters in Christ are dreaming big!

- **LOCAL UNITED CHURCH SO WELCOMING—NEEDS TO EXPAND DUE TO OVERCROWDING!**
- **CAMP LORRAIN BECOMES SPIRITUAL CENTRE OF NORTH!**
- **SHANNEN'S DREAM REALIZED** (Shannen's Dream is the dream of the late Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat—who dreamed that all First Nations children would have healthy, well-staffed schools in which to learn and grow)
- **UNITED CHURCH EMBRACES ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY** (A fascinating *theological* headline. And so is the next one:)
- **UNITED CHURCH ORDAINS ALL MEMBERS** (Imagine that—a room full of Reverends! Makes me shudder just to think about it!)

And finally a number of the headlines deal with the youth we find in our church. Trinity is blessed with some inspired youth—but it is not so for all our churches. But we dream. And dreaming is the first step towards action, and change!

- **YOUTH OUTNUMBER ADULTS AT MANITOU CONFERENCE**
- **UNITED CHURCH ELECTS 18 YEAR OLD MODERATOR** (and, my absolute favourite of them all:)

- **HOCKEY GAME CANCELLED FOR SUNDAY MORNING: “Children Need to be in Sunday School” Parents Say**

*Wow! We are dreaming!* And it may be a lot more than two years before we see these dreams realized. But as in the Bible, it is with dreams and visions that God’s Spirit begins to move among God’s people.

“**The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers.**” That’s true. And *the church will not die*—but it will change form over time, *as it always has*. And it will live up to its calling as a strong rock—as an anvil against which we are grounded, and shaped, and re-made.

There’s one more aspect about the Anvil that we should recognize.

- **SLIDE: ANVIL With WILE E. COYOTE**

The anvil is a symbol of something else. In the cartoons, the anvil is this overwhelming symbol of power and strength. And it is a power and strength that often humbles people who would otherwise be the bully, who would be self-righteous or arrogant.

- **SLIDE: ANVIL with BULL and BUGS BUNNY**

In the cartoons, there is often a character who needs their come-uppance. Whose blindness and foolishness can only be corrected by the immobility of an Anvil.

- **SLIDE: ANVIL with BUGS BUNNY and DAFFY DUCK**

“The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers.” And it is the type of Anvil that also reminds us that we are vulnerable to being wrong, that we are susceptible to becoming irrelevant, that we are subject to the forces of gravity as much as anyone or anything else.

- **SLIDE: ANVIL WITH BUGS, DESERT** (also, let’s not take ourselves too seriously!)

Friends—don’t forget the anvil—and now let’s sing a hymn which reminds us that the church is so much more than a building, or a book, or a set of beliefs!

- **SLIDE: REAL ANVIL**

*Let’s sing a hymn about the true nature of the church—not only how it is the anvil on which much is forged, but about the fire which the church is meant to encourage:*

**HYMN: “As a Fire is Meant for Burning” (VU 578)**

**OR (VU 639) “One More Step” OR “Spirit of the Living God” (VU 376)**