Transformative Conversion in a Canadian Rural Anglican Congregation:
Challenges and Response
A Case Study on
St. John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe, Ontario

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Wycliffe College and the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry awarded by
Wycliffe College and the University of Toronto

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Abstract

This is a case study of John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe, its congregation and their priest. The conclusion suggests that a ministry of presence approach to rural congregational ministry has been, unsuspectedly, a contributing factor in their decline, a suggestion supported by the empirical evidence of a learning theory known as a perspective change which deems a disorientating dilemma or upset is required to prepare for a perspective change like transformative conversion, the supreme calling of the church.

A basic introduction to transformational learning is laid out and gives a description of what is meant by a ministry of presence. Six unexpected events, following priestly prayer in response to the congregation’s vision for an addition, are cited and the responses compared.

The case study offers a thick, contextual description of St. John’s Ravenscliffe: geographically, culturally, ecclesiastically and historically and context for the priest’s spiritual, learning experience cited from her journals.

The intent and purpose of the methodology is set out, followed by the responses to a seven question questionnaire which gathers the experience of the congregation of the new life that appears to be springing up at St. John’s. A qualitative, narrative analysis and a quantitative language analysis are applied to the small sampling of data drawn from the questionnaires as a counter to the conflict of interest the writer found herself in as both the priest and the researcher. The qualitative analysis
reveals a pastoral, non-regenerative Christendom- congregation while the quantitative analysis shows change, but not new spiritual life. The results were surprising, for the new life that seemed so apparent to the priest, evidenced by her own spiritual perspective change and through the outward changes in the building and the attitude of the surrounding community, did not seem to be experienced by the congregation through the responses given, so this required more reflection on my mistakes in leadership, my recommendations for ongoing self reflection, the necessity of mentoring and of casting a vision. There is much further study required on the relationship of spiritual, conversional transformation and the embedded nature of learning and perspective change.
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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

The small rural Anglican congregations and their churches that I served have an evangelical, regenerative role to play in the post-Christendom increasingly secular Canadian countryside. Their crucial role will never be realized until the dominant pastoral approach to ministry that permeates these rural landscapes is first exposed for its evangelical ineffectiveness and then replaced with a transformative, life-releasing method for faith-based congregation vitality, sustainability and health. The culprit is a ministry of presence, more a pervasive attitude and approach to ministry than a clearly defined method. For late-stage-Christendom-formed churches, their faith communities, and their leadership to unlearn and then relearn the ancient biblical event of transformative conversion, it will take an awakening upset that causes a questioning and rethinking of Christendom’s presenting assumptions. When this upset is positively reframed through the experience of Jesus’ cross and resurrection, it can serve as the catalyst for transformative conversion.

Anglican priests (ministers) are educated, spiritually mature and pastorally capable. In order for us to resist the pastoral urge of a ministry of presence to soothe upset, we will need a compelling and well-reasoned rationale. Within the discipline of educational theory there is a transformative learning theory that provides the required incentive to make a pastoral change in shepherding our flock. It offers a well-researched, well-documented rationale for the
necessity of upset in changing long-held internalized perspectives and beliefs that have ceased to be productive. The theory offers empirical evidence to explain the evangelical ineffectiveness of a ministry of presence. The theory also provides a practical framework for developing an alternative but still pastoral approach for a highly relational ministry context as rural ministry, but this reflective mentoring framework is not being developed in this thesis, only acknowledged.

1.2 Thesis Statement

Rural Anglican congregations in decline are trapped by their long-standing well-intentioned pastorally-driven comforting ministry of presence, which will only be surrendered when those who are rationally and theologically invested in that ministry are reflectively awakened to the necessity of Spirit-led change and upset for new life. Phase one in transformational learning can serve as the rationale needed to stimulate such reflection, the Scriptures providing the mandate.

1.3 Outline

The present chapter introduces this thesis and lays out the background information for the study. Chapter 2 introduces the transformational learning theory. The introduction begins with its founder, Jack Mezirow, and his considerable accomplishments. Specific roles of a diocese, priest, congregation and parishioners in a perspective change are noted, each having the capacity to serve as a disorientating dilemma for the other. This section is followed by the
limitations of transformative learning, particularly as they relate to the Church, and my own assumptions. A Christian perspective of transformative conversation is discussed.

Chapter 3 presents a definition of a ministry of presence, the central approach in rural ministry, and looks at its limitations as a life-giving ministry approach. This chapter lays a foundation for the perspective of ministry that I held before this study. A ministry of presence comes back into focus in the final chapter when I analyse how my perspective of ministry has been impacted and shaped by this study.

Chapter 4 describes the background of the case study of St. John the Baptist Anglican Church (“St. John’s”). Particularly, the community of this rural Muskoka congregation that I ministered and lived in is described in terms of geography, government, ecclesiastical makeup and history. Collectively these landscapes reveal the conditions that set the stage for the learning reported in this thesis to take place. Following a description of the community are comments regarding my personal ministry context and spiritual journey.

Chapter 5 recounts six events that occurred in connection with St. John’s that had the potential to serve as powerful, disorientating dilemmas for myself and the congregation. They were significant, unexpected and unsolicited events at St. John’s. These events formed the catalyst for this dissertation. My hypothesis was that these events served as disorientating dilemmas, although my research suggests that while these events had a profound impact on me, the congregation seemed indifferent to them.
Chapter 6 presents the methodology of the action in ministry. My purpose is to affirm the new life that I believe is happening at St. John’s. My intent is to find confirmation of this new life. The chapter discusses the questionnaire and reveals the limitations in the research. The assumptions I unconsciously brought to the study are explored.

Chapter 7 presents the case study research. The individual responses to a narrative analysis of the questionnaires and a language analysis of the same are presented. The narrative offers a glimpse into the inner life of the congregation, while the language analysis offers more objective, measurable conclusions. The responses were reflected upon for their quality and what this insight might add to the conclusions being drawn.

Chapter 8 takes the reader to the heart of the case study: the conclusions. The core problem in St. John’s is identified as how the parishioners’ cultural-based ill-formed assumptions distort and even blind them to the tangible reality of God’s presence with them. This phenomenon is reflected upon with the ultimate conclusion of what all this means for the effective transmission of the gospel. The outcomes of the research are expressed in the shadow of the question as to the appropriateness of using an anthropocentric learning theory to guide and form Christ’s church and people.

The perspective is taken that a theology of the cross is at work in the challenges that now and inevitably will face the church, creating opportunities for trusting surrender, which integrates a disorientating dilemma into the nature life and outcome of the church. The benefit of an educational theory to the church begins to emerge in this research, and a reflective method
for mentoring a congregation begins to emerge as a viable alternative to a ministry of presence that is unable to discern a healthy ministry environment. The conundrum I presented in my comprehensive exams is revisited, with the difficult but necessary choice from Deuteronomy 30:19 serving as the catalytic disorientating dilemma when decline has become the assumed norm. The ability of lived experience to both bear witness to theological themes and correct false ones helps us to understand more completely the mystery of the transmission of the gospel.

Finally, the summary draws open the wide-angle lens of the thesis to reveal the role a disorientating dilemma needs to play in developing the inner devotion of Anglican congregations that still adhere to many of the assumptions of Christendom. It acknowledges that this personal paradigm shift that awaits will be difficult and painful but necessary for new life. Several of the current practices of Anglicanism are noted as being barriers to change that leave Anglicans particularly vulnerable to the long-held but distorted Christendom assumptions, with one of these barriers being a ministry of presence. My amen that ends the paper is a prayer that all that I have learned will be of some small benefit to the people of God who pass my way.

1.4 Scholarly Background

Four professors profoundly influenced my learning since 2007, and three educationalists introduced and guided my thinking in transformational learning. Professor Ephraim Radner from Wycliffe College rekindled my passion of faith, reminiscent of the early Church.
utilizing the John Van Engen’s text *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*. Professor Fensham from Knox College shifted my mind to the effects of the colonial missionary movements in Ravenscliffe in the late 1800s by calling upon David Bosch’s seminal text *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Professor Andrew Irvine of Knox College encouraged me to enter this Doctor of Ministry program. In his course on rural ministry, I was introduced to the seminal work of Robert Redpath on folk societies and developed a language analysis approach for analyzing data drawn from minute samples. Professor Irvine also introduced me to the world of transformative learning and specifically to Jack Mezirow’s work on transformative perspective change. Finally, there is Professor Song, also from Knox College, who introduced me to the writing of Maria Harris in *Teaching & Religious Imagination: An Essay in Theology of Teaching*. These seeds unexpectedly migrated into the world of an educational theory known as transformative perspective change.

This dissertation is anchored on the educationalist Jack Mezirow’s earliest work published in 1978 on perspective transformation in the *Journal of Adult Education*. The insights of two Canadian educators, Elizabeth Lange and Andrew Kitchenham, provided me with the needed basis for understanding transformational learning.

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Professor Lange earned her PhD in international/intercultural adult education from the University of Alberta and is now an associate professor in the Department of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and the associate editor of the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*. One of Professor Lange’s research interests is in the study of Atlantic rural community sustainability. Dr. Kitchenham is the chair of the School of Learning at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, British Columbia, with a special interest in e-learning, and Laura Gogia is a graduate fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond with a special interest in connected learning experience.

Lange and Kitchenham bring Canadian, rural, religious and secular perspectives to their writing so offered a relevant and balanced perspective to my inquiry into transformative learning in a rural setting. Gogia is a young technologically engaged American student who is on the cutting edge of postmodern developments in transformational learning.

The two key articles I draw heavily upon are Lange’s “Interrogating Transformative Learning: Canadian Contribution” and Kitchenham’s “The Evolution of Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory.” Laura Gogia allowed me a glimpse into the strains in the discipline as it transitions into a postmodern context. Gogia’s “Transformative Learning

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Theory: How Mezirow Created a Living Seminal Work Through Dialogue”\textsuperscript{10} serves as connecting material to future directions in transformative learning.

These articles create a context to understand transformative learning. The authors are sufficiently published and respected in the current field to serve as entry points for further inquiry into transformational learning that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I also want to acknowledge all those who have one way or another contributed to me finding a response to a theological contradiction that took me to seminary in the first place, which found its focus in a comprehensive twofold question: how did the decline in rural ministry happen, and what can be done about it? Its partial answer is explored in this case study of St. John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe, Ontario.

1.5 My Mission: Called to a Congregation in Decline

The following event launched me into an over-a-decade long comprehensive inquiry into how the decline at St. John’s came about and what could be done about it. It was a Saturday, early in January of 2002. The thermometer refused to rise above minus 25 degrees, and it had snowed for days. I stood at the bottom of the snow-filled driveway of St. John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe. My approach to the church was barred by a black gate that was locked and frozen shut. There was not a person in sight. From this vantage point I saw a scattering of very old deteriorating tombstones in the churchyard. Up on the knoll to the left

of the sagging pioneer church stood a dilapidated old outhouse. Death was everywhere. Cold. Frozen. Motionless. An emptied place.

Intruding on this reality was the faintest whisper of hope from a handful of very elderly faithful parishioners who had written in their parish profile, “If we don’t have a hall, we will die.” I stood in this inert place that afternoon in 2002 with an impossible vision in my hand, a dilapidated outhouse before me and God’s unqualified call to choose life in my heart. The realities were colliding within me like the great logjams on the Muskoka lakes during the spring thaws of the pioneering 1800s. I knew I would say yes to this call, with an unconditional conviction that God was here and calling, but without the benefit of having a clue as to where or how to begin. It was a moment of surrendering and vulnerable trust. God would lead me, I hoped.

That cold January night I wrote in my journal of the adrenaline rush I felt standing on the threshold of this sacred challenge of new beginning—God’s project, not mine—and the grip of paralyzing fear I felt. I concluded my journaling with “The life of the Spirit is stirring me and I have no idea where all this is going to lead, but I’m ready to follow in obedience, bewildered though I am” (January 4, 2002).

### 1.6 Conclusion

In Acts 17:24–28, Paul preaches,

> “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And God is not served by human hands, as if God needed anything. Rather, God himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one, God made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out and find him,
though God is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are God’s offspring.’” (NIV)

Paul believed that humans could search and be found by God. I believe one way we can be found by God is through transformational learning. As such, transformational learning is an integral part of God’s created order. The ability to adapt and change in thought, word and deed is the outward sign of one who is learning. Learning is still one of God’s mysteries, an innate gift that enables people, God’s people, to navigate new circumstances without losing the heart of the gospel’s message. Transformational learning is one more movement in grasping the mystery of the learning capacity God designed in us for his purpose. My hope is that this thesis brings the reader closer to understanding the positive conversional role that particularly the first stage of Jack Mezirow’s transformative theory can play in reversing the primacy of an ineffective ministry of presence in declining rural congregations.
Chapter 2

Transformational Learning Theory

2.1 Transformative Learning

Jack Mezirow is the founder of transformational learning. In 1991 he defined transformational learning as a model of adult learning that calls upon “a reflective process of problem solving in progressively wider contexts.”¹

Transformational learning theory seeks to overcome limited, distorted or arbitrarily selected perceptions through reflection on assumptions that formerly have been accepted uncritically. Mezirow believes critical reflection and self-reflection is part of the development in adulthood.²

This reflective process with its numerous phases was observed in 1978 when Mezirow completed his national qualitative study of women returning to college after a hiatus. He was looking for the factors that contributed to their success. He recognized that some had experienced a perspective change that redefined who they were. Mezirow published his findings in the 1978 Journal of Adult Education in an article titled “Perspective Transformation.” The ten original phases Mezirow observed have been developed into a worldwide recognized transformational learning model in the field of adult education.

Mezirow understood adults to be caught in their own histories, in their unexamined cultural, psychological and childhood assumptions that have influenced the way they see themselves,

² Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, 5.
their relationships and the way they pattern their lives. Breaking out of these habitual patterns of behaviour and attitudes takes reflection, which is a learning process called transformative perspective change.

The goal of transformative change is to assist adults to “become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and to advance developmentally by moving towards meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative of experience.”

Such a change is initiated by a disorientating dilemma. This is an event, a thought or a feeling that triggers, “shakes up” or otherwise challenges a person’s presuppositions. It creates the need for reflection on attitudes, assumptions, behaviours and experiences of continuity that are no longer adequate, so that a new, larger assumption can be found.

In a perspective change the person moves away from uncritical organic ideas and relationships and moves towards greater understanding in their relationships with others, institutions and society. The outcome of such a change is that the person becomes more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of experience. Changes in one’s self-understanding is also common when a perspective change has been navigated.

When a 77-year-old parishioner was praised for his faithful Sunday attendance, he said if he didn’t come to church his grandma would be boxing his ears. His tone indicated that he

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3 Mezirow, “Perspective Transformation,” 100.
4 Mezirow, Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, 225.
wasn’t side-stepping an uncomfortable compliment. His grandmother had died more than 40 years earlier, yet each Sunday morning this elderly, otherwise well-adjusted man was re-enacting a habitual behaviour from an unreflected-upon fear of reprisals for being bad. It was illogical. The habitual behaviour and its motivation formed a frame of reference that was real and well integrated and needed to be changed. We are, as Mezirow said, trapped in our history until it is reflected upon.

Mezirow believes reflection to be solely a rational process. By 1988 Robert Boyd and Gordon Myers, drawing on the insights of Carl Jung, propounded that discernment (with its capacity for receptivity, recognition of authenticity and the capacity to grieve) is the complement leading to “personal illumination, gained by putting things together and seeing them in their relational wholeness and a union between ourselves and our world.”

Following this line of inquiry offers a complementary but alternative approach to the transformational learning presented by Mezirow. For Mezirow rationality is central; for Boyd and Myers it is the self.

In 1999 Edward O’Sullivan, the founder of the Transformational Learning Centre housed at the Ontario Institute for Educational Studies at the University of Toronto (O.I. E.S.), defined transformational learning as

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5 Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 166.
The expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of the self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises.\(^7\)

In O’Sullivan’s 2002 text *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, the definition reveals the ever-widening reach and influence of transformational learnings.

Transformational learning involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-location; our relationship with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.\(^8\)

Theories that influenced Mezirow’s learning theory have all had positive influence on the Christian experience: Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory,\(^9\) Paulo Freire’s theory of conscientization\(^10\) and educational theorist Jurgen Habermas’s identification in 1971 of three domains of learning: instrumental, communicative and emancipatory.\(^11\)

Professor Kenneth Ross sought to draw from Kuhn’s paradigm theory a model for Christian conversion in the modern world.\(^12\) Freire’s work in liberation theology and the subsequent development of the Canadian Ecumenical Coalitions for Social Justice have left lasting

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\(^8\) O’Sullivan, eds., *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, 11.


footprints in the ecumenical coalitions’ dedication to the practice of Christian transformative development education.\textsuperscript{13} And the educational contribution of Habermas on social theory have had a sweeping influence on society as a whole, not merely one aspect of it.\textsuperscript{14}

After 40 years Mezirow’s transformational learning theory on perspective change remains central to the adult educational world scene, yet it appears to have had little conscious influence in Anglican seminaries or on congregational development.

2.1.1 A Disorientating Dilemma

Mezirow’s learning theory describes the attitudinal movement involved in a structural reorganization of the way people perceive themselves, their relationships and their presenting circumstances. This shift is initiated by a disorientating dilemma, an event that triggers the adult to rethink what they previously had thought to be true.

For example, people may understand themselves to be open-minded and theologically liberal about woman’s ordination but state “just not in my congregation.” The uncomfortable contradiction may lie happily unresolved in a person until the disconnect is identified by another person, when it creates an inner sense of embarrassing confusion, a disease that requires resolution until one’s sense of integrity is restored. The contradiction may also cause


conflict with another person, whose audible truth-telling observation casts doubt on the person’s integrity.

The clash of assumptions constitutes a disorientating dilemma and initiates a perspective change. It is the first stage in the learning process, and it is necessary for a perspective change to occur. A disorientating dilemma challenges a person’s current assumptions and beliefs to such a degree that their present understanding becomes inadequate for making sense of or finding meaning in the event or situation that has happened.

My 90-year-old aunt was unable to wrap her head around Neil Armstrong’s walk on the moon. The event collided with her worldview of what was possible. She died believing the event was a hoax, without benefit of a perspective change that would have enlarged her ability to understand the wonder of human technological and scientific advancement. She chose the security of her belief, false though it was, over the risk she would have had to take to explore this new understanding.

Our assumptions are the frames of reference we have uncritically absorbed and through which meaning is construed and all learning takes place.\(^{15}\) By way of example, a while ago a seminary principal visited our faraway hamlet to preach at St. John’s Ravenscliffe. Three days later, one of the parishioners still perceived a visit from someone notable as ungraspable, even disorientating. Indeed, the visit served as a trigger that rattled or shook her core perception of her little country church. Although the church had undergone a beautiful

\(^{15}\) Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 4.
renovation, the changes had not altered her frame of reference, her perception of St. John’s unworthiness and perhaps unconscious assumptions she harboured concerning the crossing of social hospitality boundaries. This elderly woman still perceived the church in its pre-addition humble, shabby state, and over her many years as a parishioner she had internalized its unworthiness. Experience had taught her that “important people don’t come to visit the little church.”

I spent several hours with this parishioner in an effort to reframe St. John’s as a wonderful place, well worthy of such a visit. The outcome of this conversation was realized several days later when she decided we needed to be inviting more important people to St. John’s, for “it would be such a shame to hide our little gem.” Her transformed perspective led to a wider understanding and perception of her church, and her behaviour was altered. The glow of the Spirit was in her face.

Mezirow states that transforming a frame of reference occurs when people are willing to view the world differently, and this includes viewing themselves differently. It is an act of a free will. In the above example this parishioner came to perceive anew her church, herself and the little hamlet of Ravenscliffe, which was a community solely defined by the physical presence of the church. The new perception of St. John’s and Ravenscliffe eventually affected her behaviour. In time, she published a photo history entitled Ravenscliffe and Its Pioneer Settlers, with the proceeds going to refurbish St. John’s bell tower. The old perspective changed from an internalized unconscious belief that the church was unworthy of important visitors to wanting to tell the world about this wonderful little place. Publicly
through the book she put her signature on this place. This parishioner’s perspective had changed, and her new-found openness to others is obvious.

Disorientating dilemmas often happen randomly, but if this response is arbitrarily solicited for purposes of teaching or formation, then ethically the learner needs to be made aware of the intention to set up a situation that will “jolt” them into a readiness to change.\textsuperscript{16} The will to choose is a biblical imperative (Deut. 30:19) and a condition in Mezirow’s assessment of the process of transformation. This ethic holds true for parishioners, parish leaders and diocesan leaders.

A disorientating dilemma can be something small that hits us hard, or it can be a life-changing traumatic crisis. A disorientating dilemma is identified to be such by the impact it has rendered on a person. Two people may experience the same thing, yet only one is shaken up by it. A book or an idea changes one person’s life; another can’t even remember it.

The experience can be uncomfortable, disconcerting and even frightening when the person doesn’t understand what is happening. They may feel as though they have no firm place to stand or that they are no longer comfortable in their own skin. A person may feel lost and confused.

The feeling is akin to being in various states of shock. The experience can manifest in physical symptoms such as “flu-like” achiness, unusual fatigue, disturbances in sleep patterns

\textsuperscript{16} Mezirow, \textit{Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning}, 225.
and irritability. It can feel like systemic dis-ease and restlessness that refuses to be settled or comforted. It is not foreboding or threatening, just unfamiliar.

A disorientating dilemma indicates that change is required and makes that change possible. Disorientating dilemmas can have a positive spiritual formation benefit for a congregation. One wonders, if the principal’s visit was ungraspable to H., how could she grasp the presence of our holy and Triune God, who is so much more ominous?

When congregants hold distorted assumptions, those assumptions may be based on incorrect beliefs that were formed from faulty childhood teachings. In these cases, transformative learning becomes a vital part of pastoral congregational ministry, but the parish priest needs to know how to specifically adapt these moments towards a positive religious deepening and a conversional outcome.

I offer the following anecdote to illustrate that a disorientating dilemma does not guarantee a perspective change and to show how the learning journey can be effectively shut down or postponed, sometimes for years. When I was a summer seminary student, I came across a method of ministry known as total ministry, based on the missionary methods of St. Paul as presented by Anglican priest and missiologist Roland Allen (1835 to 1873). 17 My efforts found little excitement at the local level, no interest among my more liturgically focused peers, and no encouragement from those guiding my advanced studies. Allen’s book was a

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disorientating dilemma for me but had no apparent impact on those in my sphere of influence.

