

**Sermon – Knox United Church (Lower Sackville)**  
**October 28, 2018**  
**Bob Richards**

Good morning (thank you Don). It is a privilege to be worshipping with you this beautiful Fall morning.

I attend Kanata United Church in Ottawa and you know what? Kanata United is aging, shrinking in numbers and always concerned about finances. Does any of that sound familiar to you?

All mainstream churches in Canada are in dramatic decline, but we are beginning to understand why and are developing means to renew ourselves.

EDGE – United Church Network for:

- New Ministry Development
- Ministry Renewal
  - Missional Renewal
  - Property Renewal



(SLIDE) Your Church has engaged EDGE to help you renew your ministry. EDGE is the United Church's network for new ministry development and ministry renewal and is one of the leading such organizations in North America. Created only five years ago, EDGE helps start new ministries and renew existing ones.

Current United Church membership is less than ½ of what it was in the 1960's. For over 50 years United Church members have been walking away from the church and they have not been replaced by new people walking in the front door.

United Church of Canada

- 1959 - opened 4 new congregations every week
- Now - closes 1 church every week



(SLIDE) It is hard to believe, but in 1959 the United Church opened four new congregations every week – we now close 1 church every week. All of the mainstream protestant churches in Canada have declined steadily for over 50 years, starting in 1964. The United Church peaked in 1964, the Anglicans, 1964, the Presbyterians 1964, and the Lutherans?, 1964. Why 1964? In 1964 the first baby boomers started to leave home for work or to go to university. At the same time, many mothers took this as an opportunity to re-enter the labour force. Both of these greatly impacted family dynamics and the time available for families to be together

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This is one way society has changed significantly. Society has also changed deep down; societal values have dramatically changed.

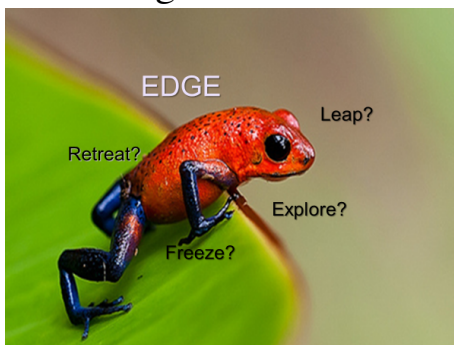
- Duty, Loyalty & Commitment



- Freedom, Choice, Relationship & Connection

(SLIDE) Where before the leading values were, Duty, Loyalty and Commitment; they are now Freedom, Choice, Relationship and Connection. One set is not better than the other, it is just what is. It is important that the decline at Knox is not your fault. What churches need to do, is understand that this is not an aberration, the world has changed and responding as we have in the past will not produce different results.

So, what does EDGE stand for? It is not an acronym; the letters do not stand for something.



(SLIDE) Rather it is based on the observation that we are on the EDGE of a new day and we can Freeze, Explore, Retreat or Leap.

Your Property Redevelopment Team asked me to help them evaluate your current situation, what are your challenges, what are your blessings and how can you respond to these. This is a critical first step, only by understanding your current situation can you make fact-based decisions, on whether renewal is needed.

Knox United challenges:

- declining attendance
- new members not being attracted
- ageing members & volunteers & donors
- deficit budgets
- costs growing faster than income



(SLIDE) Average attendance at worship at Knox has declined by 22% over the last 5 years. The number of

worship at Knox has declined by 22% over the last 5 years. The number of households that you serve has declined by 25% over the last 4 years. This reduces givings and the number who can provide volunteer support at a time that the congregation is ageing and volunteers are losing energy. Over the last five years you have had four year-end deficits which total to \$35 thousand.

You budgeted a deficit of an additional \$45 thousand for this year. Fortunately, this has been greatly reduced and you will likely have a surplus.

These financial results are the result of expenditures increasing faster than income. Over the last 5 years income increased by 8%, whereas expenditures increased by 19%. On a more positive note, givings have remained fairly constant over the last 5 years. However, 76% of your givings come from those over 60 years of age, and 22% come from those over 75. The impact of ageing donors moving into care facilities or passing away, poses a significant financial risk.

Your Financial Review Committee prepared a long-term forecast that showed your trust funds being exhausted in the period 2020 to 2022. Fortunately, more recent data shows a much-improved situation. However, if expenditures continue to grow faster than income the long-term outcome will be unchanged.

By now you must be wondering, who invited this guy. My role is not to sugar coat this situation; it is to help you see clearly what you are facing and to provide hope that revitalization is possible.



