

Article found at:

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/Religion/560992.html>

## **A vision for the future**

With costs up and numbers down, United church compiles strengths to come up with a positive plan

By LOIS LEGGE Features Writer

It's been part of Halifax's spiritual community for more than 80 years.

Now the congregation of St. John's United Church is in the middle of some intensive soul-searching about its future, although the church's full time minister, Rev. Linda Yates, isn't ready to say whether that means closing its doors for good.

The once robust, 1,000-strong congregation of the 1950s and '60s has dwindled to an average of 150-200 each Sunday still an "excellent" number, says Ms. Yates. But because of the size of the church at the corner of Windsor and Willow streets, that leaves plenty of empty pews.

The size of the church's deficit is also an issue, she says, noting it runs on an annual shortfall while facing huge oil bills to heat an old building in need of many repairs.

All of these issues led the church, at its annual meeting about a year ago, to form a so-called Futuring Team.

But instead of directly asking should we stay or should we go, the team has been getting to know congregation members and the church's role in the community better. It's an approach Yates believes will make for a much smoother transition when the parishioners eventually get down to deciding between a host of options everything from closing, to making the necessary repairs, to sharing its church with another congregation.

"Everything's on the table," she says.

But before the table is even filled, the Futuring Team has been taking what Yates calls the "appreciative inquiry" approach to its review, examining its strengths within and outside its doors.

"What's different about the appreciative inquiry and the positive model of looking at churches is instead of wringing our hands and fearfully looking at the deficit and saying, "Oh my God, when are we going to close the doors," this says. . . , "Let's look at who God calls us to be and trust and celebrate who we are and move forward in faith," and it's been amazing how this has regenerated, re-energized the church. Attendance is up, everything is up."

So far the team of volunteers has interviewed more than 100 parishioners, trying to find out, as Yates puts it "what were the best things about our congregation, what did we do well, what made people feel alive when they participated in worship at St. John's, (or) when we do social justice work."

The purpose is "to find out the strengths of the community and to get people in a framework where instead of being fearful they could look at their community and trust in the strengths of the community and also trust in God." The church also wants to know how its members like to worship, through a method of research known as theological worlds.

"There are different ways of looking at God and church and the sacred and to learn to not just tolerate theological diversity but to appreciate it and to accept it as necessary in congregations that what one person understands as being a sacred aspect to the service, another person might understand as being unnecessary."

The team will eventually put all of its information in reports and present them to the congregation, which will ultimately decide its own future.

One big decision, she says, may have to be made as early as June "but I'm not at liberty to talk about that."

Whatever happens, Yates is hopeful the lengthy, in-depth review will be preferable to, and more "peaceful" than, just laying out all the facts and making a quick decision.

"All that ends up happening (in that case) is everybody ends up blaming and fighting with each other about what the solution is whereas if you take a real strong, hard look at who you are and what you're doing and where you want to go, everything else falls into place . . . ."

"We can argue about bricks forever and we have argued about bricks forever," she adds with a laugh, "And people leave and they get upset and they really get into a place where they become distant from church and in some ways from God because they've been so upset about the argument about the bricks, whereas if we look at the real important thing which is what is our vision and who is God calling us to be, then the decisions become easier."

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