2.1.2 Basic Tenets: Frames of Reference and Meaning Scheme

The basic tenets required to forward a lay understanding of transformative learning are laid out here. Meaning schemes are the personal assumptions that are expressed through collectively established frames of reference. A person is said to have gone through a perspective change when he or she has successfully traversed through eleven phases.

Mezirow’s transformational learning theory attempts to “redress an apparent oversight in adult learning theory that has resulted from a failure to recognize the central role played by an individual’s acquired frame of reference through which meaning is construed and all learning takes place, and by the transformation of these habits of expectation during the learning process.”18

The limited and distorted frames of reference that we live by are at the centre of Mezirow’s theory of learning. They constitute “the structure or paradigm of assumptions and expectations through which we understand our experiences and find meaning.” An example is “we live in a hierarchically structured world.”

Notice the self-perpetuating authoritative nature of a frame of reference. To challenge a frame of reference—also called a habit of expectation, a meaning perspective or boundary structure—is to confront something that carries authority within us or over us.

The issue of the authority a frame of reference holds plays a large role in explaining why having a frame of reference exposed or challenged feels like a personal revolution, a busting out of an old but often safe and comfortable prison, and why the learning process results in either confirmation or transformation of the interpretation of an experience.¹⁹

A meaning scheme is a “particular assumption, belief, value judgement, expectation or feeling that is articulated, thought or acted upon.”²⁰ They are the essential components that make up “a habitual set of expectations that constitutes an orienting frame of reference…[serving as]…a belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience.”²¹

Meaning schemes amount to “our unexamined cultural assumptions and may be reflections of economic, political, social, religious, occupational or educational systems.”²²

In short, frames of reference and meaning schemes are at the core of what is changed in a perspective change, but these levels of change do not happen at the same time. Conflict can erupt when people’s universal, cultural, and personal assumptions and perspectives change

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²⁰ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 44.
²¹ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 42.
²² Mezirow, “Perspective Transformation,” 104.
not unilaterally but sporadically or episodically and they become upset or impatient with their neighbours.

In rural Anglican congregations a perspective change is necessary for them to realize that a biblical faith calls them to be spiritually mature disciples, not comfortable churchgoers. Once a parishioner told me that she couldn’t go into the sanctuary because it wasn’t allowed. She was being invited to light the candles. This was a meaning perspective from childhood that she had internalized as a personal frame of reference. It, along with a host of unhealthy attitudes around faith that the incident awakened me to, required changing.

2.1.3 Phases of Perspective Change

In Mezirow’s 1978 national qualitative study he identified ten phases that are factors in a transformative perspective change, and in 1991 he added another phase that shows the positive relational importance of self-reflection in the process.

Phase 1  Disorientating dilemma
Phase 2  Self-examination with feelings of guilt and shame
Phase 3  Critical assessments of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions
Phase 4  Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5  Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6  Planning of a course of action
Phase 7  Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
Phase 8  Provisional trying of new roles
Phase 9  Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationship (this phase was added by Mezirow in 1991)\textsuperscript{23}

Phase 10  Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

Phase 11  Reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective

According to Canada’s own Professor Elizabeth A. Lange, a disorientating dilemma, the first phase in a perspective change, is the most research-confirmed phase, and its presence is a necessary component in the perspective-changing process.\textsuperscript{24} It is the singular phase this study is focused on.

Following the disorientating dilemma, the individual must exercise critical self-reflection. First, the individual engages in self-examination, often with feelings of guilt or shame. This involves a level of honest self-critique requiring a degree of psychological and spiritual maturity and emotional intelligence. Second, in order for change to occur and maturity to happen, she must critically reflect on her assumptions and beliefs. Third, the individual critically assesses her epistemic, sociocultural and psychic assumptions. This is a process of reflecting on where she has been, what has happened to her and how she has been influenced.

After the stages of critical reflection, the individual engages in rational discourse. This includes the recognition that her discontent and process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. This affirms that she is not alone in her experience of a discrepancy between her meaning structures and her environment. For Christians,

reading the biblical text and hearing or reading the faith journeys of others is helpful. The next related stage in rational discourse is the exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions. Small groups and mentoring relationships can help facilitate this stage.

The final five steps all involve action by the individual. First, the individual must plan a course of action that will enable her to step into a new role. Second, the individual must acquire the knowledge and skills for implementing the action plan. Third, the individual then provisionally tries the new role. Fourth, the individual builds competence and self-confidence in the new role and relationships. Fifth, the individual experiences a reintegration into life on the basis of conditions dictated by her perceptions.

In the Christian believer’s life, these action phases can be encouraged by a variety of ministry initiatives through strategic plans that the minister or a lay person may develop for the church congregation. These could include mentorship programs, Bible studies and an introduction to writing their spiritual autobiography as part of their legacy. Each would encourage ethical disorientating dilemmas for conversional growth. A personal spiritual mentor or director can be of great value and influence in facilitating a smooth transition between phases. Ultimately, the final stage of reintegration in matters of faith will impact the believer’s biblical worldview, resulting in a richer and deeper understanding of what the believer is doing and why and its importance to God’s work of mission. Joy maybe the outcome.
These phases are orientated in a forward-moving direction but ebb and flow according to the learners’ readiness, the kind of support they have, their emotional and mental capabilities, the degree of upset the disorientating trigger caused, the motivation of the learners and the context the learners are in.

Mezirow has developed and refined his ideas on perspective change over the last 40 years. Except for the addition of a phase, his basic observations on the identification of the phases have not been altered, even though they have been widely debated and researched. The disorientation dilemma has remained the unchallenged cornerstone of Mezirow’s observations, and it is this phase that challenges the effectiveness of rural ministry’s ministry of presence.

2.1.4 Imagining Perspective Change

It is helpful to conceptualize perspective change. A helix illustrates the dialogical nature of the learning that constitutes a perspective change. What we see at the intersecting point is the disorientating dilemma, the catalytic beginning for a paradigm perspective change to take place, which also shows the potential directional movement of this learning if chosen. The helix can also conceptualize perspective changes within a paradigm and can show how accumulated knowledge can bring one to a paradigm shift, also called a new worldview. When a disorientating event occurs, the point of impact breaks the continuity of the helix. The phases rebuild the helix’s continuity.
2.2 Roles in Transformative Learning

When Mezirow’s theory is applied to transformative learning within the congregation, the roles of the diocese, minister and parishioners are important and to some degree align with instructor and student roles in education. Training or mentoring in faith-based transformational learning is required. Both parties can help facilitate transformation or can function to stifle it. Sunny Cooper, as part of her article on theories of learning in educational psychology, looked at Mezirow’s transformational learning under the categories of the roles of instructors and students. The lists of characteristics and roles of both instructors and students that facilitate transformational learning establish the basic components discussed here.

2.2.1 Diocese

The primary role of the church leadership is to recognize when a transformative perspective change is required and to provide the necessary resources and supports to guide such a change across all its systems.

The diocese is in a position to set in place “triggers” that can prompt transformative change, but these actions require clergy to be in place who can positively guide the learning journey of change that is required.

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Mezirow (1997) describes a transformative learning environment as one in which those participating have full information, are free from coercion, have equal opportunity to assume various roles, can become critically reflective of assumptions, are empathetic and good listeners, and are willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view.  

This describes a healthy environment for change in congregations, but the environment will only be as healthy as the degree of health that those who set them up bring to the task.

Implementing a strategic plan is one direct way for a minister to help facilitate positive transformative change in a congregation. Its introduction and follow-through can jolt a congregation that has been in a passive status-quo rhythm of ministry, and with proper mentoring through a transformative learning process it can change unhelpful, even unhealthy, long-standing assumptions of congregations.

However, in my diocese, where a pastoral ministry of presence attitude has been systemically embedded in rural and small churches, they have never been stimulated by such a simple new approach to ministry. In 2003, a diocesan synod motion was passed that each congregation needed to develop a simple ministry plan that was biblically sound and in line with diocesan goals. I was the only priest in our deanery who did this. Notably, there was no diocesan follow-up on the requirement for a simple ministry plan, and in the end it was merely a make-work project.

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26 Ibid pg 5
2.2.2 Minister

When the priest seeks to initiate change in the congregation, his or her role aligns with that of an instructor, but if the priest is responding to a disorientating upset in the parishioner’s life, the role changes to that of a mentor who is responsive to the presenting condition and seeks to prompt the person towards a transformative end.

Because transformative learning at its core is about communication, the priest needs to become adept at discerning when a direct and intentional conversation is required and when indirect nuance is preferred.

The priest can play a transformative role in a parishioner’s life and can be a ministry of presence, but only if the priest knows the difference between the two and grasps which is appropriate to which circumstances. This takes training.

2.2.3 Congregation

The congregation must be open, inquisitive and welcoming towards the change, and they must participate in the process of bringing it about. The less open they are to the change, the longer it will take to usher in that change, and the more trust and transparency will be required. An upset will be required to awaken them from their disinterested slumber so they uncomfortably realize that they may not be as spiritually mature as they believe themselves to be. A congregation is not always ready for the change required, but a congregation that wrestles with change may serve as a “trigger” for diocesan change as well.
2.2.4 Parishioner

The process of change can be intimidating—even scary—as one is required to let go of old assumptions and adopt a new worldview, especially when the need for change is not perceived to apply to him or her.

In order for change to occur, congregants must have a level of openness to change and a reason to change. A disorientating dilemma creates the possibility of openness by scrambling the assumptions that bar formative change. Then, parishioners must be willing to push aside social constructs that define reality in exchange for being willing to determine their own reality in Christ’s image. They must be willing to accept that the assumptions of a secular or Christendom worldview are not necessarily correct. Those who have a culturally borrowed faith are at risk of living under the false assumption that they are actually living a biblical gospel-shaped faith. This unsound assumption is highly resistant to change, and the parishioners are contentedly trapped in their mistaken belief system. As people of faith, they must be willing to develop and live from a biblical worldview. The freedom to choose to accept a biblical reality and form Bible-based assumptions comes from God.

This logical choosing is seldom tidy but is biblically mandated. In Romans 12:2 Paul calls the parishioner to a transforming of minds, but he doesn’t go into detail as to the process by which this comes about. As a change begins to occur, parishioners must be increasingly open to the change and willing to accept it, in order for the process of transformation to continue. It is an act of the will.
When parishioners believe that their ceremonious, non-regenerative, joyless Sunday morning religious life is all God offers, and they are satisfied with it, it will be humbling and embarrassingly painful but necessary for them to face their own smallness of belief and the arrogance of their ego that has reigned supreme. This is necessary for the congregant to embrace the One who has been calling all along. Parishioners with more life experience are often more likely to experience transformation and to be willing to accept change. This aligns with Mezirow’s second phase.

The journey will proceed authentically only as the parishioners are willing to accept that they are responding to God’s search for them, just as others before them have. Humility is a key attribute for learning and comes with reflection on God. As they reflect on the originating upset and what led up to it, they begin to understand that in the “disorientating dilemma” the Spirit is particularizing the cross in their life and so making the claim of God on their life no longer abstract and academic. This journey aligns with Mezirow’s third and fourth phases.

The motivation and intention behind a parishioner’s will must align with the sentiments of an ancient prayer poised by Richard, Bishop of Chichester, in 1253, to know God more clearly, to love God more dearly, and to follow God more dearly, day by day. This is the motivational and intentional direction of an obedient, yielded will, and it is Jesus’ own example. It is only from this surrendered obedience of radical trust that the gospel bears real fruit and God is glorified.
2.3 Limitations of Mezirow’s Transformational Learning

Mezirow’s own words in 1991 reveal the theory’s embeddedness in a modern worldview:
“the learning theory is individualistic, as the locus of change is the individual; it is cognitive
and rational with the goal being autonomous thought; it is progressive, as the change is in a
positive direction, towards more inclusive, permeable and discriminating perspectives.”

Importantly, he was criticized by his peer community for excluding the emotional and
intuitive influences on human learning. Mezirow makes no attempt to ask or explain the
theological questions about what initiates a disorientating dilemma; he simply observes the
learning process that starts in an encounter that rattles us.

This limitation presents an unresolvable contradiction in the theory and praxis of the Church.
The inquiry into transformational learning is emerging from those in the practise of ministry:
Barbara Fleischer, via Bernard Lonergan’s work, Francis A. Payette and I are sensing the
work of the Spirit, but we struggle for theological coherence because there is no biblical
authority to connect the two. Payette writes, “This paper is a pause, a time to reflect on my
personal journey of understanding how God wants to convert and transform lost people into
bearers of Christ likeness.”

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28 Barbara Fleischer, “Mezirow’s Theory of Transformative Learning and Lonergan’s Method in Theology:
Resources for Adult Theological Education,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 3, no. 2 (October
Wesleyan Church pastor, church planter and PHD student from Southern Seminary (Louisville).
2.4 Christian Perspective: Transformative Conversion

Transformative conversion is the development of a biblical worldview through a process of spiritual, religious and behavioural formation, but for the purposes of this paper the term is referencing that defining, ever-repeatable moment when a person or a community surrenders and turns from themselves towards God.

It is a spiritual transformation that takes place in the physical realm and brings “a fundamental change in the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns”\(^{31}\) and where “the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred” in the life of the individual will be changed.\(^{32}\)

Transformative conversion describes the transmission and reception of the gospel. The helix is a helpful visual aid, with the necessity of a catalyst (a disorientating dilemma) to initiate the process.

This is the type of change that is required for a stagnant congregation—perhaps especially a late-stage last-generation palliative rural congregation such as my own congregation of St. John’s—that needs to become a vibrant congregation that is receptive to the movement of

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God’s grace. Without this type of change, parishioners remain spiritually disinterested and stuck with an understanding of faith and God that does not grow or develop over time, a hand-me-down watered-down faith from an inherited cultural Christianity.

Dallas Willard, who is from Spring Arbor University, a university with a mission that calls for the total commitment to Jesus Christ, writes about the obedience that is yielding surrender:

Christian spiritual formation…is automatically ecumenical and inclusive in the sense that those thus formed, those who live in obedience to Christ, are thereby united and stand out as the same in their obedience. The substance of obedience is the only thing that can overcome the divisions imposed by encrusted differences in doctrine, ritual, and heritage. The lamp that is aglow in the obedient life will shine. The city set on the hill cannot be hid. Obedience to Christ from the heart and by the spirit is such a radical reality that those who live in it automatically realize the unity that can never be achieved by direct efforts at union. It is not by effort, but by who we are: “I am a companion of all those who fear Thee” (Ps. 119:63, 74).33

This speaks to the necessity for transformative conversion in response to the secular culture’s increasing influence. Willard wrote in the same article of the goal of spiritual formation within a biblical worldview by taking us back to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, in chapter 4:19, where Paul writes, “until Christ is formed in us” (NIV).

Willard concludes in the same article that we need to take a conscious, intentional hand in the developmental process of spiritual formation, for “we have multitudes of professing Christians who may well be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly

get along with themselves, much less with others.”34 He calls for a spiritual formation process that brings psychological and theological understanding, as well as educational theory, to bear on the formation process.35 Drawing on the observations of Jack Mezirow for methods in ministry and a congregation’s spiritual formation is to serve God’s goal.

Willard discusses the role of thinking and learning and how it relates to spiritual formation of a believer. Importantly, a parishioner must be willing and able to engage in critical reflection and to apply the skill of rational assessment to her personal life. A disorientating dilemma readies for this. He writes, “It is in our thoughts that…the light of God first begins to move upon us through the word of Christ, and there the divine Spirit begins to direct our will to God and his way.”36 His scriptural support for this is Romans 12:2, Colossians 1:13 and Philippians 2:5.

Willard is speaking generally and to transformational learning specifically, but others like Francis A. Payette, a Christian educator, are actively exploring a transformative perspective change within a Christian context. Payette’s PhD paper from Asbury Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, is on “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Transformational Learning.” Asbury is founded on the Wesleyan-Arminian doctrines and is a thoroughly biblically based seminary with its motto “The Whole Bible for the Whole World.”

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Transformative learning crosses denominational lines and academic disciplines because learning is a human activity we all participate in and share. It is not a threat to a biblical worldview but needs to stand on its own empirical research for the integrity of its own claims.

The Church in the post-Christendom context in which it operates does not have the luxury of simply adopting and assimilating the advancements made in the secular culture. This once acceptable process now challenges the ethical integrity propounded in a biblical worldview and formation because that worldview is compromised by the implicit curriculum being imported, invalidating the very perspective being taught. This is not to negate the advantage the theory offers or to prevent it being utilized in biblical faith formation, but it is to emphasize that the dissonance needs addressing, and those being formed must be aware of the disconnect.

Fundamentally, a disorientating dilemma is necessary to challenge the effectiveness of rural ministry’s ministry of presence. My ministry at St. John’s from the outset was a series of unexpected disorientating dilemmas that arrived as challenges and surprises that rattled my assumptions of congregational ministry. My coming upon St. John’s for the first time on a cold January day in 2002 was an event that shook my assumptions about rural congregations, their churches and their communities. The disconnecting discrepancies caused me to feel like a resident alien in a parish that was both familiar and at the same time unfamiliar. This event, supported by a parish profile that said, “if we don’t have a hall we will die,” led me to reflect and act, which led to a transformative spiritual perspective change in me.
Mezirow identifies the *necessity* for a trigger, or an activating event, to take place if deep structural learning that brings about this internalized change is to happen, but my congregation has never experienced such a trigger. The congregation’s history described a young missionary congregation, needing to be formed and developed, that because of the lack of oversight available became developmentally stunted in their congregational life of faith. The lack of stimulating dilemmas over the long decades condemned the congregation to a dead, non-generative faith experience and an inability to recognize the Spirit’s presence at work in and among its members.

If our overarching meaning perspective adequately explains our experiences, we do not engage in transformative learning or in faith development. However, when we encounter something that challenges what we believe to be true, we are given cause to pause and reflect. That *something* can be a major life event like a death of a loved one, or it can be a subtle event like a line from a movie that catches our attention and causes us to reflect and act. It can be sudden and unexpected like a car accident or more of a gradual recognition over time that challenges our assumptions of the world.

Importantly, the same event experienced by several people may be a disorientating dilemma for some and yet have little or no effect on others. It is not the magnitude of the disorientating dilemma that sets in place the possibility of a perspective change; it is our personal reaction. What constitutes a disorientating dilemma for a person will be determined by all that has shaped and formed the person up to that moment.
Lange described this phase as an unexpected event, person or idea that cannot be made sense of within a person’s existing framework of understanding. The upset creates the possibility for change because it makes apparent, through one’s unease, confusion, disbelief and amazement, the assumptions one holds that no longer fit the situation. A disorientating dilemma necessitates an act of the will to make a choice to either resettle into the old status quo or lean in and do the hard work of relearning.

The notion of life-giving choice didn’t start with Mezirow but was presented in Deuteronomy 30:19 when God said, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life” (NIV). Through the activity of the Holy Spirit the Scriptures serve as a disorientating dilemma for spiritual conversion and ongoing transformative formation and sanctification. This act of the human will must come first, before the softer affective influences make their contribution towards informing a perspective change. This initiating will is not a purely autonomous, independent act, as it appears to be, but rather is an act of the human will being responsive to the Spirit, whether the Spirit’s role is being acknowledged or not.

2.5 Emerging Directions and Conversations in Transformative Learning

The theory of transformative learning has advanced in several directions since Mezirow’s early work. There are three dominant streams in transformative learning theory: the psycho-
critical, which is the original rational method Mezirow propounded in 1978; the social-
emancipatory method, which Paulo Freire\textsuperscript{37} advocated in 1984; and the psycho-analytical approach, introduced by Robert Boyd and Gordon Myers in 1988\textsuperscript{38} based on the depth psychology of Carl Jung\textsuperscript{39}.

Others, like Collard and Law in 1989\textsuperscript{40}, Cunningham in 1992\textsuperscript{41} and Newman in 1994\textsuperscript{42}, charged Mezirow with avoiding the sociocultural contexts. That is, they criticized Mezirow for ignoring social action as a necessary aspect of emancipatory change, and they pointed out Mezirow’s failure to equalize power relations, thereby depoliticizing transformative learning and stripping it of its intention for social transformation. One can sense the informing influence of Paulo Freire in these later transformative learning transformers. In these later perspectives, the ethical dynamic involved in transformative learning emerges.

Other criticism has come from Clark and Wilson in 1991\textsuperscript{43}, claiming that Mezirow reaches for universal principles there by rendering his theory acontextual and ahistorical; and here can be heard the postmodern voice entering the transformational learning debate on perspective change.

\textsuperscript{37} E. Taylor, Transformative Learning Theory," Third Update on Adult Learning Theory: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 119, ed. Sharron Merriam (Jossey-Boss 2008) pg. 8  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid p. 8  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid p.7  
\textsuperscript{40} Mezirow, Transformational Theory and Social Action: A Response to Collard and Law, Adult Educational Quarterly 39 (3) Sept. 1989 169-175  
\textsuperscript{41} Taylor, A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature Unresolved Conflicts calpro-online.org/eric/taylor/taylor/_03.pdf p. 20.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid p 23  
But in all the dialogue taking place over the decades the necessity for a disorientating dilemma to initiate transforming change has remained firm.

2.6 Summary

Transformative educational theory has become a mainstream educational theory for adult education, especially in professional disciplines and liberal-leaning seminaries. The theory’s humanist core has meant, however, that some seminaries are reluctant to embrace it seriously. There is no or very little research looking at the educational method imbued indirectly in the Scriptures. This is a vital pioneering field requiring exploration as we enter an increasingly non-biblical society with its host of off-the-rack spiritual formation programs popping up everywhere and being produced by everybody and anybody with no present criteria to measure their worth and value objectively. Thus, we make parishioners the unsuspecting lab rats of amateur research. Mezirow’s work observed a template whereby content can be inserted and outside content measured.
3.1 Definition

Chapter 3

Ministry of Presence

Henri Nouwen writes,

More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence…I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn’t be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.¹

Nouwen’s beautiful pastoral approach captures the essence of a ministry of presence, which is an approach that values humanity and seeks to truly know the people to whom we minister. It has an important place in the modern-day Church, especially in a culture that is driven by efficiency, technology and progress, often at the cost of relationship.

Neil Holm, at the Sydney College of Divinity in Australia, explores the definitions of a ministry of presence in “Towards a Theology of the Ministry of Presence in Chaplaincy” by drawing on an impressive bibliography of those writing in this varied field of chaplaincy.² He describes a ministry of presence as,

the exercise of caring presence, an interpersonal, intersubjective human experience of connection within a chaplain-other person relationship that makes it safe for sharing oneself with another, bringing conscious

¹ Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1974).
awareness (intentionality) and is available and attentive in the moment to provide opportunity for deep connection between the chaplain and the other person in the relationship. Deep connection within the relationship provides an important bond between participants that gives them a sense of safety as both chaplain and other person attempt to discover meaning in the human experience of suffering. Although not necessarily part of the experience, transformation of the chaplain, the other person, or both, may be one outcome.