(SLIDE) Our scripture reading this morning from Luke chapter 11, opens with “No one lights a lamp and hides it. No one puts it under a bowl.” Literally, this was true. Oil for lamps in the first century was incredibly expensive, a luxury for most. So, it makes sense that if you had your lamp burning, you were doing so for a purpose and you would not put it under a bowl.

Metaphorically, it is another matter. I have worked with about 60 congregations and I continually see congregations, including my own, hiding their lamp under a bowl and unaware that they are doing so. They are all doing good works and have developed close faith communities. However, in our changed world I believe we have lost our sense of purpose. It is hard to shine when we are

believe we have lost our sense of purpose. It is hard to shine when we are worried whether our church will survive much longer. Finances are declining, we are losing members and our buildings, built for a different time, have become a burden. Many of us are uncomfortable talking about our faith in our church, let alone outside of it. We are afraid that our friends will think we are judgemental, bible thumping, fundamentalists. So let's turn on the lamp but keep the light low. **[turn light on]**

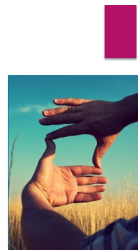
Is this a good defence, or is this just a fall-back position because we don't know what a loving offence, would look like in our very secular and multi-faith world.

In Luke we are told that no one will light a lamp and hide it, rather they put the lamp on its stand. Then those who come in can see the light.

How can you put Knox United's lamp on a stand?

Knox United blessings:

- large congregation
- base of children, youth & families
- \$190 thousand of investments
- valuable property
- proactive leaders



**(SLIDE)** Let's start by confirming some of your blessings. You have a large congregation. With an average attendance at worship of 150, Knox is likely within the top 10% of United Churches for attendance. This means you have a lot of human resources to call upon, even if some are ageing and feeling tired. Most congregation would be very envious of this. Moreover, you have a Sunday School, a youth group, a teen choir and about 30 young families in the congregation. Not big in numbers but a base that can be built upon by better understanding their needs and those families not attending. Children and youth are important, but families are more important. From families come children and youth and when they leave to go off to school, the parents will remain if they have been actively engaged in the life of the church. **[maybe the light is brighter]**

Knox has about \$190 thousand dollars in unrestricted investments. That means you can use them as you please, not to squander but to steward, such as buying more oil for your lamps, seed money for new ministries. You also have a potentially valuable property. Your property was identified in an evaluation of all United Church property across Canada as being one of 250 strategic properties. This does not mean these are properties that General Council should take over, which they can't, but rather if the congregation is considering redevelopment. the United Church should provide sufficient resources and

redemption, the United Church should provide sufficient resources and expertise to maximize the missional value of the property, as defined by and decided by the congregation. This may not be the super lottery, but it is a substantial blessing. You will hear more about this from the Property Redevelopment Team at the congregation meeting after worship and you will be asked for approval to explore what this opportunity could mean to Knox United.

Maybe the greatest blessing that I observed in preparing my review, is that you are being proactive. You should be very proud and thankful your leaders are responding to your challenges. As I said earlier, the first critical step was taking a multi-year assessment of your financial and other resources. This was undertaken by the Financial Review Committee and the Property Redevelopment Team with my assistance. The Revitalization Committee has been seeking ways to grow the congregation and have concluded that revitalization is not a destination, it is an ongoing journey. The Congregational Open Conversation that was held in January, collected numerous renewal ideas from you which will provide a rich resource for planning your future.

You can look at your situation through lenses of scarcity or lenses of abundance.

You are facing real challenges that most United Church congregations are facing. You are also blessed with a large congregation, a good base of children, youth and families, financial reserves, a valuable property and proactive leaders.  
**[third light]**

I believe the biggest challenge facing the United Church and the other mainstream protestant denominations, is that we don't know how to communicate our Good News, shine our light, in a way that others can hear and see it.

How to communicate our Good News, shine our light, in a way that others can hear and see it, and we theirs?



**(SLIDE)** This is a challenge that I recommend that you discern, pray and talk about. And in considering your property redevelopment opportunities ask yourselves, how will these help us shine our light, how will these help us to remove the lamp shade, so your neighbours can see your light and you can see theirs.

The first step in doing so, if you can, stay for lunch and the congregation meeting.



## Sunday Worship

(SLIDE) And on the seventh day we rest. We come back to our sanctuary to share how we have tried to shine our light, how we may have failed, how we have succeeded. We celebrate our accomplishments and lament our disappointments. We compare our experiences together and to the Biblical witness. We ask the Spirit for further guidance through prayer. We get refreshed and reenergized in worship, and in fellowship, and then we go forth once again. Amen.

Our next hymn is We Are Pilgrims On a Journey – you can find it in Voices United number 595