

# MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, JUNE 1 2025

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## "Hope and Possibilities"

Based on Acts 27

Paul was in prison. He was to be transported to Rome to await trial, and likely, a very public execution. It was late in the season for travel, but I suspect there was a promotion or a sac of gold to the centurion who could bring Paul to Rome in one piece. And no one wanted to be stuck in a backwater outpost with little in the way of excitement for the winter season. So, they filled the boat with supplies, soldiers, and the prized payload of prisoners and headed for Rome.

Trouble soon arrived. The stormy season came and stayed. One problem after the other.

- They lost their bearings.
- The wind pushed them into unfamiliar waters.
- In panic the lifeboats were let go.

For fourteen days they moved back and forth on the vast waters with no relief, death seemed certain.

Then the cry came. It appeared land was near. Paul gathered everyone together.

- They ate a meal.
- They prayed.
- Then they threw the rest of the food overboard (no where left to go but forward).
- They hoisted the sail and made for the horizon in the distance.

Yet more trouble. Rocks along the shore pounded the boat into twigs. So close to shore, and yet again, death seemed certain.

Paul raised his voice and said, "I promise you, none of you will die. God has told me so. If you can swim, swim. If you can't swim, grab something to hold on to. But go. Go now."

One by one, sailors and prisoners alike jumped. Every single one of them made it to the beach safely, just as Paul had said, but not one of them knew where they were.

Today, our General Assembly will open, celebrating 150 years of Presbyterian heritage in Canada. The church came over to the new world from Scotland with the waves of immigrants (think about that for a minute considering today's political climate).

They settled first in the Maritimes, and later to Lower Canada, in search of land,

hope, and possibilities. The Scots brought their way of being church with them and is the root of our polity and our way of worship still today.

There have been some storms along the way. In 1925, most Presbyterians amalgamated with other Congregationalist and Methodist churches to become the United Church of Canada. You and I are part of the remnant, to use an Old Testament word, part of the group that decided at the last minute not to merge with the others. That is why we are a much smaller church today than we used to be.

Of course, we have braced and survived, and dare I say it, thrived through other 'storms' over the years:

- Whether divorced individuals could be allowed in the pulpit,
- Whether women should be allowed in the pulpit,
- Whether members of the LGBTQi community should be allowed in the pulpit.

Some jumped into these issues and swam with them, while others held on to a piece of wood and drifted along with the waves. But we all made it to shore safely. We're still here.

A lot has changed since the church began here in Canada. The polity and policies of the church were created in those early days, to reflect the church of that time. But in case you missed it, it's not 1875 anymore.

In 1875 the church was growing quickly, expanding west as it was explored and settled, as Canada herself became a nation. There was little thought about how to manage situations where churches had to close, only on how quickly they could be built to serve the growing population of our country. Today we are closing churches faster than we are building them. Many need to use their church building in different ways to keep the doors open.

In 1875 the church was the central part of any community. Think about where most of the original church buildings were here in Vernon when the city started. They were all in the downtown core, beside the banks and the court house. The issues of the day in society were framed by church's opinion on the subject. Today, society defines the terms of social issues, and churches must decide whether they are going to get on board or not.

In 1875 most people went to church, a church. But

churches tended to stay in their own corner. The idea of working cooperatively or sharing leadership in ministry with other denominations would never have been discussed. Today, many communities are asking our church offices to help them find ways to keep one community church alive. Notice I said, 'community church' and not necessarily, just a 'presbyterian church.'

In 1875 technology was limited. Horse and buggy, or maybe the telegraph. Long wait times between debates was required so that the mail service could reach the far corners of our country. Everything was written out by hand. Today, we make use of many of the communication tools that came into focus during COVID to quickly gather people together when business needs to be addressed.

In 1875 the clergy were king, small k. (and yes 'kings' because 'queens' were not yet allowed). Their voice carried the day, right or wrong. Lay leadership, which has always been the backbone of Christian witness was rarely given the authority to act on their own without the supervision of clergy. Today, there are not enough clergy to fill the pulpits, let alone supervise. There's not enough money to pay for clergy in hundreds of pulpits but there remains in these churches, a

passion by the lay people and pew sitters, to keep the church alive.

And this is the one that pains me...

In 1875 there was great debate amongst colleagues in the courts of the church, but there was a respect by all, for The Word, the polity of the church (even flawed) and of each other. Today, I am sad to report, this respect is harder to find. And I'm just not sure what to say about that.

There is a storm brewing. It has been brewing for some time. There have been other documents and think tanks on this before. Today, there is a sense of urgency by many that we need to re-think the church of 1875 and re-frame the polity and the policies to encourage the church as it moves forward, so that there will be a church moving forward that makes sense for the next 150 years.

And so, the Hope and Possibilities document. The beauty of this document is not that it suggests we throw out the baby and the bath water today, but opens a window to the possibilities of church growth and reignited witness if we allow ourselves to redesign our polity and our policies based on our present reality.

Could we have a team that thinks about helping churches

find new uses for their buildings before we get to the sad moment when it must be closed. Can we help congregations work with other churches in their community and figure out ways to worship together, share one building instead of three or four? Can we use the money from the churches that are sold, as seed money for the new community church or community center that is desired by the people?

Can we find ways to encourage and share lay leaders, give them what they need so they can lead effectively, and help congregations embrace one another by taking turns leading worship and preaching the Word of God?

Can we shake off our pride thinking that the world has to listen to us and listen better to the world, and what they need from our church. Then, can we be brave and do that thing, even if it doesn't look like church. Can we see God at work, when only a small part of what we are doing now is worship on Sunday morning?

These ideas will require major changes to our Church Polity and our Policies. This will be a struggle for many. It will require everyone from national office to the pews right here at Knox to keep an open mind and be willing to bend. If you can get on board, then jump in and swim. If

you're not sure, then grab a piece of wood and float alongside.

I can tell you, that quietly in communities all across Canada, these creative changes are already happening. Even though our church is in the process of a major storm, the church is already finding dry land, and rebuilding again. And some of that is happening right here at Knox.

- We share our worship space with another church.
- We allow weddings in our church where I am not presiding.
- We shared our love and hospitality to the Kitmat church when they closed, until such time as they found new church homes.
- We open our doors to renters and recitals and concerts and construction crews.
- Three of our Elders, lay leaders, are now commissioned to serve communion.

Fifty years ago, most of these things would never have happened or been allowed. When things were getting rough, Paul said to the crew and the prisoners alike, "Stay with the boat and I promise you, no one will be lost."

I choose to stay with the boat. Some ideas, I will willingly jump in and swim.

Other ideas, I choose to grab something to hold on to and float for a while. Storms will come and storms will go. But I choose to stay with the boat. And the unfamiliar shore we are headed for? I chose to explore it. I hope you will too.

Amen.