He implicitly grounds his definition in a biblical understanding of the presence of God as the God of compassionate caring, as a chaplain like a minister does not have a secular role, but a sacred intention. He concludes by warning against the notion of ministry as something “done to and for others” when ministry is to be based on mutuality and reciprocity. The objectifying and dehumanizing of others is contrary to the ministry of presence.

In a ministry of presence, the emphasis on caring creates a helpful environment of trust and care where mentorship can flourish. In the spirit of being vulnerable and open, a minister is able to share her own journey and inspire her listeners. In this, a minister may serve as an experienced mentor by reflecting on her own journey, which assists others in the transformational process. Sharing one’s life experiences may also help congregants to see their world in new ways and to shift their worldview through transformative learning. It may help the minister to fulfill the role of a mentor who is willing to demonstrate her own willingness to learn and change. There is much to applaud in a ministry of presence. In fact, it characterizes my own spiritual formation drawn from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.

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3.2 Limitations of a Ministry of Presence

Ministry of presence, while being a powerful way to affirm the inherent value and worth of people, can also have harmful effects. In rural ministry, there is an embedded variant of the ministry of presence as described by Holm. It is casually referenced, applauded and validated in public newspapers like The Anglican Journal yet has had no scholarly attention paid to it in a rural ministry context.

Let me offer three illustrations of this embedded nature. On October 31, 2006, an article appeared in The Anglican Journal that celebrated the regular ministry habit of Reverend J. “to have breakfast and three cups of coffee at her local family diner in rural Saskatchewan, where everyone, not just parishioners, know they are welcome to sit down and chat.” The writer presented this as perfectly normal. I asked a colleague how he would define a ministry of presence, and without hesitation he said, “It’s being visible and accessible in the community to build relationships of trust so the community will feel they can bring their needs to him when they arise.” In the same article that Reverend J. was sited, came one from the bishop of the Diocese of Saskatchewan stating we need to change: “We’re still thinking very much in terms of the chaplaincy model, where the priest is there to look after the needs of the people.” The bishop presents the systemic normalcy of this chaplaincy style of ministry in the rural areas, yet this embedded system is failing to produce transformed,

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conversional people. Something seems wrong. These three situations illustrate how this wrongness is part and parcel of the embedded nature and language of rural ministry.

As a primary approach to ministry, a ministry of presence presents the risk of unintentionally affirming harmful behaviours, motives and perspectives. Those who practise ministry of presence can be hesitant to criticize when needed, to call attention to sinfulness or to encourage self-examination. This hesitancy can be exercised at both the level of the local congregation and the ecclesial life of the wider church.

This hesitancy to confront is particularly harmful when change in a congregation is necessary for the congregation to survive and thrive. In this, ministry of presence and strategic planning’s innovation seem to stand in opposition to one another. During times of turmoil, ministry of presence can be very soothing and can keep a parish feeling safe, but its approach can neglect to equip the parishioners to navigate the turbulence.

Ministry of presence can also foster laziness in clergy when there is no sense of being accountable for ministry outcomes and no evaluations are established to obtain feedback and monitor progress. This may be a wonderful ministry approach for elderly clergy no longer in active ministry and for wise parishioners who have other means of self-evaluation and feedback from others. However, for an ordained clergyperson receiving a full-time stipend, there should be more expectations than an assumption of a ministry of presence in the church and community. For the process of transformational learning to happen in a congregation,
ministers must be willing to give compassionate criticism to help parishioners question their own realities.⁸

In my deanery, a ministry of presence is prevalent to the point where priests see themselves exclusively in pastoral roles and relationships, marginally in an administrative role, and not in an evangelizing role at all. The three traditional and distinct roles of an Anglican clergyperson as pastor, priest and prophet have been so taken up into the pastoral role that it has rendered everything to be a relational ministry of presence.

A heartwarming article by Canon R. F. Palmer, who is considered one of the founding fathers of the rural clergy in the Deanery of Muskoka, gives a beautiful glimpse into a ministry of presence being an active agent for evangelism in Muskoka in the 1950s, when Christendom had yet to unravel. I have been inspired for decades by Father Palmer’s intelligence and faithful yet simple devotion to God and to his people. Reading the article makes me feel nostalgic. I once believed that if I could be all that Father Palmer spoke of, all would be well. But alas, that is not true. To let go of what was requires a perspective change, a realization that those who were so lovingly cared for by Father Palmer all died in faith without the gospel being vitally handed on to the next generation.⁹ Now, 60 years later, I am confounded by the lack of fruit of these evangelism efforts. To see the limitations of a ministry of presence in handing on the very essence of the gospel feels like an act of judgment and a betrayal of the ministry of a saintly man. Perspective change is painful.

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⁸ Cooper, “Jack Mezirow: Transformational Learning.”
In my case, I perceived that St. John’s congregation was in need of spiritual transformation. I ushered in change that I assumed would affect them devotionally. I was willing to cause my parish some unease in hope of causing a disorienting dilemma that might lead to transformative change. This required me to put aside an exclusively ministry-of-presence approach. My ministry approach had to be transformed, my assumptions questioned and my role clarified. This process had to begin in my own self through the inner conviction of the Spirit.

I would need to communicate the need for self-criticism to the congregation and then mentor the parishioners through the stages of reflection. I might myself be the disorientating dilemma that could evoke change. This would not be possible through an exclusive ministry of presence approach. I would need to take risks and exhibit a willingness to be vulnerable. If I wanted my parishioners to question their attitudes and assumptions, I would need to model self-reflection myself before I challenged their attitudes and assumptions.

3.3 Summary

Transformative perspective change offers in phase one of its theory a rational reason why the non-active pastoral chaplaincy-style of ministry known as a ministry of presence is hazardous to the internal evangelical opportunities that present in parish ministry. It also offers as its replacement a template for reflective mentoring in ministry as a response to the evangelical necessity of the gospel to make new disciples. In my case, I responded to the congregation’s
fraying strand of hope intuitively and lovingly and with many, many pots of tea. On reflection, this turned out to be a faulty plan.

It is possible, but not provable, that this nebulous approach to ministry is the logical outcome of Christendom’s dominant worldview. The unconditional accepting attitude in highly relational rural ministry contexts is encouraged and expected by parishioners and implicitly affirms and normalizes a non-generative congregation.

A ministry of presence fails to confront Christendom congregations with the shortcomings of the culturally shaped normative faith that parishioners and priests have uncritically assimilated over generations. It has its place in parish ministry, but when it is applied indiscriminately across all areas of ministry, the ongoing evangelical opportunity within ministry is replaced by an unconditional approach of love and acceptance that fails to provide the intentional, reflective response that reveals sin and exposes our need to repent and receive forgiveness.
Chapter 4

Case Study Background

This chapter presents the background context of St. John’s congregation: the regional and municipal context of Muskoka, St. John’s ecclesiastical Anglican context, and the particular parish context and history of St. John’s. Following this is a reflection on my personal ministry context.

4.1 Regional and Municipal Context: Muskoka

Muskoka is located on the southeastern edge of the Canadian Shield, several hours north of Toronto. It hosts a rugged terrain of beautiful lakes, deciduous forests and rock cliffs, perfect for tucking away the thousands of tourists who visit the numerous high-end tourist lodges and the loved family cottages each year. Beautiful as the terrain is, the geography makes for a narrow, windy road system throughout all of Muskoka. This means no one goes anywhere quickly, and any jaunt takes longer than expected. There is no public transit system, except the Northland bus, which travels the Highway 11 corridor. But getting to the corridor is another matter. The summer shift in population places great strain on all hospital, emergency and town services. This strain on services has been unsuccessfully tackled by the political efforts of the Conservative Party, which has had a strong hold for generations.

According to the founder and chair of the West Muskoka Food Bank, Muskoka is the poorest district in Ontario, with seasonal employment in the service industry being the main factor. This statistic flies in the face of Muskoka’s predominant image as being the playground of the rich and famous, an image many have a vested interest in keeping unchallenged.
Racially, Muskoka is white, except for one black musician; his baritone voice entertains Muskoka to their delight. This musician identifies himself as being the “only black person in Muskoka for the last 30 years.” There is a native presence on the Watha Mohawk Reserve, which is more invisible than people of colour. Muskoka has three towns: Gravenhurst in the south and Bracebridge and Huntsville in the north.

In winter, Huntsville hosts more pickup trucks on its main street than cars. In summer, the pickups grudgingly share the road with Jaguars and BMWs. There are only five stop lights to navigate through the congestion. The realities of Huntsville’s traffic point to the social, educational, cultural, financial and denominational extremes that co-exist in one of the most beautiful areas of the world. Huntsville has a population of just under 20,000, which triples with the influx of summer residents, cottagers and tourists. It is a community exchanging its slow-paced small-town reality for a sustainable economic future; the church community mirrors the same exchange. The marketplace marks the changing face of Huntsville. Once Huntsville’s main street was a celebration of mom-and-pop establishments, like the local family run hardware store.

My rural congregations feel an inevitability in their going the way of the family run stores, partly because they are not familiar with the restructuring Home Hardware did in consolidating mom-and-pop establishments under an administrative/organizational structure that allowed for the mom-and-pop identity to be kept. The box stores and major restaurant chains have all arrived in the last ten years, challenging locally owned establishments, like
Westside Fish and Chips, the Family Place Restaurant and Louis’ II Restaurant, to be more responsive to contemporary tastes and trends, an attitude St. John’s might consider adopting.

There are seven mainline faith denominations in a three-block radius of the downtown core of Huntsville. Each year the Town of Huntsville bans religious carols from the Santa Claus parade, and each year the outrage weakens, which suggests that Christendom’s waning influence is noticeable even in small-town Ontario and marks the town’s entry into a post-Christian secular consumer society. This strain in values also comes out when the wealthy, well-educated, professional summer population complain bitterly about the high taxes they are expected to pay when they are only present for short periods of time, yet when present they expect full and equal access to the hospitals and the recreational facilities. The summer congregations also complain about having to pay into stipends they access the benefits of for only a few weeks’ a year. The two populations are in a symbiotic, paradoxical strained relationship. The local residents need the seasonal work the summer population provides, but the summer population and the powerful political influence their lake associations employ keep out companies that would bring in well-paying jobs but are not conducive to the cottagers’ tastes. Economics and the search for sustainability are the forces driving change in Huntsville.

Ravenscliffe is six kilometres west of Huntsville’s Big East River on the Ravenscliffe Road. This is a district road, also known as Muskoka Road #2. It serves as the corridor to everything west of Huntsville. It is well maintained in the winter by necessity because the Big East River hill is steep, windy and dark. There are no streetlights, and it is impossible to
see deer on the road, making the driving conditions treacherous. Ravenscliffe for me begins when I cross the Big East River, even though the shabby, worn blue sign announcing Ravenscliffe is four kilometres further west. The Big East River is the geographical landmark that divides Huntsville from the rural communities to the west. All the homes in this area are on wells and septic fields, and all have rural route postal addresses. Ravenscliffe no longer has a school, store or coffee shop. Only St. John’s church and its cemetery echo that there ever was anything else here. But the community does have people, attested to by the five school buses that pick up children each weekday morning and the new high-end subdivision being created on the old R. farm.

The summer swell in the seasonal lake population brings great opportunities for hospitality ministries and the gentle evangelism opportunities they bring. The limited cellphone and Internet reception and a lack of mailboxes displaying addresses’ civic numbers at the end of what are often, very long bush driveways making connecting with summer people in the rural areas a challenge. The distances I drive demand an oil change for my car every month in the summer and about every six weeks in the winter. The winter road conditions made it necessary for me to purchase an all-wheel-drive vehicle instead of an economy car. My half-time stipend mirrors the local employment situation, and my employment status allows me to claim solidarity with the working poor in Muskoka. Because of the circular configuration of the parish around Huntsville I’m always travelling in circles but never actually going anywhere. This serves as a good metaphor to explain my ministry of presence, a method of ministry I was inadvertently exercising and which I challenge in this thesis.
The rural community has a possessive attachment to the land that I don’t understand. Many residents own hundreds of acres of undeveloped bush land, the land having been passed on through the families who received it as part of the land grants of the late 1800s, and many tap over one thousand trees during the spring maple syrup run. There is something in their voices that doesn’t resonate as holding the land but more as possessing it. I see messages written on billboard-like signs that say “Back-Off Government. This Is My Land.” It’s a possessive voice that reveals people who pride themselves on being self-sufficient and self-made, but with this hardworking attribute comes an unbending iron will that hides an uncompromising self-righteous good-works attitude and a fierce individualism. It is one of the masks the sin of ego wears. The people are good, moral, honest, and hardworking but so self-defined that the notion of yielded, surrendering, radical trust is simply not in their DNA. This attitude makes for much conflict in their families, the community and the church; it is sin realized in them, for it echoes the need of the self to reign, rendering them unable to listen deeply to God, others or themselves. The rural population is not drawn to the formalism inherent in classic Eucharistic liturgies; they like “heart and boots” Gospel country music, so the Anglican worship I’m bound to deliver is out of step for much of the local population.

4.2 Ecclesiastical Context: Anglican

St. John’s is ecclesiastically situated in the Deanery of Muskoka, one of five deaneries under the present episcopal leadership of the twelfth bishop of the Anglican diocese of Algoma. It is a vast, sparsely populated rural diocese in the Canadian Shield, stretching from Gravenhurst to Thunder Bay. The diocese is governed by a synod, which is the incorporated
entity and legal owner of all church property. The bishop has the power of veto over all synod decisions, but this veto is exercised cautiously, for the synod is comprised of representatives from each congregation in the diocese. A carelessly exercised veto by a bishop would upset the delicate balance of authority in an episcopal system and be subject to inquiry. The sparse population and distance are long-standing challenges facing the diocese as it seeks to provide ministry in a changing world.

The Eucharist is the norm for Sunday morning worship. This has negative implications for rural churches that serve an ecumenical congregation, which morning or evening prayer accommodates very well. There is also a far greater financial cost in having a priest for a Eucharistic celebration than in having the parochial lay person offer their service as a gift to the congregation. A Eucharist brings a financial benefit to the diocese; the 27 percent apportionment owed to the diocese each year is calculated on the congregation’s identifiable offerings that pay the operating expenses of the congregation; the priest’s stipend is considered an operating expense.

The deanery is situated at the southern end of the diocese and takes in Parry Sound to the west, South River Ontario in the north, and Gravenhurst in the southeast corner. The deanery has 35 rural churches, four town churches and two chapels. The rural churches are clustered into six parishes. Each rural parish contains a mix of heated and non-heated buildings, and all have aging congregations. The rural churches that are non-heated are increasingly being referred to as hospitality churches. They were well served from 1927 to 1983 by the Anglican Society of St. John the Evangelist, which reopened these little places of mission, serving the
chaplaincy needs of the people. The present-day deanery congregations support four full-time clergy, and the balance of ministry is provided by retired, part-time and fee-for-service priests. Three of the town churches are under serious financial strain. St. James in Gravenhurst supports only a 50 percent stipend, Holy Trinity in Parry Sound supports a 30 percent interim contract without benefits and St. Thomas’ in Bracebridge is seriously considering looking to 50 percent ministry. Historically, the deanery responds to economic challenges by gathering more congregations under one priest, but in changing their model of ministry there is never any corresponding change in the method by which ministry is delivered. There is no reflection process, so in time the strains resurface with greater consequences. The deanery does not have a strategic plan, and there are no committees. All the congregations in the deanery function essentially as “mom-and-pop” operations. The congregations are worshipping communities who understand themselves to be strong on outreach; evangelism carries a negative response. Embedded in the deanery is a non-reflective, accepting attitude towards a ministry of presence as offering pastoral outreach. The deanery system is the creation of Archbishop George Thorneloe (1897–1927), who re-organized Algoma’s string of mission outposts into deaneries. Perhaps it is time for another re-organizing effort after the financial upsets the deanery is experiencing, a move by the diocese that would most certainly serve as a disorientating dilemma. The financial challenge is indicative of our living in the wake of Christendom’s decline.

A key feature of the culture of St. John’s is its still very present Christendom mindset. The long-time residents of Ravenscliffe understand themselves to be Anglican and are not shy to approach me in the vegetable department of the local supermarket to introduce themselves as
“one of yours,” even though they have never stepped foot in the church for worship. The conversation always links their sense of belonging to their ancestral heritage. St. John’s church community accepted, understood, confirmed and valued these pastoral relationships, with the maintenance of their structure serving this historical heritage without reflection.\(^1\) St. John’s is steeped in local tradition, and the pre-2002 well-meaning but spiritually immature wardens applied an authoritarian administrative structure, built on rules being applied without understanding.\(^2\)

In the Christendom culture of Ravenscliffe, the role of the Anglican parish priest, when they had one, was sacramental, as untrained lay readers could and did preach the Word but always on an irregular basis. The town church’s priest served as St. John’s pastoral presence of comfort long after he wanted the role. For the 2002 congregation, just knowing that this long retired priest lived down the road was enough to assure them that all was well, even when reality shouted it was not.

Christendom helped to create the role of the priest as the comforter of the flock in Ravenscliffe, with the Anglican flock being anyone who lived in the designated geographical area known as a parish. Mission and evangelism were primarily left to the missionary societies financially supported by the church organizations like the Women’s Auxiliary (WA), later renamed as the Anglican Church Women (ACW).\(^3\) Evangelism of the flock was not a necessity as the flock was Christian by virtue of being born into a Christian country.

Their Christian status was outwardly secured through infant baptism. The flock was knitted together by an inherited faith that was to bring pastoral comfort to all people, not a radical life-changing conversion. Comfort displaced the local evangelical mission of the gospel. No longer was there a heart for reckoning with sins committed and for creating the means to shun sin in the future as had been the evangelical passion of Roberta Tilton, founder of the W.A.

In 2002 all the North Muskoka Parish congregations functioned unconsciously out of a Christendom context, a paradigm that had long ceased in the culture, so were at a loss to understand the decline that beset them. As they had no idea that this context change had occurred, the decline hit them hard when pointed out, and this readied my way.

4.3 Parish Context and History

Up until 1990, all of the North Muskoka Pioneer Parish congregations were the six mission churches of All Saints Anglican Church in Huntsville, under the leadership of their priest. None had heat or water; they were pioneer structures, some without even an outhouse, and one didn’t have electricity. In 1990, the town church priest retired after 30 years of a *Book of Common Prayer* ministry. The new priest came armed with a mandate from the Bishop to usher in liturgical change by bringing in the *Book of Alternative Service*. Time management constraints caused the new priest to refuse to pastor the mission churches, leaving them to die or survive by their own means.
During the years 1990 to 1997 the mission congregations were able to gather significant financial reserves because they were not contributing to ministry; the congregations seemed to forget they were part of an episcopal system, where financial responsibilities come with organizational sharing. All the congregations developed unbendable wills during these years and became disconnected from the bishop and the episcopal structure. With the assistance of a retired priest and a lay reader Sunday worship continued at St. John’s. In 1996, there was a diocesan decision, under the tenth bishop of Algoma, that all churches in the diocese needed to be under the leadership of a stipendiary priest. This decision led to all the small congregations in the diocese being formed into parishes under a priest. The mission congregations refused to co-operate.

The North Muskoka Pioneer Parish (NMPP) was formed in 1997. It was the last parish in the diocese to be formed, because the parishioners were so resistant to the process. This resulted in the parish structure being imposed on these six mission congregations of All Saints in Huntsville. A half-time stipend was arbitrarily put in place for the new priest who had just graduated from Trinity College. The new parish structure brought administrative challenges, financial responsibilities and changes in worship. For over a hundred years these mission congregations had existed by relying on freely offered gifts of untrained but well-meaning lay ministers, supported by the occasional fee-for-service retired clergy to kept the doors open. The new parish system overturned their way of being church and made demands for new inter-congregational relationships for sharing and fellowship, with no mentoring supports for managing change put in place to stir a new direction. By 2001, the parish knew
something was wrong. They knew they were dying, and they hung their hope on a lifeless parish hall as their antidote to decline.

I arrived in 2002, fresh from Wycliffe College. It would be up to me to reshape their antidote into its life-giving God-shaped vision for them. The parish was stridently and increasingly conflicted with personality disputes and jealousies; the continuous battles over the shared stipend were relentless and never found resolution. Although a parish, they had never embraced the ethos of the parish system.

Ministry to the NMPP was both exhilarating and exhausting, particularly concerning administrative matters. In 2014 I retired from the parish because my half-time stipend was too burdensome for the remaining four congregations. I was unable to gather the parish leadership to discuss a new financial arrangement; it was time to move on.

St. John’s Church Ravenscliffe now has a nine hundred square foot addition, completed in 2007, which has modernized the pioneer building, beginning with the foundations of the historic church being secured. The bell tower was renovated. The pioneer church has radiant floor heating, accessible bathrooms, a small kitchen, and a Muskoka deck. The interior has been painted, and hardwood oak flooring was laid in the nave. The altar and the 130-year-old candlesticks have been refinished. There is a circular driveway and outside lighting lining it. The cemetery headstones were cleaned, and the cemetery map was redone and professionally framed. The trees on the property were pruned to make the church more visible.
I understood the building of this addition as an evangelical, mission-driven imperative initiative and also one deeply pastoral to an elderly congregation. I did not want this little struggling congregation that I cared deeply about to watch their little church close. I knew if the congregation was to survive it had to grow numerically and spiritually, and the church building was the primary hindrance, or so I thought. I had set the building initiative in the context of an evangelism journey; the results of the research questionnaire proved otherwise.

In 2014 St. John’s congregation was offering year-round worship, both Eucharistic and lay-led matins. Music was played on a keyboard, but a home was still offered to the pump organ, run with a vacuum cleaner. The congregation and leadership were ten to fifteen years younger than that in 2002; some were still working. Sunday attendance was 23. There was a blending of the old and the new: liturgically, musically, structurally and socially. There was a weekly community BBQ in the summer and a monthly supper in the winter. The elders program and the local community music ministry initiatives I called for gradually ended after I retired.

4.4 Historical Context of St. John’s

According to the Algoma Missionary News of August-October 1927, Ravenscliffe was part of the Muskoka Mission of the Diocese of Toronto until 1871, when the new missionary diocese of Algoma was formed.\(^4\) A licensed lay reader from the Old Land (Kingsley, Staffordshire, England) settled in Ravenscliffe on April 22, 1871. He chose to immigrate to

\(^4\) Algoma Missionary News (August–October 1927), archives at Algoma University. Fonds No: 2009–073/001(018) Title: Temiscaming & Ilfracombe Missions (after 1915), last page.
Muskoka because of the free land grants offered by the Government of Canada. The first church services in Ravenscliffe were conducted in his log home. During a pastoral visit in 1872, a vision for a Ravenscliffe church building began. This lay reader gave the land for the church to be built, but he died in 1874, well before it was erected. He was the first to be buried on the site of St. John the Baptist and is considered its founder.

By 1875, the talk of a church at Ravenscliffe was being echoed by the first bishop of Algoma. It was not until 1880 that sufficient funds were gathered to move forward on a church building. The people of the newly formed congregation of St. John’s contributed liberally to the building of the church facility, giving all the lumber and shingles and 60 days of labour. The eldest son of the British lay reader was both the architect and builder of St. John’s Church. Construction began in 1883, and the church was completed in 1885. The first vestry meeting was held April 9, 1885. The congregation appointed the founder’s eldest son as their first lay reader in 1886, a man deeply respected by the congregation, whom they promised to support in leadership by attending Sunday services. Their first lay reader was gifted and resourceful, and when no choir was forthcoming he led the Sunday music with a tuning fork. All twelve oak pews in St. John’s were imported from England, along with English churchmanship, compliments of missionary-minded friends in England.

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5 Algoma Missionary News (August–October 1927), 3.
6 Algoma Missionary News (August–October 1927), last page.
8 Algoma Missionary News (August–October 1927), last page.
9 Algoma Missionary News (August–October 1927), 17.
As early as 1887 the church had an auditor for its accounts. Fiscal responsibility never wavered at Ravenscliffe, but by 2002 it had gone off course, for the congregation had $30,000 in the bank but was without running water. A pump organ was donated in 1892, and the famous tuning folk was preserved in one of St. John’s contemporary stained glass windows.

The importance of history to St. John’s 2002 congregation was evident in the effort of the people to preserve it. Ravenscliffe and Its Early Settlers was compiled as a labour of love by the Ravenscliffe Project Committee. Joy and care went into each page as a tribute to an honoured past. Their living memory is that the pioneer families of Ravenscliffe pulled together as a community, and their steadfast faith, hope and hard work sought the common good. The retired town priest was invited to write the introduction, and I was offered the last page for a closing comment. It was a sign of being accepted as the minister of this folk community, and it felt very good. This book may well be the last tangible evidence that a Ravenscliffe pioneer folk community ever existed. The school, post office, store and people are all gone, but the church was building a bridge into a contemporary world as it was being walked on, a new community of faith coming, I hoped.

But the truth was, the past had a merciless grip on this 2002 congregation. A dead past was suffocating the living present and any hope of a future. They were imprisoned by something they thought they loved. “We Love Thy Place, O God” was one of the few hymns the 2002 congregation sang with any gusto. Henry Van Dyke’s famous 1907 hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” had been carried into the present day through the family ceremonies of one
of St. John’s founding pioneer families. When I arrived, this hymn was being played every Sunday morning on the old blaring pump organ. The disconnect between the hymn’s words of joy and the depressed reality I witnessed in the congregation each Sunday morning was so sad. People were terrified to change or move anything in the church; even a broken door handle on the interior bell tower door had to remain untouched for fear of some unspoken reprisal from the dead but still very powerful past. Parishioners who had been at St. John’s for 60 years had never been in the vestry or near the altar; everything was sealed off by the invisible authoritarian traditions of the past that had a dominating influence on the present. It was as though the past had taken on a living personified force.

My invitations for liturgical involvement with its “spontaneous learning as we do” approach to ushering in change was slowly breaking down very old barriers. The old pioneer congregation responded slowly but positively to the freedom. It was this deeply aged, severely compromised congregation that were the builders of the addition. I was only their mentor. The 2002 congregation wanted to pass on the building they loved, and I wanted a gathering place to worship God as our mission; we had mutually beneficial purposes. I believed that the evangelical mission of the church was born in the surrendering act of worship. I chose to believe this was possible.

I have willingly led so many historically directed services at St. John’s that I feel like I know the old pioneers. In these services, I presented and praised the layreader from England as a faithful man who desired to thank the Lord for his good fortune by generously giving an acre of land and all the lumber for a nice, neat frame church, one the congregation would not be
ashamed to hand down to their children. In 2013, my heart sank when I learned in a casual conversation that this may not have been the case. It is said that he left England because he was not able to marry off all his daughters and thought the pioneer settlements in Muskoka would have lots of available strong young men. So, it is possible that the land that St. John’s was built on was given not as an act of great faith and devotion but to have a respectable place where a man’s daughters could be properly married. The marital practices of cultural and nominal Christianity were taking root in Ravenscliffe, transported in by the English church practice of churchmanship, not by the gospel.

The faded vestry minutes reveal a certain monotony in the life of the community. For years essentially the same thing is written, over and over. Even the people in attendance don’t vary. Occasionally it was noted that the building needed some work, but any action was always about looking after the building for the building’s sake, never for invigorating the mission or ministry of the congregation. The lay pioneer founding families of St. John’s, the saints of the past, had taken over the church’s episcopal spiritual lineage. There is not a single picture of a bishop anywhere, and in the parochial history the name of Jesus, or even God, never appears. Memorializing of the past was slowly spiritually starving and atrophying the congregation.

The personal lives of the parishioners were also steeped in pioneer traditions of the past. One New Year’s Eve, my husband and I were invited to an old-fashioned house party of one of the pioneer families of Ravenscliffe. They had a beautiful home that hosted a big wood cook

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10 Beth Cope, Helen May, Ken May, Karen McAuley Smith, and Barb Paterson, eds., Ravenscliffe and Its Early Settlers (Huntsville: Near North Business Machines, 2007), 16.
stove in a large farm-style kitchen reminiscent of pioneer kitchens. That evening, the kitchen table was moved aside, and fiddles of all shapes and sizes played the old square dance reels that the guests were raised on. The attendees were very elderly but were introduced to me as though they were 30 years old. All of old Ravenscliffie was present. The 30 guests had all attended the Ravenscliffie one-room school, the U.S.S. No. 6, and they still lived in the area, these great-grandchildren of the pioneer families. The host introduced me as the new minister at the church, who came to bury everyone. They all grinned gratefully. My husband and I left this precious experience feeling like time travellers. Indeed, the past was not in the past in Ravenscliffie but was alive and very present that evening and every Sunday morning in the church. I believe the dozen parishioners actually saw the organist playing the old organ, pumping with one foot while rocking the baby with the other, as the story is so often told. I’ve heard about the original pioneers so often and with such present-ness that I sometimes think I too can see them on Sunday morning pumping the organ and holding up the tuning fork to begin worship.

The structure and the congregation I encountered in 2002 was of an era most of the world thought had passed on long ago. It never occurred to me that I would be needing to journey with a congregation through 130 years of deadly stagnation that had been internalized and normalized in order to usher in something new.

St. John’s Church in Ravenscliffie was still a pioneer structure without heat or water and hosted a dilapidated outhouse. When I arrived St. John’s congregation had twelve

11 Cope, May, May, McAuley-Smith, and Paterson, Ravenscliffie and Its Early Settlers, 24.
parishioners, all over 77. They were all faithful to Sunday worship; one elderly man rose at 5 a.m. in the winter to turn on the overhead area-style heaters so the church would be warm for Sunday at 10:30 a.m. These elders were responsible for keeping the vision of a hall alive for nearly 40 years and were catalysts for its long-coming emergence. The vision came through the remembered action of a woman, who at the end of a W.A. meeting in the 1960s offered a spontaneous gift of generosity ($5) and said, “Here’s the start of our hall fund.” The famous roast beef fundraising dinner each spring kept the vision alive. They moved the drilled well forward, and a generous financial gift made the renovation possible.

In the next five-years I buried all but two of the 2002 congregation. What was startling to me in 2002 was that the family names present on Sunday morning had not changed. The founding pioneer families were still sitting passively on the hard-English pews in the unheated pioneer church in Ravenscliff.

They were all suffering from the false perception that their memorialized past was a carrier of regenerative life in which the gospel lived and moved and had its being. Their perspective of the past’s presence was altering how they saw reality. One afternoon, I was standing with the organist looking towards the original front door of the church, with its peeling and blistered yellow paint. Linda dearly loved the past; she had played the old pump organ, run with a vacuum cleaner, for over 40 years. This day she gazed on the old door and said dreamily, “Oh, it’s so beautiful!” The decay and neglect of the door was obvious, but she saw the beauty of 40 years before. The difference between our perspectives was

irreconcilable and made changing the door difficult. What matter was the door as it has been. The congregation gave their devotion to the outward symbols of the past, neglecting the inward surrender and devotion to the Spirit of the living God.

Let me share a story that captures my ministry challenge to this independent, hardworking congregation that knew how to die but didn’t know the benefit of grace to live now. I shared tea on more than one occasion with two old trappers who ran trap lines in Algonquin Park and carried their hundred pound packs on their backs over a frozen Tasso Lake. One trapper liked to reminisce about going through the ice and told “how when the ice gives way and it’s minus 30 below, you call out from your depths, and you know there is a God.”

It was a moment of surrender but one that never went on to be transformative. I know the wives, the children and the grandchildren of these trappers, whose occupation and congregation were nearing extinction.

4.5 Personal Context

I began my ministry leaning heavily on Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (KJV). This is translated in The Message as “If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.” I received this verse as my mandate for preaching, and from this mandate came the parish visioning weekend and our little strategic plan for ministry. This document served as my compass for ministry and its assessment. I had never experienced the power of vision or the benefits of a strategic plan. I trustingly chose to accept the authority of the Word of God.
Ministry was about honouring the past to usher in change. I believed the Spirit had been at work doing something at St. John’s since 1883, so it made for a legitimate portal. My historical interests had to be genuine if this community was to trust me with altering that which they found their identity in. Each year I organized an historic service featuring a PowerPoint presentation of photos taken from the locally written *Ravenscliffe and Its Early Settlers*. I was very deliberate in nurturing my trustworthiness with their history; I started where the congregation was and invited them forward. I avoided upsetting them, always seeking accommodation.

Music and the church building were intricate components of the 1886 congregation, so I drew on both as minimally upsetting yet effective carriers of the Word of God to serve the congregation’s need for spiritual formation and evangelism as my church growth strategy. I sought change without upset by building a bridge with what was important to them in the past.

By 2007, St. John’s Church was a small, attractive, energy-efficient modern-day structure that had a computer, printer, a desk, a filing cabinet, a cellphone for emergencies, and a table and chairs to sit 24. There was a monthly newsletter, a website, and a Facebook presence. For the community-at-large we held a weekly BBQ all summer, a monthly supper in the off seasons and music concerts every quarter. There was Eucharistic worship for the first three Sundays each month, a Morning Prayer service from the *Book of Common Prayer* (lay led) on the fourth Sunday and a midweek Taizé service. The music was contemporary and
devotional, played on a keyboard by young musicians. We had a sound system. I was
preaching biblically and introducing Scripture through the music. A yearly pilgrimage was
made to the Sister of St. John the Divine Convent. We had an associate priest, a one-person
altar guild, four lay worship leaders (lay readers), a maintenance/property person, a chartered
accountant as the treasurer and a young communication officer. We had launched one priest
and five associates of the Sisters of St. John the Divine.

St. John’s Congregation was about 28 in number and 15 to 20 years younger than it had been
in 2002; several of the parishioners were still in the workforce. The parishioners were well-
educated and financially secure. They travelled regularly to visit out-of-town grandchildren
so were unable to be as present and physically committed as the 2002 congregation, who
never missed a Sunday. They were busy, with full lives. Most of the 2007 congregation had
not experienced the outhouse years or the unheated pioneer structure. They were good, moral
people, committed to the liturgy and communion. They, like the 2002 congregation, had little
interest in the Scriptures and tolerated only ten- to twelve-minute biblically based sermons.

St. John’s had outwardly come a long way by 2007. The devotional practices of the 2002 and
the 2007 congregations were very different, the former orientated to good works, the latter to
the sacraments. Yet Jesus’ name was never spoken by either congregation. Nor was a faith
sought by the congregation that was any more than what it was at the present moment. The
outward changes at St. John’s were driven first by my devotional need to glorify God in that
place and secondly to grow the congregation numerically and devotionally, in that order, so
to avoid closure. I knew the congregation’s spiritual life was lethargic, but I wasn’t
perceiving them to be in any spiritual crisis; after all, they were acting no differently than any other Anglican congregation I’d been exposed to. I assumed the congregation was growing spiritually just by being among the changes that God was behind, but I was wrong. This devastating realization only came to me with the results of the research questionnaire, which shattered my perception of the congregation and my effectiveness as a parish priest. A disorientating dilemma by its very definition.

My entry into the case study of St. John’s is unavoidably personal. My self-reflection was deep, personal and humbling, and I struggled in prayer as I sought to understand and find direction in a severely challenged and challenging ministry context.

4.6 My Spiritual Journey

The experiences that came in parish ministry could be very intense and personal. Never did I question whether these experiences were anything other than of God. Writing these experiences down helped me to gain perspective, so reflection on these events became an aid for personal faith development. I had five particularly intense experiences in ministry that reshaped and reformed me. I would say these experiences were catalysts for a transformational perspective change in me, which caused both behavioural and attitude changes in my personal faith and in my approach to leadership in ministry. I once believed that peace and unity were the marks of a well-led parish; now I understand that some upset is required for deep transformative change to take place in a congregation and individuals. I once understood a ministry of presence to be the hallmark of a loving pastoral priest,
protecting people and the congregation from upset. I now see this attitude as detrimental to the faith development of the congregation. This section presents a reflection on my spiritual growth during my ministry at St. John’s.

4.6.1 My Leadership Perspective Change

I began parish ministry steeped, shaped and formed in Christendom attitudes. Despite being a cradle Anglican, having had years of intentional reading in the spiritual classics and a vigorous embrace of all seminary had to offer and two decades of embracing a Benedictine lifestyle, I was still blind to the interpretive film the Christendom culture bestowed on my perceptions. In ministry, I was becoming aware of this film and sought to shed it, thrusting me into a more consciously committed biblically narrated life.

Three colliding factors prepared the ground for my leadership perspective change: the extreme decline I found exhibited in St. John’s, my singled-minded belief that God sought life for his people (and me) and my deepening prayer life that was coinciding with the shedding of my Christendom lens. I did not consciously let go of Christendom, but in upset I consciously chose its biblical meaning.

It would take the unexpected results from the research presented in this thesis to rip the Christendom veil away and allow me to see the deeply non-generative nature of culturally inherited faith, which in turn exposed the primary evangelical need for transformative conversion in my declining Anglican congregation and in me. The research result changed
my leadership perspective from building on a congregation’s present inherited faith to seeking to awaken the faith hidden in their inherited faith by realizing the positive role transformative learning plays.

The research results also caused the basic notions of total ministry to be casually reconsidered as I questioned how this awakening might happen, where the disorientating dilemmas might occur. On reflection, I could see the pattern of a transformative perspective change required in my own transformative conversion out of Christendom’s grip.

4.6.2 Role of My Journal

The unexpected ministry experience that is presented in chapter 5, when the congregation discerned St. John’s as being physically brighter after it had been spiritually cleansed, was recorded in my journal, as were all things that caused me disturbance, surprise and bewilderment and required thoughtful and prayerful consideration. The cleansing spoke to my theology of the cross in the most immediate of experience; I’m not accustomed to such immediacy, and the incident required some reflective journal time. My journal was the place where my practical experiences and the theologies that bring understanding to my faith came together in a mutually informing necessity, and the consequence was a quiet living witness, born from the integration of theory and practice. In short, journaling was how I grounded my experience theologically through prayer. The claims of this case study are based heavily on my lived experience through my skill of reflection and attests to the fact that I came through a transformative perspective change concerning parish leadership, both a spiritual and
academic journey of discovery. This learning begins with experience but is understood and presented as the ongoing story of Scripture, tradition and reason. The conclusions of this case study were not in conflict with the ancient faith but more a commentary than anything else. I have practiced the art of reflective journaling since 1982 when I was living in a medically unsupported rural area and nearly lost my life in childbirth. This event was my initiation into the lived experience of yielding trust, a transformative conversion to a faith of radical, simple trusting. The crisis led me to write, “I can’t explain the peace that passes understanding, but I sure know what it feels like.”

I share this personal data to indicate that the insights that arose from my journal carry authority for me. They were born from the searched reflections of a mature and ever-seeking faith, one that has been tested and strengthened in the crucible of life experience and found to be ever new and never wanting.

My journal entries that noted my extreme and extended surprise, disbelief, and bewilderment at the events about to be narrated would suggest that these events were disorientating dilemmas,13 not merely the momentary turmoil that’s characteristic when a critical incident is experienced. The compromised context of my ministry and the circumstances that surrounded these five events combined with the intensity of my desire to serve God by serving the St. John’s congregation created an environment conducive to initiating a transformative perspective change in me concerning parish leadership. My ministry situation kept me living in the urgency of the moment. I was immersed in practical, theological,

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biblical, liturgical, pastoral, structural and social details and was operating in survival mode to keep all the ministry balls in the air, discovering a past and living a present while doing long-range planning so as to glimpse a future. But I didn’t know it; I didn’t have time to know it. All of this urgency, plus taking overnight chaplaincy calls for the hospital, services at two of the local retirement homes and funerals whenever called, left no time for reflection. Financially, I was being rewarded with a half-time stipend that didn’t provide housing. Add this ministry context to my intense desire to serve, a desire that could be traced back to a perspective-changing event that clarified my call to ordination after more than a decade of reluctance, and the scene was set for unusual events to arrive with force into my psyche. At the time of writing about these events in my journal I had no understanding about learning theories, but I was aware that these ministry situations were serving as catalysts for my spiritual growth. However, the internal learning process that was taking place was a mystery to me until I happened upon transformational learning in one of my core Doctor of Ministry courses. The unexpected intrusion of an embedded educational theory in my spiritual journey of yielding trust was an unsettling surprise in and of itself. As I was being exposed in class to extra-biblical sources on how people learn, it was becoming clear to me that the consistency with which I was recording “stunned amazement” in my journals was reminiscent of the early stages of an established learning theory that was being introduced in my course work. I remember the stages jumping off the page at me with powerful familiarity, like an echo of something I already knew, yet I had barely heard of transformative learning.

Mezirow names the first and second stages in a perspective change as a disorientating dilemma, followed by the regret and even shame that comes with critical self-reflection upon
the upsetting event. My experience, as recorded in my journal, confirmed that motivation was indeed a key factor of transformative learning. For these stages to be navigated effectively requires some reflective, intentional mentoring. These two stages noticeably echoed through my journal jottings. They also are reminiscent of conversion journeys that have been shared with me over the years. It was at this point when I began to strongly suspect that conversion was a perspective change, albeit a particular type of perspective change, so, logically, conversion must follow the same stages that Mezirow observed if it is to be transformative. It wasn’t hard to see the lack of this life-giving disruption in my ministry. I began to wonder about the effectiveness of my conciliatory ministry of presence that was keeping at bay the single imperative (so the learning theory said) required for the congregation to break out of the conundrum R. D. Laing, C. S. Lewis and St. Paul all wrestled with.

4.6.3 Ministry of Presence

I asked myself whether it was possible that my chosen leadership style of peace and harmony born from God’s love was actually serving as a deterrent to the health, vitality and sustainability of the congregation by blocking the ingredient that could initiate a perspective change as vitally important as transformative conversion. The notion left me regretful and sick at heart, a sign that I was going through some sort of perspective change myself. I had always understood the term “a ministry of presence” to be descriptive of a pastor filled with warmth and love and caring for the flock, attributes I liked to believe I brought into ministry.

Having my way of being, my identity as a priest, being challenged by my own increasing awareness that I was missing the mark was akin to discovering that I was a bad mom. It was a jolting awareness, to say the least, but my desire to learn how to serve this congregation overcame my ego’s desire to cease further self-examination.

On reflection, I began to realize how often in ministry I was smoothing over conflict and avoiding upset by accommodation. I accommodated a pump organ run with a vacuum cleaner for too long, and I negotiated irrational margarine tub battles that raged between the Depression-era elders and the younger warden of pristine efficiency. These battles expressed a clash in values between people without a capacity for empathy for those unlike themselves, and both sides were wilful and intolerant.

I had initiated a vision day, which resulted in a congregationally stated life-giving vision, but in my desire to care for them I had done the work of developing the goals and initiating them. I believed I was modeling a way forward, but this may have been another expression of just how deeply embedded my ministry of presence was. These upsets and initiatives in parish life were opportunities to learn and grow and change through grace, but instead I just kept the peace and did the work single-handedly, at an exhausting personal cost.

I was unaware of the deep change that was slowly taking hold of me. I had been using reflection as a coping mechanism, but it also allowed me to stand back from the situations and gain a wider, more meaningful perspective. This perspective that would allow me to

\[15 \text{ See the appendix.}\]
probe my actions in ministry and see a chaplaincy style of pastoral ministry to the
congregation that would ensure my reputation and identity as a peaceful and loving pastor
while at the same time transforming the culture of the church. These were ministry streams
that were running parallel, but I thought they were intersecting to nourish the faith of the
congregation.

Once I came to this painful realization, I began to see the factors that were contributing to my
leadership weakness and the variables resisting change. Paradoxically, the new life in the
church was blinding me to the negative benefits of my too hands-on overinvolvement. I even
justified my exhaustion by the accomplishments that would keep the church open. Here my
Christendom-formed belief that a church building serves as an evangelical presence for the
congregation and others snuck in, hiding the real evangelical need of the congregation. The
primary factor contributing to my ministry of presence was not my Christendom-formed
assumption but my inadequate grasp on the doctrine of sin.

These factors were further cemented by my inadequate understanding of my authority as a
half-time priest, remembering that Anglicanism exercises shared decision making. At the
onset of my ministry I was told by the diocese that because I was half-time the usual
Celebration of New Ministry (which is the time of symbolic receiving of one’s ministerial
role and establishing authority) would not take place. The diocesan decision, I believe, sent
mixed messages and instilled a lack of confidence, and I responded by compensating with
what I did know—peace and harmony.
When my unconsciously held Christendom, beliefs adhered to theological misunderstanding and diocesan short-sightedness, all threaded together by my extreme relationally driven personality type (INFJ), my blindness to my contribution to the congregational need was complete.

My ministry flaw was born from a desire to minister from God’s unconditional love without recognizing that addressing sinful behaviour is an act of loving service and good pastoring. I was under both the romantic spell of the 1967 Beatles tune “All You Need Is Love” and the singularly informed thought of 1 John 4:7–9:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (ESV)

Love chastens when required and allows those we love to struggle to do things on their own, and I wasn’t permitting this. I was condoning, compromising, accommodating and doing for, then misnaming it as unconditional love.

Another contributing factor in securing my ministry of presence was the lack of policies and procedures or even living examples of alternative methods in the church. I had no living examples to act as a corrective to my tolerance and overachieving in ministry.

It would take an upsetting pastoral crisis to jolt me awake so I could begin to learn just how distorted human love and harmony can be. Let me share the story.
An elderly widow was worried sick about her mentally unstable daughter who was in crisis yet again; six times in less than 24 hours this adult daughter was taken to the emergency room by her 79-year-old mother, who was exhausted. I was called at 10:30 p.m. This elderly mom was beside herself; her daughter had just been released from hospital yet again and had come home irrationally demanding that a gourmet meal be prepared. The daughter went to the store for ingredients at 10 p.m. I inquired as to where her ill daughter got the money for such an extravagant shopping trip and how she got access to a vehicle. “Well, I gave her the grocery money and the keys to my car…I love her, you know” was the answer. I remember being stunned by this distorted act of love. Love was feeding and enabling her daughter’s delusional state. The incident served as a wake-up call for me, for suddenly I realized that I was feeding the delusion in the congregation that they were all God sought them to be. I was finally ready to sing a new leadership song.

A ministry of presence can be addressed on several fronts but not until its harm is recognized and acknowledged.

4.6.4 My Transformative Learning

My journey with transformative learning has been turbulent, arduous and intentional at every turn. On the first day of my Doctor of Ministry course, the class was presented with the classic definition of transformational learning. The definition was written on the blackboard, and for over an hour we tried to make sense of it. It didn’t resonate with even one of my cohorts, despite our considerable diversity. This lack of resonance made no sense to me, for
surely someone had experienced transformational learning sufficiently to recognize it in a definition. The disconnect left me dismissive of the value of transformative learning.

The classic definition I refer to is by Edmund O’Sullivan and is found in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*:

Transformational learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves, and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.\(^\text{16}\)

The classic definition makes it sound like the experience of transformative learning and perspective change is rare and implies that the internal upheaval will be in equal response to an external upheaval. It also moved directionally, yet the learning will move in whatever direction the content informs the stages of a perspective change. The definition fails to acknowledge the jarring, a disorientating dilemma manifests, so misses the core mark.

My ministry experience suggested that the catalysts that initiate a perspective change have more to do with the person’s unique interior response to a situation, rather than to the magnitude of the stimulus. In other words, what initiates a perspective change in one person may serve as only a minor critical incident for someone else.

\(^{16}\) O’Sullivan, Morrell, and O’Connor, *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, 11.
In our everyday lives we identify these events as wake-up calls, being jolted awake or hit with a two-by-four, and aha moments. These events are seldom mentored and integrated into a larger faith understanding; they just get rolled into our lives unexamined.

The questionnaire attested to the ordinariness of the five ministry events that initiated my perspective change. I had anticipated these events to be front and centre in the memory of the congregation, who had all experienced the events alongside of me, but in fact none were mentioned. They obviously didn’t serve as disorientating dilemmas for the congregation as they had for me.

I have spent a fair bit of effort trying to reflect on my ministry experiences so as to understand what happened. I have used a non-biblical educational source to make the claim that a ministry of presence is ineffective for ministry because it mismanages upsets that are natural in ministry, thereby missing transformative conversional opportunities.

I believe my educational source for inquiry also has scriptural warrant. In revisiting the biblical narrative, it is noticeable that disorientating dilemmas characterized Jesus’ ministry from start to finish. Sprinkled across the Synoptic Gospels is a narrative of people continually being amazed by Jesus, someone who simply did not fit anyone’s frame of reference. The resurrection was a disorientating, reorienting dilemma, not merely a critical incident that required a simple return to a “business as usual” life. It was a lived historically experienced event that shook and shattered the followers of Jesus to their core, demanding a reorientation of the Old Testament that had previously shaped and formed reality itself for
God’s people. The resurrection served as a disorientating dilemma, revealed by the responses of the people: upset (Matt. 28:2), confusion (Mark 16:8), amazement (Luke 24:12) and fear (Matt. 28:10; Mark 16:8; Luke 24:5). These are all signposts of a transformative perspective change having been initiated by a disorientating dilemma, the resurrection. Martyrdom in the early Church would evidence how successfully the perspective change had been. A brief glance at the Scriptures would suggest that the disciples and the early Church navigated a conversional, transformative perspective change without benefit of being aware of the interior learning process that was at work through the Spirit. It was then supported organizationally, scripturally, liturgically, doctrinally and socially. The biblical narrative, without benefit of deep textual analysis, supplies initiating evidence to suggest that transformative perspective change is a valid learning theory to bring into the life of the 21st century Church across all the disciplines and essentially for transformative conversion. I add my narrative to the biblical witness that continues through time.
Chapter 5

Potential Disorientating Dilemmas: Significant Events at St. John’s

An analysis of the transformative learning process at St. John’s begins with the events that had the potential to be disorientating dilemmas. This chapter discusses six events that occurred during my ministry years at St. John’s. The first event was a profound disorientating dilemma in my life. The remaining five events occurred on a congregational level. I describe these events and reflect on their impact. I could have set them aside like the congregation did, but instead I said yes to a life-giving learning-in-faith experience (Deuteronomy 30:19).

5.1 A Significant Event in My Ministry

The event I am about to describe marked a watershed point in my ministry. Although the event left me with many unanswered questions, both theological and otherwise, I deem it to be a disorientating dilemma because it changed me forever. I reflect on the event and my reaction, but I have no academic or spiritual context to comfortably situate the event except a ministry of deliverance, which is quite unfamiliar to me, so the story sits as a continuing disorientating dilemma that I have yet to fully integrate into a new spiritual transformational understanding. The event marks the spiritual return of St. John’s Church to its consecrated state after it had been defiled by a satanic ritual that had gone unrecognized for decades. The event was the trigger for me to widen my very narrow understanding of the effect of spiritual evil on my ministry and the congregation.
In the first few months after my arrival at St. John’s, there was a story that everyone in Ravenscliffe loved to tell me. It was about the big break-in at the church when the sterling silver communion chalice was stolen. By the end of the story, the chalice was found in the ditch by the side of the Ravenscliffe road and was returned to the church, its stem bent. Now, no one could remember just exactly when the break-in took place or who the culprits were, but if I was to put an date on the event I’d say it took place in the early 1960s when there were no regular worship services being held. The story about the break-in was told to me by many different people, always in rather confidential whisperings, but oddly enough the telling was always exactly the same; it never varied. It was told to me so often that I figured there was more to it, but on inquiry no further details ever came to light, so I just set it aside, believing that if God wanted me to do more about it then he would reveal it in his own time.

My surrender was probably more dismissive than any true yielding surrender should be, but regardless, the Lord showed himself to be faithful. After several years had passed, a woman came to me one Sunday after church and said, “I’m the one who found the chalice.” Her terse, abrupt manner was odd. Then she told me that when she brought the chalice back into the church, she found remnants of a satanic ritual in the chancel. The hair on the back of my neck stood up when she began to describe the burnt animal hairs. I felt an ice-cold rod of steel strike an inner indignation of necessity in me, something I was quite unfamiliar with and had no rational or theological insight to explain with any maturity. I calmly but with unexpected conviction told the woman not to worry; the archdeacon and I would look after it. She nodded knowingly and left with obvious relief, and to this day she has not spoken of the incident again. I called the archdeacon, and we cleansed the area with prayers, songs of
praise and a simple Eucharist; it was all done in order and decency and without dramatic
fanfare.

If all this wasn’t strange enough, the next Sunday came, and the parishioners all made
comments about how much better the lighting was in the old church. Some thought I had
dusted the light covers; others were pretty sure I had put in light bulbs with a higher wattage.
I just quietly accepted their observations and responded that God’s light was shining
throughout St. John’s. They all agreed, without understanding the spiritual shift they had just
born witness to. The story of the break-in has to date never been repeated to me by anyone. A
once repeatedly told tale had vanished.

5.1.1 Reflection

This incident left me confused and theologically ungrounded. My mainline Anglican
upbringing and training did not touch on evil and how to address it. On reflection I returned
to my trust in ancient liturgical church practice and began praying the daily offices in St.
John’s from the traditional Book of Common Prayer, and I reintroduced, on a monthly basis,
the traditional communion service.

I began to recognize and reclaim the spiritual depth of these liturgies and their capacity to act
as the vanguard against spiritual evil in the church. My disorientating confusion led me
towards another transformative perspective change out of Christendom.
My yielded confusion was taken up with Jesus’ cry from the cross, “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit” (Luke 23:46 NIV), where Jesus takes the absolute trust expressed in Psalm 31:5 as his own. The event is not just a surrender of that horrific moment in time but the audible cry of the inner act of surrender, taking with it all the moments that ever were and ever shall be. It is a sacrificial, sacramental offering of God’s own pure, unadulterated, surrendering love back to himself, the only propitiation wholly sufficient in its worthiness, and my confusion too was taken up in this, a realization that takes my breath away.

My surrender began the transformation of my Christendom-formed belief system into a biblical worldview, a perspective that is much more comprehensive. I came through a transformative perspective change and a transformative conversion. It took time and overlapped with other transformative awakening, but each contributed collectively to the same end, a transformative conversional perspective change in me. I am able to discern in this journey the basic stages in a transformational education theory put forth by Jack Mezirow. I clumsily followed the Spirit, but a map of the Spirit’s innate pattern for transformation would have been useful.

Did the spiritual cleansing at St. John’s lay the way for all the providential events preparing the church for new life? My perspective has changed significantly enough to publicly say that I believe it did create a wider frame of reference for conceptualizing ministry.

For me the event was a disorientating dilemma.
5.2 Five Significant Events at St. John’s

In my time at St. John’s, there were five events that I perceive as landmarks, creating disorientating dilemmas in my own experience and, I assumed, in the lives of the congregation. The congregation’s response, my perspective of these events, and the important outcomes that followed are outlined here.

5.2.1 A Celebrity Arrives: The Story of A.

A. came to St. John’s during the outhouse years, the years before the addition in 2007. I had been the incumbent for two years. I had thrown myself into the demands of ministry, and I desperately needed liturgical help. I was nearing exhaustion, as the six-point dying parish and their reactive eccentric characters in lay leadership were absorbing me twenty-four-seven.

I was beginning to burn out and was utterly relieved and filled with hope when A. walked in and sat down in the back pew one Sunday morning. I knew A. by reputation only; she had an impeccable Anglican pedigree and was a published writer, poet and actor. I had heard that she was a bit of a local celebrity in Huntsville.

A. had parted ways with the town church and had come to St. John’s restless and not really knowing why. She soon became my lay reader and within a few weeks was in the pulpit.
Response of the Congregation

The Spirit had brought together my need for a preacher and A.'s need to discern a call. It is an ordinary faith-filled story of answered prayer, but at the time, A.'s entrance was disorienting.

During the time when P. ministered, I sensed that the parishioners’ sense of self-worth was elevated by the presence of an esteemed person of status. There was no remembrance of someone of status previously ministering at the church, therefore the parishioners were flushed with pleasure to have A. with them. They didn’t pander to her, but I would hear them telling others with quiet titillation that A. was their new lay reader. The congregation’s sense of pride in her presence carried over into a greater sense of pride in their humble church. Importantly, A.'s choice to be present with them was very affirming, but they didn’t perceive her presence as God working among them.

I still am amazed that a sign-on-the-road community like Ravenscliffe drew the attention of an accomplished author who was looking to be involved in a rural community. Years later, I would learn that A. had come to St. John’s because she wanted to work with me in ministry; it was another eye-opening surprise.

Then, A. was gone. She left the congregation to study at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax and was eventually priested. I felt as though the congregation resented not only that A. left but also that she left the church for this reason. While some communities would feel deeply blessed that they had raised up a lay reader who received a call to priesthood while in
their midst, St. John’s appeared to feel nothing. The priesthood had taken A. away, and that was that. Their resolve, I believe, hid their hurt, perhaps as their defence mechanism against more loss.

Their non-responsiveness betrayed a deep-seated sense of abandonment, evidenced by their silence on A. departure. There was no farewell party. There was no parting gift. There was no memorial. No one referred to A. after she left. Their flush of pleasure concerning life at the church quickly dissipated. Once again, they were just as they always had been, a plain old congregation that everyone passed by. Building my home in Ravenscliffe and staying with them for twelve years were decisions I made to address this unworthiness. I believe the 2002 congregation suffered from abandonment issues, which resulted in their lack of attachment to people like A. making welcome and integration of new people impossible. This congregation’s dysfunctional attachment to the past may have been because the past was the one thing that wouldn’t leave. Yet it too was passing away.

A positive outcome of A.’s time with us was the development of a liturgical team, which continued to function after A left. In fact, this liturgical team continues to the present. However, the sense of pride in the church faded until the structural changes of 2007 came about and I began ushering in a stream of “important” people to reinforce their worthiness.

A’s arrival at the church was not a disorientating dilemma for the congregation. Because they did not recognize my need for liturgical assistance they were not seeking a solution. They maintained unrealistic expectations of me, giving thought only to their own needs rather than
acknowledging the needs of the priest. No one noticed that the priest also needed rest and rejuvenation. Further, the parishioners seemed unaware of how much work was involved in pastoring a parish of six congregations, with each believing they were the only one I was ministering to. So the problem of my exhaustion simply did not register in the minds of the congregants.

Because the congregation did not perceive my exhaustion as a problem, they could not appreciate how God responded to this problem through the ministry and presence of A. I discerned no sign that the congregation had been concerned for my well-being, never mind being in prayer for a resolution to the overreaching extent of my responsibilities.

From the onset, the congregation seemed to assume that A. would leave soon after arriving. They made no discernable effort to integrate her into the community. When she wrote and performed a one-act play from a chapter of C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, the church was filled for two evenings, but no one from the congregation came. It appeared that their fear of A.’s abandonment and of her bringing the church into visibility prevented them from seeing God at work in the congregation, providing an answer to a serious need. As A. began her ministry to the congregation, they were glad to receive and confirm her liturgical presence and creative sermons, but they didn’t engage her. They did not seek to build a relationship with her.

Why was the congregation not impacted by A as a disorientating dilemma? First, the lack of congregational response to A was rooted in a lack of discernment and prayer. The
congregation does not spend time reflecting on the church and the work of God. Because they were focused on their own expectations of the priest—expectations that were far too high—they did not stop to consider the well-being of their priest.

Second, fear prevented the congregation from embracing an opportunity for transformational learning and change. Their fear of abandonment inhibited the congregants from being open to build relationships with A. Why did the congregation assume that A. would leave them soon after she arrived? I believe their fear of abandonment points to a deep-seated sense of unworthiness among them. There was a fear that the congregation was simply not “good enough.” The people believed that they didn’t have what it took to be a place that someone of importance would want to call home. It was so strongly felt that it led to a hopelessness that resulted in a self-fulfilled prophesy. The congregation believed it would never be the type of church that visitors and notable people would come to and stay at, so the congregants made no effort to change or to try to be a welcoming and nurturing parish.

Third, the congregation had lacked mentoring. It may be that the congregation struggled to nurture others because as a congregation they had not been nurtured themselves. The lay readers had not had the opportunity for development. St. John’s had only been under priestly leadership for seven years at this point, and they were like children with attachment issues.
Response of the Priest

I desperately needed someone who could lead worship with a degree of competence, and to be sent a published author and poet was, frankly, over the top. I wasn’t expecting my prayers to receive a tangible response, never mind a blue-ribbon one. Rural congregations like St. John’s have earned a negative reputation for being desperate places of endless need, neglect and inefficiency. No one ever just walks in to these rural pastorates, and certainly not someone who has some local notoriety and professionalism. From the first time I saw the shabbiness of St. John’s I had wanted to turn this reputation around, and A’s presence was a startling, unexpected beginning. A’s arrival answered my immediate prayer need.

When A arrived at St. John’s, I was 54. My fatigue was showing. I felt pressured into keeping the intense schedule that I thought the congregation expected from me. I strived to meet the overly high expectations of the congregations I oversaw. There was no break in my schedule, no downtime.

One evening I hit a wall metaphorically. My prayer journal reveals my feelings at the time:

I must have help! I need someone to walk in the door who can preach. I’ve no time to find or to train someone. I need help and I need it NOW! Help!!!

The page in my journal was tear-stained, the letters written in capitals. I felt angry and experienced a sense of desperate surrender. So, for me, the problem was clear. Something needed to change. I had absolutely no resources to solve this problem.
Perhaps because I was keenly aware of the problem of my exhaustion and the unrealistic expectations of the congregation, I was also keenly aware of how A met a major need in the ministry. I clearly and immediately recognized A as an answer to prayer and a divine provision. I wrote in my journal,

God has sent me a writer as my preacher?!?!?!
Oh my, how could this be? This is unbelievable, I can’t believe my eyes.
Unheated churches with dilapidated outhouses don’t attract gifted authors, who just waltz in one morning. Or do they? Oh my!

I resolved my astonishment that a blue-ribbon response was given to my cry for help by simply choosing to believe the obvious, that God had answered my prayer. It was an act of obedience to trust. The congregation’s reaction was one of simple disinterest.

5.2.2 A Classically Trained Musician Arrives: The Story of B

God’s disorientating events breaking into St. John’s came through the oddest of people, and this continued. This time B, like A, just waltzed into St. John’s one morning, arriving during a difficult time. When B arrived, the worship music at St. John’s was led by a deaf matriarch with limited musical skills. She was an organist playing a pump organ that was run with a vacuum cleaner motor. It sounded terrible. The congregation struggled to follow the music, and this profoundly impacted their ability to worship.

Into this milieu, B arrived, a stranger in our midst. After worship one Sunday, she walked up to the newly purchased little Roland keyboard that the seniors had paid for, and she began to
play. B played like no one present had ever heard before, filling the twelve-pew church with “Ave Maria.” The magnificent roof rafters crafted in 1885 that produced awesome acoustics radiated a sound truly to the glory of God. B’s talent stunned us all, but it was not just her talent that caused us pause. B was from Eastern Europe and had been trained in one of the finest music schools in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Now, if the old pump organ run with a vacuum cleaner offered a disconnect with modern-day musical sensitivities, having a classically trained Eastern European pianist playing a mini Roland keyboard in the old pioneer church in Ravenscliffe was a disconnect of even greater and more astounding proportions. Muskoka in general and Ravenscliffe do not have a multicultural presence, yet here was a professionally trained Latvian musician playing in St. John’s.

For three years, B transformed the music at St. John’s. She was a catalyst that ushered the church away from the pump organ, except for a couple of traditional celebratory events a year. Besides introducing new music, she formed a small choir for one Easter. The little ragtag aging ensemble sang the contemporary piece “Here I Am to Worship” as an Easter anthem. Through B’s contribution to St. John’s, the music element of the worship service greatly improved and varied. The music improved so much that it became an avenue of evangelism that I could build into the Sunday worship. What a contrast to the limitation of three tunes the congregation had when I arrived.
**Response of the Congregation**

Before B arrived, no one criticized the quality of the music or challenged the congregation to do something to improve the situation. The congregation was far more concerned with maintaining the tradition of the pump organ and the loved organist’s ministry than with the quality of the worship.

The purpose of the musical element of the service was perceived as an opportunity for the organist to be part of the church, rather than a venue to open the heart to the gospel. The music was the congregation’s way of including the loved organist in the life of the community. Indeed, she had led worship for over 40 years, and it was her role. The organ was her organ. It was the organist’s very identity in the community of faith, and to remove her from this role was unthinkable and non-pastoral. Her failing health made the way for B.

When B ushered in a new era of music at St. John’s, the congregation was generally receptive. They accepted B’s music and the changes in the worship services to the extent that there were no signs that they did not like it. The verbal response was minimum. The congregants neither condemned nor praised B and her abilities.

With the changes, B brought the parishioners seemed to become a little more engaged in the worship. There was in a few an increased posture of openness while the hymns were being sung. Gradually, the singing became more audible. Several parishioners who had never
approached the altar to receive communion came to receive. This seemed to be a visible sign that a change had come to St. John’s.

The congregation’s response to B was mixed. Notably, they did not speak against B. To me, this was both a surprise and a very good sign that they accepted B and her ministry. Just as A’s presence opened the lay reader development, so B opened a willingness to accept a keyboard over a pump organ, which opened up the way for a contemporary style worship service and biblically based music as a way to teach the Scriptures.

The congregation’s acceptance of the gift B brought is evident in her legacy. There are now three talented young musicians at the church. By accepting the changes B brought, the congregation began to overcome their fear of change so as to welcome more change, or so I thought.

However, the congregation’s acceptance of B had clear limits. They did not fully welcome her into the congregation; they did not make an effort to know her or to build a relationship with her in the simplest ways. For example, they did not invite her over for tea.

In a general sense, there was likely a subtle change in the atmosphere of the church. I would hear people express their appreciation for the music. “The Spirit was with us today.” This type of statement was unheard of previously. It was very subtle change, yet people who never spoke about the worship before would come up to me and comment on the music. Was this an outcome of the music? Was it a small movement of the Spirit in them? This was hard to
tell, but it seemed that B had brought a taste of joy to the congregation’s worship. A talented musician had brought about a sense of well-being that had not been present before.

One woman seemed particularly impacted by B. This woman was a reserved, quiet woman who is filled with grace. Through B’s ministry, she experienced a sense of worship that had been seeking expression in her, or so it seemed to me. Although reserved by nature, she is now known on occasion to stand, smiling, and to clap gently during the hymns; she appears positively engaged and spontaneous—a stark contrast to her presenting nature. Signs of joy are present.

**Response of the Priest**

Before B arrived, the “worship” was offensive to me. The music was so bad that I felt it violated worship. I am not easily offended, but in my heart, I felt as though there was no worth being given to God through the music in the church. To me, worship is the core of my faith expression, and music is an essential element of biblically based, liturgically expressed Anglican worship that opens up my heart to the Holy Spirit. Worship—giving God, his worth—brings me to a humbled, submitted place so that I am able to hear from God and to respond.

My frustration was not about the lack of musical ability or the style of music; it was the lack of sincerity that upset me. The organist’s music embarrassed me to the point of asking for
God’s forgiveness. My surrender to this situation presented as utter frustration. My journal entry reads,

I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for what we did today.  
You call us to worship, to give you your worth, and we gave you an off-tune foghorn.  
Dear God, forgive us and help us; there is no way out of this. Help!

B’s presence with us seemed nothing short of a completely impossible event, a miracle by its very definition. I wrote,

No one will believe this. I don’t believe it. 
How can this happen? I’m too stunned to even be thankful. 
It can’t be real!!!

I experienced B’s ministry as a living miracle, like A’s. She brought hope, as did A. B’s ministry enlivened the worship, deepened my faith and enriched the congregation. When she played music that was deeply emotional, such as “Ave Maria,” the congregation was able to experience a new encounter with God through music, a new reverence and gratitude for encountering a sense of God that was greater than themselves.

The legacy remains of filling the building with beautiful music that brings the congregation a sense of God’s presence. Has it changed the hearts of the congregation? Has it transpired into a transformation of the heart? Has it brought them closer to God or impacted their devotional lives? For my part, I was thankful for the way I saw B’s music opened up the hearts of the people to the sermon. I could sense that the Spirit was able to move among the congregation, even if it was only subtle.
B impacted me in other ways as well. She had faced various personal challenges. She represented a stark contrast to my own life and middle-class experiences. Her experience of extreme poverty impacted me, even exhausted me, taking a great emotional toll. My prayers for her during this time were intense. I felt like I was living in a place where I was confronted by harsh reality and thrust into levels of surrendering prayer that I could not have even imagined beforehand.

I believe that the congregation missed out on an incredible opportunity to be confronted by the reality of life that B faced and represented. The congregation didn’t know what to do with B; she was so full of life, extroverted with intense life challenges and I believe she exhausted the community. The congregation did not know how to respond to B because it didn’t take time to understand her needs. Yet, as I walked through several crises that B faced, I felt God’s presence the strongest. The day I walked her back to her home, from which she had been evacuated due to the Big East River flooding, the ground that was once lush grass was now hard sand, and there in the middle of this hardened earth was a single crocus. Against all possibility of growth, there it was; I felt God’s hand that day, and hope.

After three years, B left as quickly as A had. I invited several talented young musicians to come among us, and they took turns filling B’s role and providing the music for our worship service. The congregation said that they missed B’s music talents. When she is remembered, it is with a sense of mystery. Rather than the deep unspoken sadness they felt when A left, they remember B as a quirky person who was never fully understood and who disappeared one day.
5.2.3 A Financial Gift Arrives: The Story of C

After the Spirit took A’s and B’s disorientating presences beyond the boundaries of Ravenscliffe, my third disorientating dilemma came through C, the great-granddaughter of one of the pioneer families; she was one of St. John’s own. The morning my flabbergasted treasurer called to say that C. had donated $100,000 for the bathrooms I could hardly grasp what she was saying. I had responded to the congregation’s wish for a hall and turned it into a vision. There had been nothing as concrete as figuring out how the vision of a hall would actually come about and be funded. There certainly had not been anything as organized as a financial campaign. The hall was an embryonic vision, dusted off from the past.

Response of the Congregation

The congregation did not see C’s gift as an answer to prayer. The news spread through the grapevine quickly, so that by the time I made the announcement on Sunday it was old news. The congregation seemed oddly and increasingly fixated on the desire for washrooms to replace the outhouse. I wondered if this unusual shift in focus was their response to feeling awkward or even embarrassed by such a large financial gift, so in not knowing how to respond they reverted to the familiarity and comfort of their old pioneer families’ jealousies.

Confronted with the reality that real change was now possible, the congregation quickly reverted to their fear of change. As long as the vision remained only a vision, no one needed to act on it. C’s gift made the vision a real possibility, and the congregation had trouble
navigating the notion of a tangible structural change taking place. One person wanted the hall as a separate building and did not want to leave the church to go to the bathroom: two opposing desires. This was very frustrating until I realized that it was an expression of fear of moving forward. This 80 years old, had been the initiator of the drilled well, with its capped top, but the idea of touching the church itself paralyzed her.

In many ways, the 2002 congregation saw themselves as stewards of the past that defined them. Various parishioners talked about the past with a reverence that was ill-advised. Once I stood with a faithful parishioner as she gazed at the property across from the church that was once the old post office. She described a scene of horses and carriages going by, which seemed more real to her than I did standing beside her. Indeed, I suggested this, and she agreed. Another member of the congregation told me of being visited by an ancestor who came “over the fields” and met with her. These experiences had gone unexplained in the absence of priests and settled into unexamined moments requiring informed inquiry.

The congregation wanted a hall and washrooms, yet moving ahead and creating this change was very difficult, whereas C’s gift confirmed for me that once again God had provided. The gift was received with jealousy and ingratitude by the congregation. This response showed their true perspective. The washrooms were desired not for the well-being of God’s church or as a way to honour God but rather to facilitate the aging population that no longer wanted to cross an icy path to a freezing cold outhouse “heated” by a light bulb. In this sense, their “vision” was not born from a spiritual or evangelical desire or mission; it was not motivated by faith at all. It was actually a desire for personal comfort. The desire for washrooms was
self-serving, not an effort to honour God in a way that would impact the Kingdom. Some of
the younger congregants expressed concern that without washroom facilities, the church
would not grow numerically. However, the old guard did not share this concern.

C’s health took her to a nursing home shortly after her gift was given. She lived long enough
to visit the new addition once. She said with tears in her eyes, “Thank you; you haven’t
changed my church.” Cs gift had come with no strings of request attached, none. Her
sentiment gave us a great compliment, and it reflected hope for the present.

**Response of the Priest**

The morning the treasurer called to say that C had donated $100,000 for the hall, I was so
stunned that it took me almost a day to actually believe she had offered such a gift. I had
shared tea with her many times in the family’s 100-year-old farmhouse where she lived,
sitting beside the old wood stove, enjoying the original oilcloth on the kitchen table. It was
yet another experience of stepping back in time. Nothing would suggest that C had the ability
to offer such a large financial gift. I felt that she was entrusting the future of the church she
loved into my hands; I am still haunted by this trust, in the face of all the obstacles ahead. In
my journal, I scribed,

I don’t believe it!!! I just do not believe it!!! This just cannot be real!!!
The words are far easier to write than the experience was to integrate. Little country churches like St. John’s just do not have gifts like this bestowed on them, ever. Yet, here it was. The definition of a miracle is when something happens outside the naturally existing laws, and this financial gift arrived as a miracle, an answer to my prayers, if sustainability, vitality and mission were to be anything more than pulpit inspirations.

I felt that the task of using this gift in a way that honoured C was my responsibility. When the church received the gift, it suddenly made the vision of the hall a real possibility. I was confronted with the reality that the vision God gave us might actually be fulfilled. I had to face the reality of my own rhetoric of hope and surrender to God.

From my perspective, God was teaching me yet again that he answers prayer. I perceived the gift as a direct response to the ministry that was unfolding in the church. It was becoming all the clearer that God actually had a plan for St. John’s. I had trouble believing this. Deep down I believed that God, like everyone else, had seemingly abandoned this little congregation, yet that was proving not to be true.

5.2.4 A Theatre Director Arrives: The Story of D

The next event began at a meeting in my living room within a year of C’s donation. Even with C’s gift we were still short of funds to secure a contract for the addition. I organized a brainstorming session to consider how we could meet the financial needs to fulfill the vision
of the church addition. D, a stranger to me, arrived at my door to join us for the meeting. Her presence was a surprise to us, and her idea was completely unexpected.

D was an amateur theatre producer who lived in Huntsville and wanted to use her skills to raise funds for the addition to the church. She offered to direct a stage production of Annie at Huntsville’s Algonquin Theatre as a fundraiser. Ravenscliffe had never been involved in a major local stage production before. This was a ground-breaking event for our community, which typically viewed a fundraiser as a bake sale to raise several hundred dollars. The concept of a fundraising event on such a grand scale had never been conceived.

To make this fundraiser happen, several major factors were required. Foremost, this fundraiser would require start-up funds of about $30,000. In response to this need, the local five-member ACW offered to front the $30,000 production fee. The ACW was a group of elderly women with a Depression mentality towards money. In spite of this, without even a quibble, the women immediately caught D’s vision for a production and wrote the cheque unconditionally, in drastic contrast to their long-standing process.

The second requirement for the production to occur was for the congregation to rally together to provide as many services as possible. And the congregation—the whole handful of them—responded enthusiastically. One of the ladies designed and created all the costumes with a small team. Three men designed, produced and set up the staging, sets and props. An artist was brought in to paint the sets. D managed the finances and marketing for the production,
along with directing and producing. She also arranged for an out-of-town 25-piece orchestra. The actors were unpaid local children.

Annie ran to a sold-out crowd every night, for two weeks running. After expenses and after the ACW was paid back, the profit was $27,000. The publicity that came to the little country church from the wider community, which had thought it was closed, was remarkable. The reserved little congregation may have had more trouble with their new-found visibility than I realized.

The congregational response when the production was over was noticeable silence. Even though they were deeply involved in the workings of the production—making the sets, sewing all the costumes, serving as ushers, funding the project and acting as stage and set managers—they never celebrated the part they played in this incredible event. When the play was over, it was as though it had never happened: no reminiscing, no getting together to watch the CD, no inviting of the children who played the orphans to come to St. John’s, no farewell thank you celebrations for the volunteers. I tried to promote each of these, but to no avail. It took me a long time to realize that my efforts to bring life were going against the grain of their natural instincts as a folk community.¹ This may account for their detachment, which I perceived negatively as unresponsiveness and disinterest.

Response of the Wider Community

The response of the wider community, which had thought that St. John’s was closed, surprised me, for the door had been open every Sunday since 1992. The little folk community dismissed the community’s perspective as being irrelevant, but I realized that the community’s new perspective was yet another positive hurdle in the survival of the little church. Ushering in necessary structural change to a church is difficult. Changing the inner attitudinal culture of a church is even harder, and changing what the wider secular community believes about a church is harder again, but so necessary. Annie was the first catalyst for the wider community to see the little church with new eyes.

Response of the Priest

I wrote in my journal,

My pen is stilled because I have just been part of a modern-day miracle. In the midst of it I can barely stand back and reflect upon this…this…miracle—there is no other word. The ladies count pennies and are as cheap and mean-spirited as they come, (sorry, Lord, but they are) and then write a $30,000 cheque without the bat of the eye, without so much as a discussion? Annie grossed more than any other production the Algonquin Theatre has ever hosted. I just do not understand! I just do not understand! What is going on! Tell me! Show me! I am stymied! What just happened? All this would be astounding in the town church, but to happen in the little country church is unheard of.

Within a month of the production, D was gone, leaving as suddenly as A, B and C had. As with the others, on her departure no one in the congregation reminisced about this incredible time in the life of St. John’s. The congregation had a DVD of the production given to them
but never watched it. When I suggested we have an *Annie* night and invite the cast for a BBQ to thank them, the idea was rejected with thunderous silence. *Annie* was another movement of God’s miraculous grace among us; I was sure of that.

### 5.2.5 A Chartered Accountant Arrives: The Story of E

In 2013, six years after the addition was built, the fifth significant event occurred. St. John’s was yet again without a treasurer; the congregation had gone through five treasurers since I had arrived in 2002. C was the first. She had been the treasurer at St. John’s for 40 years, and her accounting system amounted to keeping a list of the few transactions in a recording book for personal cheques. To say that St. John’s had a simple accounting system when I arrived in 2002 is an understatement, but it lays the groundwork for understanding my astonishment on A’s arrival.

On the Sunday when E walked into St. John’s, it was by way of odd twists and turns. Later she would reminisce, “I don’t even know what I was doing in St. John’s that particular day. I guess it was just meant to be.” E was an associate of the Sisters of St. John the Divine in Toronto, and she walked into a once-in-a lifetime worship service at St. John’s where I was installing a new associate of the same order, who had been unable to travel to the convent for her installation. The little twelve-pew country church for the first time ever had an SSJD associate in every pew that morning. E was staggered when she came into the little out-of-the-way church to find the “convent” present. E had just moved to Huntsville, and she
decided to return the next Sunday, intrigued by St. John’s. The next week she offered to be our treasurer; she was a chartered accountant.

Response of the Congregation

The congregation knew the trouble the church was having in finding yet another treasurer, but they were totally unburdened by it, as though it was not their concern. When I announced that God had sent us a chartered accountant it was received with the usual disinterest. E put the books on a solid accounting footing, so that someone without a financial background could navigate the church bookkeeping. She also clarified what was exempt from the diocesan apportionment, allowing the little church to glean some of the benefits town churches accountants had long discovered. E brought St. John’s financial life into the 21st century, a benefit most of the congregation ignored the importance of in their desire to survive. When E left there was no goodbye party, not even a card.

Response of the Priest

This excerpt from my journal captures my response to this event:

Here we are again, no treasurer, and no one in sight. The horizon is bare of hope. The wardens are stumped and frustrated. I am so tired after the summer; can’t you just waltz someone in the door? I am even too tired to be prayerful in my asking. I need a treasurer. Is there any chance you could accommodate? I’m too tired to get emotionally invested. I hate administration glitches!

I can’t believe it! A chartered accountant as treasurer of the little church? There isn’t a country church anywhere with a chartered accountant as their
treasurer, and right after my little journal pout. This just can’t be happening. It just can’t!!!

For the next year, E did an excellent job as our treasurer and was able to organize the administration details of a little church that was expanding into a template that we could follow for years to come. E left St. John’s to become our hospital chaplain.

5.3 Summary Reflection

Each of these five ministry events were precipitated by urgent ministry needs and prayers of surrender, but each was not an isolated ad hoc happening, for each was in general response to one of the goals of our strategic plan.

The ministry needs far surpassed any resources available. These events were jotted in my journals as a healthy prayer outlet for me but, due to the urgent responsibilities of a diverse multipoint parish, not fully reflected upon until time permitted. Never did I anticipate my journal being utilized for anything more than my private reflection; it was never intended to provide data for a spiritual autobiography.

The public role the journal now has leaves me feeling vulnerable and exposed. Each event left me in a state of shattering disbelief and astonishing amazement. Five women arrived bringing gifts that would bring God’s newness of life to Ravenscliffe; they came as answers to my agonizing prayers. Each of these women brought their own measure of considerable benefit to our church community. Yet oddly, when the individual of change moved away from St. John’s, the community did not even reminisce about her gifted time with them, even
though the gifts they each brought positively affected the congregation and contributed to tangible changes that would increase the appeal of St. John’s to newcomers.

From the pulpit, I drew the little congregation’s attention to each of those five occurrences as illustrations of God being with us, but beyond this I did not question the congregation’s passive behaviour. Nor did I call them to reflect on the biblical insights unfolding in their midst.

The analysis of the five events was not done until much later as I was shedding my Christendom lens and awakening to the harm of my ministry-of-presence attitude. It was my assumption that the congregation had been as affected by the unexpected five events as I was. I expected to find evidence of this in the questionnaires; it proved a shock to see the absence of these events in them.

On reflection, I see how I failed to awaken the congregation to their spiritual necessity because I was blinded by the same spiritual cataracts they wear. Our perspective needed to be changed from a Christendom perspective to a biblical perspective.
Chapter 6
Methodology (Action in Ministry)

6.1 Introduction

My methodology is based heavily on self-reflection and prayerful insights drawn from my spiritual autobiography, the raw data that reveals the heart and soul of my ministry. I need to learn how to mentor deep formational change in a congregation, and to mentor implies one who has already walked the path. This section evidences that the perspective change I seek to mentor is a journey I am stumbling through by arduous experience. It reveals that both theory and experience support the hypothesis.

This chapter presents the purpose and intent of the methodology of the present study. Next, the action-based research, including the questionnaire, limitations of the research and questionnaire and a reflection on the quality and value of the questionnaire are provided.

6.2 Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to conduct a case study analysis of one tiny rural Anglican congregation to move towards an understanding of the challenges faced by small congregations in rural Ontario and why these congregations might be in decline. This case study will hopefully point to how the trend of the decline of rural small-town congregations can be halted and even reversed so that they can become vital, sustainable, evangelically re-missioned hubs of new life and new beginning.
The purpose of the seven-question questionnaire was to hear the congregational experience of congregational life and to analyze whether their experience demonstrates the apparent necessity of upset through disorientating dilemmas required in a new-life transformative perspective change as my experience in ministry is showing. The conclusions will begin to build a case for or against a highly relational, non-confrontational pastoral method of ministry known as a ministry of presence, a method that has been the norm in St. John’s and all my other dying congregations for decades.

I analyze the questionnaires using a qualitative narrative analysis and a quantitative approach based on language analysis. My purpose for choosing a dual approach is to confirm the reliability of the subjective interpretation of my narrative analysis using a second more objective approach and to counter the unreliability of the data being collected from such a small sampling of only eleven questionnaires. I also wanted to practice the quantitative language analysis method that I developed during my course on rural ministry from an assignment based on Robert Redfield’s seminal article “The Folk Society.” My elementary understanding of research analysis is that there is not one approach to analysis that is conclusively considered valid for such a small research sampling, complicated by the researcher being in a close pastoral relationship with the subjects.

6.3 Intent

The intention of the case study is to discover what might account for the new life I assumed was emerging at St. John’s, a small rural congregation that was in severe decline in 2002. A
second intention behind this case study is to contribute to the small body of literature that exists in the Anglican Church of Canada on fast-disappearing small rural Christendom congregations. My intention in making this small contribution is to suggest to the wider church that these seemingly unimportant congregations and their churches may still have a contribution to make in the increasingly secular society they exist in, but this contribution will be dependent on their movement from a culturally informed faith to a conversional and transformative faith. This is a perspective change. Perspective changes are learned and can be intentionally guided. My intention is for this paper to be in service to the primary purpose of the church, which is the evangelical mission of Jesus, the Christ, for without transformative conversion all our good works are incomplete and secondary.

I expected to discover through the action-in-ministry research about the events and the people who had brought the congregation a sense of new life. I expected to see them named and remarked upon throughout the questionnaires. I expected to see joy and delight in their answers about being in this little church on the move. I expected the respondents to write about being caught up in this amazing, impossible journey in Ravenscliffle. I expected to hear a quiet pride about the accomplishments in modernizing a pioneer structure and how they enjoyed inviting friends and family to church. I expected them to speak of God’s presence with them and among them during the years of transitioning from severe decline to budding new life. I thought someone might have seen the transformation of St. John’s as a modern-day miracle. I was expecting the questionnaires to reveal the respondents’ enthusiasm and an eager hope for the future. I expected the questionnaire to be a medium for them to freely express the joy they felt but were too reserved to express. I expected that participating in
research that was aimed to be encouraging for other rural congregations to draw forth a deep pleasure in being a part of something bigger than themselves. I expected the respondents to respond differently than in my day-to-day encounters with them because they were intentionally being asked in the questionnaire to reflect prayerfully on their experience before answering.

6.4 Developing the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was drawn up from my experience of a ministry that had moved forward the quality of the Sunday service, created increased opportunities for faith development, modernized a building, and reconnected with its neighbourhood, all between the years of 2002 and 2014. It was a ministry that had ushered in a transformative perspective change in me, the priest and researcher, and the questionnaire was a tool to capture how the congregation had experienced this wonderful time of ministry and new life that I had experienced.

My knowledge of developing questionnaires was rudimentary, but I knew what I wanted to find out. The questionnaire was not consciously developed to evaluate a transformative perspective change because I had yet to understand the role it plays.

I wanted a questionnaire that would not lead the participants towards the answers I sought, so I chose to simply mail the questionnaire and the consent rather than utilize the church as the physical context, thereby implicitly prompting a more deeply considered faith response. If
there was a change in perspective indicated by new life, it would be easily evident, with no need to prompt.

The questionnaire was designed to be as non-directive as possible, so the responses would be genuine. Because I am the researcher, the priest and a participant, I was in a place of conflict of interest, so the need to deliberately lower my ability to influence the responses to the questionnaire and to acknowledge the risk of my influence was essential. Paradoxically, my closeness to the situation allowed me awareness of the wider historical, situational and personal factors that the responses allude to, factors that only someone very close to the situation would know. My closeness to the responders brings risk of biased interpretation and so demands integrity of interpretive translation in the analysis. The broader and sometimes more accurate understanding of the response is worth the risk.

6.5 The Questionnaire

I created a simple seven-question questionnaire for my action-based research.

The questionnaire supplies a representative sampling of the congregation’s comments that would be analyzed using both a qualitative narrative approach and a quantitative language analysis to determine whether St. John’s was indeed going through a transformative perspective change that would account for the new life that appeared to be springing up at St. John’s.
The seven open-ended questions were designed to elicit a general picture of life at St. John’s, a picture I believed would provide evidence supporting my hypothesis. I did not make the association with the strategic plan clear to the respondents, as at the time the questionnaire was developed I wasn’t clear about the role the strategic plan might have played.

Eighteen questionnaires were mailed out on Toronto School of Theology letterhead. Twelve were returned. One was primarily discarded because the responses were corrupted by the textbook answers given. The questionnaires were colour-coded to indicate the respondents’ time of arrival at St. John’s, assuming this information might have interpretive value for analysis.

The first four questionnaires were marked with yellow stickers and are the responses from those parishioners who experienced congregational life at St. John’s prior to 1997, that is, before the parish of North Muskoka was created, and who thus experienced the 1990 event of being cut off from the pastoral oversight of All Saints Anglican Church in Huntsville.

Three questionnaires were marked with blue stickers to indicate parishioners who were present in the congregation when the parish was formed in 1997, bringing together six tiny pioneer congregations under half-time priestly oversight. This group also experienced the transition of St. John’s from a pioneer facility to its modernization.
Four questionnaires were marked with red stickers to indicate the responses came from those who arrived after 2008, post St. John’s modernization, so these respondents have no lived experience of the state of decline that existed in 2002 when I arrived.

The yellow and blue sticker parishioners were present for all the events I noted in my journal.

6.6 Limitations of the Research and the Questionnaire

The questionnaire revealed the respondents’ general perspective on the church at a particular time. There were several assumptions inherent in the questionnaire. It assumed there was more life in St. John’s in 2014 than there was in 2002, and this movement is referred to as “new life.” The questionnaire carried the assumption that new life was experienced and would be articulated by those who answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire assumes that life is on a continuum, so improvement or increase in vitality, positive outcomes, increase in positive attitudes and behaviours all informed the hypothesis to name new life as a given at St. John’s from 2002 to 2014, when I retired.

Further, I assumed that my ability to interpret God’s movement in the parish was from pure intentions and not corrupted from false purpose. I assumed the congregation was living in as highly contextualized worship and ministry focus as I was. I assumed and never questioned the congregation’s faith, believing the decline and all the problems and challenges it brought were born from external circumstances, so I never stood back to assess the congregation’s faith maturity or lack of it. In other words, I brought a Christendom-shaped and -formed lens
to view my congregation; it was ingrained in me to not judge the faith of others. I had assumed I was seeing through clear eyes when I left seminary to lead St. John’s.

I know all the participants answering the questionnaire. I can identify them by their handwriting, the language they used in their responses and the return addresses on the envelopes they sent the questionnaires in. I know their families, have been in their homes, and know the circumstances that surround their responses. I have turned my obvious conflict of interest status into an asset by bringing a better-informed and more comprehensive understanding to responses that are terse.

6.7 Reflection on the Quality and Value of the Questionnaire

I have compared my questionnaire against professional standards to better understand how researchers use Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory as a functional tool for measuring the transformative process.

This research indicates that the information I sought to retrieve in my questionnaire is far more difficult to ascertain than I had expected; even the professional researchers have limitations. The open-endedness of the questions and the dual analysis give complementary pictures of what was going on in the congregation and in me. The narrative analysis revealed the inner life of the congregation and its lack of a perspective change, while the language analysis unexpectedly revealed their response to the strategic plan’s goals.

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The questionnaire had value even though compiled by an amateur, not because of its volume of data or its clarity of outcome but because of my ability to comprehensively interpret the data with integrity.
7.1 Introduction

The research has four points of contact that will be used for comparison. First there are the tangible changes that took shape in St. John’s because I was following a home-grown eight-goal strategic plan, a plan grounded in the historic fading vision of the pre-1997 congregation and given a present-day voice in the vision of the 2002 congregation. Secondly there is the spiritual journey this ministry has set upon me. Thirdly are the responses to question 1 of the questionnaire, which identifies the occurrences that became the categories to determine how the congregation experienced the new life at St. John’s. This method was designed so the analysis of the responses would be an inter-questionnaire process, allowing outside influence and interpretation. Finally, the responses to questions 1 through 6 indicated the significance of each of the categories of new life that emerged from question 1, revealing the fullest understanding of what might be accounting for the new life at St. John’s. Question 7 was expected to offer confirmation.

7.2 Research Question and Hypothesis

The research question I asked was:” What is going on at St. John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe that might account for what appears to be the new life springing up?”

My hypothesis is that St. John’s is going through a transformative perspective change. The reason for my hypothesis is that both St. John’s and I changed between 2002 and 2014. The
tangible changes going on at St. John’s aligned with four of the eight goals, which anticipated the creation of healthy congregational life and in turn new life, the aim of the strategic plan.

7.3 The Evidence for New Life According to the Strategic Plan

It was the results I was seeing from the eight goals of my strategic plan which first led me to believe there was new life at St. John’s. The Sunday service became the primary context for developing the first goal, which was Christian growth and development. A full liturgical year of worship experience was now being offered. The contemporary Anglican hymnal *Common Praise* was now being sung from, with new biblically based music being introduced. I had an eighty-five-year-old associate priest with me. We had two of the finest young musicians in Huntsville playing their Yamaha keyboards each Sunday morning, and we had raised up five associates of Sisters of St. John the Divine and five lay readers. I held a weekly teaching session called “Preach Club” and held a monthly Taizé service. I was growing in a surrendering faith by leaps and bounds, and I believed everyone else was too.

The Muskoka deck that unexpectedly came with the addition became the setting for the second goal of congregation development. We were hosting gatherings that had social, outreach and friendship-style evangelism benefits: weekly BBQs on the deck all summer, one-pot suppers monthly all winter, local music concerts, a yearly fiddle fest, a midweek seniors group and a monthly offsite women’s retreat. Each were well received.
We had a “stay in touch with people” approach to the communication system. We had a website, a Facebook page and a monthly electronic newsletter to augment the traditional spring, thanksgiving and Christmas letters.

We held two worship services per year designed to attract newcomers: a traditional Book of Common Prayer Evensong and a historically driven Decoration Day service that remembered those who had gone before us and who now lay in the cemetery.

Partnerships were being forged with local agencies for community initiatives like a community kitchen outreach program and a Christmas outreach. A portable microphone system was gifted to us by the Anglican Foundation for the hard-of-hearing among us, a system that was shared with the other congregations and gave voice for two years to life-size puppets travelling on the back of a pickup truck in Huntsville’s Santa Claus parade.

Our third goal, to create opportunities for the Word of God to be experienced by children, was humbly honoured from our great hope that little ones would come. We had a “kids” craft and book table at the back of the church, and children were encouraged to move about during the service as they needed. The few children who came were celebrated and encouraged to see themselves as being in God’s living room. Suitable snacks for children were always quickly available. There was always a gingerbread house to decorate on Christmas Eve and an scavenger hunt on Easter Day, with clues teaching about the different parts of the church.
Our financial life goal was strengthening, as the financial contributions that were returned to the diocese as our fair share of the episcopal system had increased significantly due to the increase in worship services, as had the overall financial revenue sourced from the increase in the number of social gatherings for outreach purposes. However, there were no initiatives to ease the unfairness of my half-time stipend, no offers to increase my inadequate mileage allowance. I didn’t ask for anything, and they didn’t offer anything, which made for an unhealthy personal ministry that contributed to an unhealthy weight gain in me. My unconditional calling needed healthy boundaries, boundaries I was not seeing modeled in any of my senior and also overweight peers.

Our last goal was to care for the building so as to serve God’s work. In six years the old pioneer church has been transformed into an energy-efficient, attractive, well-maintained full-service building. We had transformed our bush driveway and parking lot into a safer circular formation, and we levelled the nave floor, for safety reason.

The congregation had replaced itself numerically over 10 years and was 15 years’ younger, which seemed an obvious sign of new life, but I know now that is only true if everyone is working from the same definition, the same perspective.

The action-in-ministry hypothesis emerged because I trusted what I saw, heard and felt. My physical senses told me that by us attending to these goals, the Spirit had ushered in new life, and the culture of death was changing to one of life. I also knew that my soul had been deeply converted to new life. My energy and optimism seemed boundless for these extended
years, and I know abiding joy. All that remained was to confirm how the congregation had experienced this new life.

Conclusion: The strategic plan guided a direction for tangible exterior change and created the potential for a perspective change, but no perspective change was evidenced.

7.4 Qualitative Analysis of the Questionnaires

7.4.1 Narrative Analysis Benefits

The narrative analysis allowed a historical timeline to be viewed to see long-term effects of single disruptive events in the respondents, and the analysis allowed access to the attitudes of the respondents. The method allows for an inter-questionnaire comparison of the questionnaires, permitting variants in respondents’ comments to be noted, compared and put into a wider interpretive frame. The analysis provided practical illustration of attitudes and values concerning authority and governance differing widely in different generations and of this difference being a source of conflict. The narrative reveals that it is possible for people to be imprisoned by attitudes that no longer form the present-day situation and that havoc is caused when those attitudes seek to impose an obsolete reality onto a new one. The narrative method was able to reveal conflict as a sign of new life, which I had not recognized.

1. The narrative analysis has benefit for the pastoral relationship. It opened up what the respondents felt more than what they experienced through their senses. This increased understanding of my parishioners validated the necessity of my pastoral role, but that
role must move beyond a passive ministry of presence to be effective. The method exposed implicit information about how upsetting events manifested themselves in people’s lives and revealed that what is not said is often as important as what is said. This research method allowed the priest access to some aspects of that unspoken inner life of her parishioners. I learned from the analysis to expect parishioners’ old attitudes to clash with new attitudes, and I recognized that what is new amounts to a disorientating dilemma, even if they are seeking new life. The narrative reveals how complex parish ministry is and the challenges that arise given that it is being done by those of us with a generalist training.

2. There are benefits from this kind of research for parish ministry. The narrative analysis revealed far more relevant data on what was going on inside the respondents than was expected by the researcher. Upsets in the congregation are always potential disorientating dilemmas, which if not biblically reframed can fester for decades and create parishioners who are decidedly difficult and filled with rage, tarnishing their own experience of faith and their biblical witness to those around them. Parishioners’ frames of reference can keep them imprisoned in realities that literally no longer exist.

3. The narrative analysis benefits the diocese in that it reveals the long-lasting negative impact that unmanaged diocesan change can have for decades. The analysis allowed a historical look at some of the outcomes of changes initiated but not managed by the diocese, which began with the town priest’s retirement in 1990, ending a thirty-year
ministry as the priest-in-charge of All Saints Anglican Church in Huntsville and all the mission congregations surrounding it.

4. The analysis shows this event to be the catalytic event that set in motion an unmanaged change, which had a negative impact on the ministries of three priests and a long-time faithful lay reader. It can be cited as the primary source of the conflict alluded to in questionnaire #8. This off site priest’s retirement changed the governance and the long-established authority structures of St. John’s, a change that was never internalized by the pre-1990 congregation, who continued to operate out of the old style of governance and understanding of authority.

5. The analysis bears witness to the necessity for a diocese to manage change as a disorientating dilemma, so that the change is integrated and so that congregations, parishioners and priests do not get hurt. Dioceses have an ethical and biblical responsibility to recognize that administrative changes, and all systemic changes they implement, serve as disorientating dilemma, which can be spiritually and theologically fruitful when ushered in with proper policies, procedures, communication and implementation planning. They can also have a devastating effect on congregations, rectors and parishioners when these supports are not put in place.

6. The narrative analysis led me as a researcher to understand that one of the characteristics of new life may be the presence of conflict, a notion that has altered my simple notion of new life. The narrative analysis revealed practical information
about disorientating dilemma that went far beyond where the transformative learning articles took me. The narrative analysis enriched the definition of a disorientating dilemma by providing lived illustrations of the diverse experience, and it demonstrated the long-term negative effects if a dilemma is not resolved. It allowed me to see that emotionally immature or psychologically unbalanced people, when a disorientating dilemma is not addressed, can become capable of rage that erupts into lashing out.

7. The narrative analysis offers a very different picture of St. John’s than what I experienced. I knew about the events of 1990 and 1997, but I knew them intellectually, not from experience. The long-term members of the congregation who responded knew these events from experience. Because of their anger, they presented as negative biblical witnesses to newcomers to the congregation, and they made congregational life difficult. This is the reason disorientating dilemmas need to be identified and understood as being catalytic threshold moments when theologically sound spiritual growth and formation can be mentored in a parishioner towards a transformative conversion. Training is required for this.

The narrative analysis has led me to believe that educationalist Jack Mezirow is correct that transformative conversion is rationally initiated, supported by other factors, but transformative conversion is impossible without the primary will of intent. People must choose new life, and new life will always require change. This is validated biblically in Deuteronomy 30:19. As the disorientating dilemma creates the opportunity for a change in
direction, whether the person follows the learning opportunity towards a deeper relationship with God is a matter of personal choice. If left on their own after experiencing a disorientating upset they may simply return to their well-established ways of thinking and being, ignoring the significant questions the upset confronted them with. The person or congregation may simply follow whatever path happens to be closest to them, whether it is healthy or not. A mentor in matters of faith, one would assume, is a spiritually mature priest/minister, but this is a huge assumption given the variety of and at times eclectic training clerics receive. One would believe ordination to be the moment of choosing, but current trends would say that choosing comes in baptism. If these adult learning-journeys in formation are not mentored well, they end up as ends, rather than means to God – *missio Dei*, that is, God’s self revelation as the One who loves the world.¹

Anglicanism seems to assume that adults immersed in a rich faith experience of worship and study instinctually learn the spiritual life and how to do ministry. As decline settles in, the externals of the faith fall away, and people and congregations fall away too, because the deep conversion formation never took root in their souls. A spiritual mentor who understands the learning stages in adult perspective change as spiritual formation can utilize the upset of decline as the catalyst for life-giving transformational conversion.

### 7.4.2 The Method of Narrative Analysis Data Collection

I began the narrative analysis by taking time to become acutely aware of the information I was naturally importing into the narrative analysis process because of the long term and

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deeply pastoral relationship I had with each of the respondents. I then slowly and deliberately read the question being answered before I read the corresponding response. I then slowly read each response, twice out loud so to be deliberate and intentional in grasping the literal meaning of the respondent’s answer to the question. I then sat holding each response and listening to the words, and phrases chosen so to pay close attention to the emotions or experiences the script may be suggesting or alluding to, noting whether the words were narrating experiences that held embedded feeling or whether the response was more analytical. I then gathered the collective responses and listened for any data that may be emerging from an inter-questionnaire read.

The slow deliberate read has three benefits: it prepares me to write an intentional, well listened to description of St. John’s using the responses from the questionnaire either directly or indirectly; it allows me to identify from question one the categories of the signs of new life at St. John’s which would be utilized later in the language analysis of the questionnaire and to establish a weight for each sign using the data gathered from the second through sixth question.

7.4.3 Five Descriptive Perspectives Observed

Introducing the descriptive narratives of St. John’s according to the questionnaires responses

The five descriptive narratives that follow is woven together from different perspectives using the direct responses from the questionnaires. The questionnaire begins with the instruction: Before you begin please take a few quiet moments to think back on your experiences at St. John, taking notice of what you have seen, heard, touched, felt or even smelled. Feel free to use a maximum of three sheets of paper for your responses.
The first narrative is drawn from question 1:

*Please respond generally to the research question: What do you believe is going on at St. John the Baptist Church in Ravenscliff that might account for what appears to be the new life springing up?*

The first narrative is presented in four parts. Each part presents a composite, description of the little, rural Anglican congregation in Ravenscliff according to the responders themselves and arranged in the order of the years each attended St. John’s, reflecting the critical events the respondents were exposed to.

The second descriptive narrative is drawn from the collective responses given by the respondents to questions two through six. These questions are as follows:

Question 2. *Please identify some characteristics of life in St. John’s as you experience it.*

Question 3. *Please describe a time/event/situation or moment when you experienced new life at St. John’s. Can you give a rough date?*

Question 4. *How do you experience God being glorified at St. John’s? Please only one example.*

Question 5. *What is the moment you remember most clearly at St. John’s?*

Question 6. *Why do you attend St. John’s?*

The third descriptive narrative is drawn from question 7:

*Do you believe St. John’s is a church in decline or on the cusp of new beginning? Why?*

In the fourth narrative, I bring forward my own observations based on the responses as the parish priest of this congregation.
In the fifth and final descriptive narrative, I offer the unattainable narrative which acknowledges those who were present in 2002 when I first arrived at St. John’s, those who laid the primary groundwork for modernizing change through the vision they carried, the motions they passed for structural change and the follow-up actions that gave life to their motions. I have buried them all.

The descriptive narratives of St. John’s are then given a conclusion. On this concluding point the descriptive narrative approach begins to serve the increasingly hard data of research analysis, with my comments increasingly becoming more analytical as I shift from being the parish priest to being the researcher, the uncomfortable journey from a subjective pastoral perspective on the responses to one that seeks more objectivity.

Question one, from all the questionnaires tells the story of new life as noted in the responses, and creates the categories for the language analysis to determine the signs of new life in St. John’s. Questions two through six invite the respondents to reflect more specifically on their experience of this new life at St. John’s, and to give weight to each of the new signs identified in question one for use in the language analysis. This first and second narratives each conclude with a summary statement drawn from the questionnaire excluded from the language analysis.

The questionnaire ends with:

Thank You. Please mail the consent form and the questionnaire in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope provided.

The first descriptive narrative

Question 1

Observations drawn from the responses of those who attended St. John’s prior to 1997 when
the parish was formed. These responses I colour coded as yellow.

St. John’s congregational life is gentle and without extreme, a congregation that has active lay involvement as their hope, and believe themselves to be attractive to those who need some comfort in their lives; one adamant, strident voice sounds an alarm that there is no new life in St. John’s. It will take time (until question 7) for that alarm to give expression to its evangelical concern that there is no mission to young families in St. John’s. The church carries the personified role in the community of being the keeper of the Ravenscliffe pioneer history, offering a living, sacred, historic timeline through the presence of the church building and the oral tradition of remembering which bears witness to St. John’s being both a welcoming and spiritual home for people from diverse Christian backgrounds. New people have been trickling in, people who bring greater diversity into the congregation and it is wondered if these “occurrences” bring a discovery of fresh opportunities. The unspoken dilemma is in holding the cherished, sacred status quo when fresh opportunity comes with new people. The congregation is most comfortable incorporating those with family and familiar relationship and find incorporation into the congregation is best secured when they invite new people to gather and take on responsibilities they themselves enjoy. St. John’s congregation is well seasoned and knows that those who fit in the best are those who bring the values of hard work, a willingness to pitch in where ever it is needed, bring a willingness to share their talents and take pleasure in a job well done; the intent is to maintain St. John’s to God’s glory. When new people come, they bring others, who in turn bring their talents. Bringing people together is important to St. John’s whether it is in their incorporation of new comers or whether it is being expressed in having an active seniors group, the coffee hour after church or observing how enjoyable music carries the capacity to bring people together. No new life is springing up in St. John’s.

Observations drawn from the responses of those who attended St. John’s during the structural changes (1997 – 2007). These responses I colour coded as blue.
St. John’s congregational life is well-maintained, and is relatively cohesive as St. John’s incorporates new people within a framework of continuity. This cohesiveness is being disturbed by the priest who is trying to find new ways to encourage engagement (of the congregation) and it is taking a lot of the priest’s energy. The congregation is growing in spirituality as they are being fed from the Gospel and are not attending out of habit. The congregation truly experiences the presence of the Trinity and is a community supportive of lay ministry, a reflection drawn from first person experience. Music has come to life at St. John’s, it is better and more constant. Our young musicians have a heart felt relationship with the priest and share their gifts as the congregation can not afford to pay large amounts to the two of them. These young musicians are a gift! We are their ministry. St. John’s is growing a new neighbourly relationship with our community. We supply a venue for community music and we host a barbeque and one pot suppers. All are welcome at St. John’s. Neighbours are not filling up the pews, but they know for sure that we are seriously “open for business.” Into this confident expression comes another perspective: “New life ! ?”

Observations drawn from the responses of those who have attended St. John’s after the structural changes (2007…) These responses I colour coded as red

St. John’s new life is due to its ability to: welcome new people, be open to new ideas and because it has an openness to community in various forms. The congregation is willing to help where ever it is needed and required, without needing to be asked. The priest is trying to bring the community together and music, which is a mix of old and new is doing its part, along with introducing different events like Taize and intentional hospitality.

A descriptive narrative summary drawn from question 1

“The priest is in relationship with others, ourselves in relationship to one another, our Lord’s presence to lead us to learn, the best of theological foundations to our faith from which to draw,
and the pressing vision of, and the need to be missional in our disconnected world. People’s
talents are explored, welcomed and encouraged by a discerning priest. It is the infectious
shared sense of wonder of our priest that invites hope in the life-giving truth of our Christian
faith and practices. All are accepted and we belong at St. John’s”

The second descriptive narrative

Questions 2 through 6

Observations drawn from questions 2 through 6 according to the respondents

St. John’s is a small, pioneer church that sits on a small hill and is very picturesque. A new
addition has brought heat, hydro, water, a meeting room and a kitchenette for social gatherings.
The character of the church has not changed as you can’t really tell from the front of the church
that we have a beautiful, modern addition. The doors can now be open mid-week as an office
and for meetings. If the addition had not come along the church would have been closed.

Traditional systems are fading away and few new people are coming to join and contribute to
the current systems, even the "locals" are gone, except for 5 at best. If the priest who retired in
1992 had not declined payment for the services he took, the church would have closed long ago.
No new life is springing up. In fact, it seems to be going the other way, even the children don’t
come anymore. The restoration and expansion was done to God’s glory, but it was wishful
thinking that it would increase the community’s use of the building and attendance at worship.
It is a challenge to be working to accomplish something when the old and the new are not on
board nor compatible.

Despite all this the congregation is welcoming, friendly, encouraging and accepting of new
people with a bond of closeness and a willingness to help financially and prayerfully, to listen to
each other and to participate as all talents are recognized; we even have a team governance.
Reliability, sincerity, care of one another and faithfulness in our relationship with God describes St. John’s. The congregation has a way of showing wonderful, loving care by “keeping watch over” those in need of comfort. There is and always has been lots of fun and fellowship and a deep feeling of warmth towards one another, notably on Christmas eve.

Sunday is a day to be taken seriously; it is a Holy day of rest and worship. Anglican worship is a holy and sacred time, both personally and communally. The sacred is honoured in the service and is deeply enjoyed with its inspiring and “making you think” message being important, as are the variety of services offered. The service is the time when at least one man gets to see people while another meets Jesus in remembrance through the cup of salvation. It is the congregation’s worship and the loving care that is given to a faithful group of worshippers that gives glory to God. Celebrating the Eucharist with others is key, as is the Prayer of Thanksgiving, but liturgy must be careful not to become too casual. The loving care given to the altar, always reverently and beautifully dressed by one who has this special ministry, always knowing how to give honour to God. The altar is a place “for pause” before service begins.

There has been a transition from only pump organ music to a wider invitation to others to share their talents from their own style of music. This music transition happens in worship and through entertainment. St. John’s has been home to some talented musicians and lay reader. The renovation for the addition hit home when the old vestry was removed. It was a moment to be remembered, as was the time when the addition was ready to be shared with the regular congregation and the community. Even though one respondent thought the addition was built on wishful thinking the addition enabled the door of St. John’s to be open midweek as an office and for other meetings. Summer BBQ’s were hosted on the deck with lots of relationships formed. The addition sparked new life, creating opportunities for small projects that new attenders enjoyed helping out with.
We thought about it (the addition), and talked about it, met opposition to it, then we went ahead and planned it, worked for it and with a generous gift we saw our dream a reality. We did it! We can do great things. God is on our side.

People attend St. John’s for a variety of reasons. Some drive more than 20 km, passing by the urban town church to attend. For some it is their desire to be working/involved in a relationship with God., for others it is the small welcoming character of the congregation and a priest who shares her deep sense of love of the Gospel and scripture with a deep desire to teach and share this love with the congregation. Sometimes people attend because they are finding the sacred in each other through life-giving theology and music. The priest is a strong community builder and works hard to bring people together for new life through the music of young talented musicians. The projects that forwarded the addition serve to bring people together to build community for those who are not “God people” and it is a time of happy gathering.

The event of St. John’s being cut off from the town church, All Saints in Huntsville in 1992 created the opportunity for new lay leadership to rise at St. John’s, continuing the church’s witness as a viable congregation, but this event was also perceived negatively, due to the attitude of a new rector towards the surrounding country churches causing sermons to offend belief for the next twenty-two years, so different from St. John’s which is where Christians can be found.

St. John’s is both an adopted home to some and a natural one to another. It is a place of God’s grace that holds the past both people and place with deep love. It is a congregation where acceptance abounds and where one can have one’s breath taken away. It is a congregation that doesn’t generally verbalize their inner experience of faith and devotion and the reasons for this could be many, but they easily recognize God’s presence in the care they offer one another in
times of sadness and in the care given to the altar, with Communion the orientation of their worship. The congregation attends St. John’s as it provides an alternative to the ethos of the town church and keeps the church present in the rural areas.

**A descriptive narrative summary drawn from questions 2 to 6**

St. John’s essence is captured through the remembering of “when the time of worship had come, on one Christmas eve in 2012 at the 7pm service. Unexpected visitors both from out of town and out of country (India) gathered; the priest’s extended family was there. A child was helping with the bell-ringing. There was a sacred immediacy of musical offerings, accentuated by the spontaneity of a requested hymn. The doorway entrance was bustling, the welcome smell of hot cider filled the air, the softness of indoor and candle light contrasted with the pitch-black, night time winter outside. It was a gathering that felt unique (just one time and purpose together before parting). The joy of loving, singing hearts, and the welcome and intimacy of a small, shared, familiar physical place.”

**The third descriptive narrative**

**Observations from question 7, according to the respondents**

The diocese lacks the leadership and the insight to change and Sunday church seems to be in decline, even the VBS door is closed; we are struggling with decline. We are experiencing growing pains between the old and new as St. John’s has been changing and growing. There are expressions of new beginnings since the addition and the face of congregation is new, as the pioneer faces have all passed away, but we need outside people interested in our ideas. New problems and new responsibilities face us and we are challenged in maintaining our financial support, but there is some new growth which needs to be cared for. We are attracting new workers who are highly intelligent and educated so there is hope for growth. Our varied midweek gatherings seem important and are enjoyed by a variety of people.
Without a priest like GailMarie, who has the passion to push through with changes, decline is inevitable. Spirit is growing here, how can we not do wonderful things here. We are ready.

What is coming we don’t know, but we have a great support system in the Trinity. Prayers are being heard and answered by our loving Heavenly Father when the Time is right.

The primary characteristic that stood out from question 7 was the hesitant, nuanced answers, as though they were afraid to even say it was on the cusp of new beginning.

The fourth descriptive narrative

Observations of the priest from the whole questionnaire

This congregation exhibits change within continuity. The questionnaire reveals a congregation that is highly relational and the structural change seems to have been the catalyst for increased sociability and congregational growth through social association seems. Evangelism and church attendance seems to be understood as the same thing. The congregation seeks to incorporate new comers who align with a good work ethic and new comers’ participation is expected. The historic past is remembered through people and the building is important for situating the Ravenscliffe community in history. Over the church’s one hundred and twenty-five- years presence the congregation is perceived to have become more inclusive. This is indicative of a perspective change. Perspective change over a long distance of time requires further study and can not be dealt with here. The goal of maintenance runs deep in St. John’s even though they intellectually realize new life is desperately needed. I am named as a sign of new life. Some of the respondents pastorally recognize that developing new life is at the cost of my energy. I am described as devoted to the goal of engagement, even though the stated goal is not my goal. This causes me to wonder if I may be working at cross-purposes with the congregation who say they do not want to die, yet do not engage the fresh opportunities that give life. This is their
conundrum, only to be broken by a fruitful upset like a new vision being called for from the 
congregation that has no living experience of the pre-structural, pioneer life of St. John’s. My 
leadership style is seen as being one of encouragement and innovation, more characteristic of 
Christendom than paradigm shifting leadership.

Extensive fruitful outcomes of the Sunday service are noted with energy and excitement: the 
decreasing age of the congregation was noted, and this observation is a positive indicator of the 
twelve years of mentoring spent with one respondent, for she has made my observation her 
own. This respondent’s responses present differently from the others and contain phrases that 
suggest devotion, passion and excitement of faith. Further interviewing of this respondent may 
indicate a possible perspective change taking place. This respondent was in a life crisis when I 
arrived to the parish and this upset may have made my weekly mentoring fruitful acting as the 
necessary disorientating dilemma for a faith-filled perspective change.

The questionnaire contained many third-party observations that would need to be collaborated.

The glaringly terse, negative statements of some of the questionnaires contradict the 
assumption of new life built into the questionnaire and these responses along with their general 
unenthusiastic tone, except one shut me down for several months, a reaction that required 
reflection on my part only to discover the response had ignited some old, still being resolved 
childhood issue with my dad who could be unexpectedly, glaring terse and negative in his 
responses. Reflection is a complex art, able to be learned, but not without intentionality after 
upset.

The fifth descriptive narrative

Reading the questionnaire responses, I am acutely aware of the voices that are missing from the 
above narratives, those who were my first parishioners in the 2002 pioneer church; there were 
only twelve of them: Lu Brown (ACW President), Harry Brown (warden) Frank Robinson,
(treasurer) Eleanor Tipper, Ken May, Shelly Martin and Barbro Smith. I name these saints so they do not disappear into history, nameless. I can remember where each sat and I remember the moments of connectedness I shared with each. Then, there are the four who most intentionally kept the vision of a hall alive for almost fifty years and who moved the vision ahead as a structural reality: Vi Earl (warden), Phyllis Rowan, Linda Rowe (organist), Helen May and Miriam Robinson. Only one of these twelve participated in the vision weekend of 2002, perhaps it was a foreign concept or too uncomfortable a process, it may have been perceived as a “make work project,” or perhaps their lack of participation was because they already had a vision. Whatever the reason the elderly 2002 congregation did not attend the visioning workshop I organized and which was led by a diocesan staff person. I have shared their names because these are the ones who broke ground; the forgers of a future deserve recognition. Tribute is seldom, if ever given to the smallest of the small, and the most ordinary of the ordinary. We tend to forget that every beginning has a past that quickly becomes invisible and forgotten, not so in a church that intentionally builds into its liturgical life a remembering of those who have gone before us.

7.4.4 The Conclusions on the Narrative Description

I would use this method again. The descriptive narratives reflect the congregation I know and love, a Christendom congregation I was called to care for. The responses reflect the vision I leaned on to bring new life to St. John’s congregation. It is a description of a congregation, a building and a community that changed, but the responses do not reflect a congregation that has had a perspective change, but a perspective change was not my goal for this congregation in 2002 nor the goal the congregation had for itself. The language was noticeably absent from the responses as was the emotion of enthusiasm and joy. A follow up interview would have been able to prob what was behind these absences.
As I continue over time to sit and reflect on the thoughts of the respondents in the questionnaire I find it amazing how insight is embedded in responses that say far more than what the responder or researcher may have initially recognized. For instance, when I informally collate the three most stark and negative of the questionnaire responses with a basic profile of the responders’ professional lives I notice how they each “hit the nail on the head” and bring a big picture concern into the analysis reflecting attitudes borrowed, I suspect unconsciously from their educational background and secular work experience. One respondent is a structural engineer who builds pipelines through the mountains of India. His response pierces through the local necessities of parish life and sites the need for structural change and action on the part of the diocesan and national church structures to initiate this change, albeit speaking this truth using sparse, negative language and as a self professed non-religious person. The most negative of the respondents is a retired regional manager for Ontario Hydro and long time Book of Common Prayer lay reader who has served in two missionary dioceses. It is his negatively stated insight that identifies the mission of evangelism and a reassertion of clear church structures as necessary for new life, if new life is ever going to be a realistically located one. And finally, there is the severely sparse comments of a retired, bio-chemist who demonstrates the fragility of the situation as being both necessary, but equally uncertain. Each are men over sixty, and from the small lens of seven question their answers present as profoundly critical, yet they are “big picture” criticisms emerging in a small picture research quest. One can only marvel at this late in coming observation which reinforces for me that nothing is lost to God². I suggest that continuing reflection on the responses will bring other fruitful benefits as my thinking continues to be stirred by the Spirit.

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² Romans 8:28
A follow up interview would have been helpful for data clarification, but also for making the research process as ethical as possible. I wonder if there is a collation between the number of people participating in a small questionnaire for research purposes and the increased need for the subjects fullest and reflective involvement? Perhaps, the smaller the number the greater the reflective response to the data given.

The insertion of a perspective change came into the research as the ministry experience of building a parish from vision increased, serving as a catalyst to my own unexpected transformative conversion out of a church orientated Christendom attitude to a much more biblically narrated, consciously chosen, surrendering trust orientation; I trust I am now finally situated on what I believe is Anglicanism's cornerstone of belief, the crucified Christ.

The data gathered as a narrative suggests something was indeed changing at St. John’s, as there was far more activity in 2015 than in 2002, but the responses are not indicative of a perspective change taking place, only of exterior change.

7.5 Quantitative Analysis of the Questionnaire

7.5.1 Language Analysis Benefits

The language analysis is far more objective than the narrative analysis of St. John’s. It reveals the exterior life of St. John’s to be changing and improving. Because the language analysis drew from the words the respondents themselves used to answer the question it lowered my influence of interpretation and offered a more objective read of the questionnaires.
7.5.2 The Method of Language Analysis

The categories for new life were drawn from the words used in question one to indicate new life. The words and phrases used in questions two through 6 were sorted as to the categories they most obviously reflective of. The questionnaire coded the responses into three groups determined by when the respondents arrived to St. John’s being indicative of the historical event they were influenced by.

7.5.3 The Observations from the Language Analysis

The language analysis showed that new people are the highest sign of new life at St. John’s suggesting a highly relational, social community is the outpouring of St. John’s Sunday service and appears to be an end in itself. The words in the questionnaire did not indicate a scriptural interest or any commented interest in spiritual growth or growth in prayer outside of Sunday morning. There was no indication friendship evangelism was an outcome of the relational nature of the congregation. This may indicate why a noticeably productive priestly ministry is not an expectation, making a ministry of presence the unstated, perhaps unconscious, expectation and desire of this Christendom congregation.

As structural change is identified as the second strongest sign of new life at St. John’s it would be a logical observation to say that Christendom’s high expectation for pastoral care of their people and the maintenance of their structures allowed for St. John’s addition with ramps and accessible bathroom to be built with little resistance, but there was no expectation of its missional utility to evangelize an unchurched generation.
The respondents appear to understand the question of new life as the exterior changes happening at St. John’s and did not associate the question as having anything to do with the movement and grace of God being with us.

It is interesting that the respondents identified new life from the same perspective as the diocese in their gathering of yearly stats, which all point to exterior measurement. The diocese, to my knowledge has no measurement for spiritual maturity except by counting the attendance on Sunday morning and the number who receive Communion with focus on the Christmas and Easter octaves,

If there was one word I was expecting to find in the questionnaires it was “joy” or a synonym. I never heard the 2002 congregation laugh, but by 2008, the coffee time was filled with laughter, so I am puzzled as to why the joy that comes through laughter was not reflected in the responses

The categories identified identifying new life were: new people mentioned 85 times, Sunday Service mentioned 33 times, Structural change was mentioned 23 times, no new life was mentioned 19 times, the priest was mentioned as a sign of new life 10 times and music was mentioned 6 times. There were 176 comments made in total on the questionnaire.

The follow chart shows the number of times each of the three groups mentioned the signs of new life categories in their answers to question two through six.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The signs of new life categories from question 1 &amp; weighted by questions 2-6</th>
<th>New People</th>
<th>Sunday Service</th>
<th>Structural Change</th>
<th>No New Life</th>
<th>Priest</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The congregation before 1997 with 4 responders</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The congregation prior to the formation of the parish, our elders that are still alive recorded the most no new life and were marginally the most relational. The actions of the priest were barely on their radar and music was never mentioned. This may have assumed the changes in music.

The congregation who were most present for the changes noted the worship as the strongest sign of new life.

The newest congregation had no experience with the pioneer building saw the signs of new life demonstrated through worship and the number of new people like themselves.

The categories from question one begin to reveal the Christendom shape of St. John’s congregation. The numerical values for the first three signs of new life do not indicate the incredible hesitancy written in question 7. This may indicate when new life is seamlessly incorporated into congregational life it is less threatening than an overt question that demands reflective objectivity which a congregation may not naturally know how to do. Reflection being a learned skill.
7.5.4 The Conclusions Drawn from the Language Analysis

The language analysis indicated a Christendom congregation with much catechism work needing to be done. Adult educators suggest that adults only learn what they want to learn, unlike children. This is the conundrum of St. John’s, for they feel no need to learn, hence the evangelical role upset, the first stage of a perspective change, can play in an overly stable congregation. The language analysis did not indicate there was a perspective change in the congregation of St. John’s, but it did indicate there had been a great deal of exterior changes and experiences that allowed for a great deal more activity at St. John’s, which I had incorrectly identified as new life. A definition of new life as a comment on faith development might have led me on a very different journey. The results of the language analysis raised the question as to just how aware the respondents were that there is an inherent expectation that our faith is intended to develop and grow and mature. The respondents understood the question of new life as the exterior changes happening at St. John’s and did not appear to associate the question as having anything to do with the movement and grace of God being with us.

As a lay researcher, I found developing the method to be cumbersome and labour intensive, and it demanded an eye for detail, but once determined it was very effective as it pertains to ministry. I would use the language analysis again as I still believe that language is powerful, as it is a carrier of meaning, feelings and our values.

The language analysis was intended to bring a more objective analysis of the questionnaires, so to counter the inherently subjective perspective brought to the narrative analysis by the parish priest. Naming the categories for the language analysis from question one and the
sorting of words from questions two through six was a far more subjective task than I thought it would be.

In the end, I was still the interpreter of the data’s nuances provided by the respondents and without a follow up interview I was assuming I had interpreted correctly.

7.6 Cross-Referencing of Both Approaches of Analysis

The two different types of analysis drew forth two different perspectives: the narrative analysis opened up the inner experience of the responders, and the language analysis opened up their experience of exterior reality.

7.7 Quality of Responses

Each participant knew this questionnaire would be contributing to a thesis on revitalizing rural ministry, yet the wider purpose didn’t appear to serve as a motivator.

Eighteen questionnaires were mailed out and twelve returned, which is 66 percent. There was nothing in the responses that would indicate that the introductory instruction at the top of the questionnaire, which was designed to set the context, was followed.

All except one of the six non-responders were in leadership positions. Three of the non-responders offered me apologies for not responding. One faced health issues with a spouse, one was caring for an aging parent, and one had a personal health concern to deal with. One non-responder said she did not respond because she was mad at me for not upholding the way decisions were made 55 years ago. I believe her refusal to respond was an action of protest. This parishioner adversely influenced the behaviour of a second elderly parishioner. I
had hoped that my letter would be received as a gesture inviting their continued participation in the life of St. John’s, but it was rejected. The final person, a young musician, I later learned was in the process of leaving her husband when the letter was sent, and I believe it got lost in the urgencies of her life. Of the people who did respond, one person responded on a ripped open envelope, and another responded with a total of five words on the questionnaire.

On a whole, I would say the above analysis suggests low participation and low self-investment. The low engagement could point to them perceiving themselves to be outsiders to my studies rather than integral parts of the support team, which they were. Perhaps if I had been more successful in helping them to understand their part in my DMin education, the congregation’s understanding would have encouraged greater compliance to the research request. Conversely, my inability to establish an effective ministry base team may have been indicative of the congregational passivity.

My analysis of the responses indicates to me a sense of fear, spiritual immaturity that comes across as indifference, and little reflective ability. The responses appeared to be more hurried than deeply considered and at times were offered with childlike brevity. This may indicate a lack of training or trust in questionnaires. However, my sense is that it indicated a larger ongoing problem in the congregation.

The responses to the questionnaires seemed to mirror the sense of apathy and lack of spiritual maturity that I perceived was present among the St. John’s congregation, although initially
my ministry of presence approach would not allow me to see or admit this. My strong initial
response to the questionnaires bears witness to how blinded I was by my approach to
ministry. Upon later reflection, the lack of regular Sunday attendance and the poor
stewardship record of the congregation seemed to confirm that the congregation was not
engaged in or strongly committed to church life or exhibiting spiritual maturity.

This indicates to me that this group of responders did not enter the life-giving inner world
with conscious awareness and may not have had the language to answer the questions
reflectively, even if they had wanted to, or they just didn’t take the time to read the
instruction carefully; no one contacted me for clarification.

The questionnaires were returned promptly, which was respectful and responsible and almost
the way a child is obedient to a teacher’s deadline. This observation may be an unexpected
key point for pinpointing the spiritual maturity of the congregation and their actual ability to
discern new life from reflection on their experience.

The questionnaire could have been set up in a controlled environment that would have
deliberately guided the responders, but the point would have been lost.
Chapter 8

Conclusions

In this final chapter, I present my personal reflection on my ministry at St. John’s—both my mistakes and what I learned. From the lessons I have learned, I provide three recommendations: self-reflection, leading by example and casting a vision.

8.1 Personal Reflection: My Mistakes

My primary mistake lies in my assumptions. On entering ministry, I unconsciously assumed that by my enriching the exterior environment of the congregation and preaching God’s grace from the pulpit the congregation would be persuaded to see, accept and be convinced that God was with us and working in the life of the congregants. This demonstrates that I did not understand the basics of adult education, so I relied on what I had experienced in the past, which was persuasion and direct interpretation of events.

A second error was my assumptions of a ministry of presence approach. I made the mistake of believing gentle pastoral persuasion through passive third-person exposure to the outward signs of God’s grace was an effective way to teach and form adults in the faith and to keep the peace at the same time. I allowed a pastoral ministry of presence method of ministry to take precedence over the evangelical need of the congregation to experience a transformative conversion.
My third mistake was to exclude the congregation from key processes. I began with the 2002 congregation’s long-forgotten vision, but I failed to call the emerging congregation of 2007 to reflect on the next leg of the vision for the coming post-addition years and to give them the opportunity to direct future changes. I assumed that the old vision would just morph into a new vision. In this, I failed to intentionally involve the congregation in forming a new vision.

Upon reflection, I realize that I also made errors in my personal life. I did not look after myself in ministry. I allowed myself to be overworked and attended to too many tasks in the church. Over 12 years, I slowly gained 50 pounds, another indication that I was not taking proper care of myself.

Finally, whereas the diocese could have assisted in the process of congregational transformation, I did not understand the diocesan system of governance well enough to allow it to help me. As a result, I took a very solitary approach. I felt responsible for every aspect of the congregational life, rather than relying on help from the diocese. In hindsight, it would have been better to rely on the diocese for direction, assistance and mentoring.

8.2 Recommendation: Self-Reflection

My experience at St. John’s taught me three important lessons. First, this thesis has convinced me that transformative learning requires a perspective change, which demands critical reflection and it is important for congregational formation. This also applies to leaders. I must reflect on my approach to ministry. Is my approach creating any concrete
results? Is my ministry biblically based and educationally supported? Am I effectively reaching my small dying Christendom-formed parish, my aging parishioners and rural ministry in general? Going forward, I realize that I must critically reflect on my approach and method and I must seek out congregational feedback. If I had done so earlier, I might not have made the wrong assumptions noted above.

For a priest to lead a congregation in transformative change, the priest must be a reflective mentor. The priest should feel called and have a passion for formation and ministry, seeing them as two sides of the same coin, with prayer the connecting tissue. This person would be theologically, biblically and prayerfully well informed and mature. This person should be an adult learner, skilled in the basic principles of adult education and perspective change and schooled in the art of mentoring, which would assume active listening and trust-building skills. These non-theological courses are readily available in the faculties of education at Nipissing University in North Bay. These courses serve as templates waiting to be tailored towards spiritual formation and ministry goals that utilize the ministry context as the catalyst for learning.

The diocese has an important role in fostering a community of priests that are reflective mentors. The skills identified for a reflective mentor may be difficult to find in a single person but may be acquired in a team of people under the coordination of someone, lay or ordained, with wide-based administration, management and facilitation skills. In a team approach to reflective mentoring, the priest ceases to be a generalist but instead becomes one of the ministry team, which challenges the classic normal of one priest–one parish system of
Anglicanism. The team ministry approach also has the complication of deciding who gets paid for what, which will slide the conversation into social justice issues.

A core requirement of transformative change is reflection. But how can we inspire the congregation to reflect? Parishioners need to understand the context of the intentional conversations they engage in so that they are willing participants. The Anglican Church offers liturgies for affirmation and reaffirmation of faith perspective changes in a congregation (B.A.S., page 629), but if these liturgies are merely recycling old culturally derived top-down understandings of faith in the participants and are not reflective of a surrendering faith, then they are simply confirming the mistakenness of what was and so compounding the problem.

Rural congregations suffer from assumptions that they are dispensable and do not make a valuable contribution to the Anglican Communion. These perspectives need to be challenged and changed on both the diocesan side and the congregation side if the small congregation is to thrive for the purpose God intended. These assumptions of unworthiness are known among rural congregants and strongly felt to the point where these assumptions define the congregational mindset.

One concrete way of encouraging self-reflection in a congregation is to encourage the congregants to write a spiritual autobiography—to record their faith journey. By remembering moments in the past we are given the opportunity to reflect on some experiences, perhaps for the first time, recognizing God’s grace in events. This reflection on
past events can serve as gentle disorientating dilemmas that yield a trust and surrender in 
God, encouraging self-examination. With the help of a biblically and theologically informed 
reflective mentor guided by the stages in a perspective change, elderly Christendom 
parishioners and those with an inherited faith are able to give voice to the devotion that took 
them to church on Sundays, a devotion they may never have spoken of, only practiced. This 
practise was never understood as an evangelical witness by those around them, who only saw 
it as *churchgoing*.

This vision of a spiritual autobiography is not of a mere litany of churches attended but a 
reflective self-examination of one’s life to discover the story that has always been there 
waiting to be shared for the benefit of those loved. A spiritual autobiography has a sacrificial 
dimension to it. The self-examination is a journey we are willing to take for those we love, 
not for ourselves. For the Christendom parishioner this experience may be one of recognizing 
that he or she was lost and now has been found. This would be an expression of total ministry 
that calls all of us to share the gospel, and in being guided by a transformative education 
theory it would make ready for a deeper learning experience on the part of the writer and the recipient.

### 8.3 Recommendation: Mentoring by Example

Second, I have learned about self-understanding. To mentor others in transformational 
change, I must first take care of myself in ministry. I must model the transformative change 
that I desire my congregation to experience. To this end, I have begun a new ministry with
much better boundaries concerning taking time off, exercising and eating a healthy diet. Boundaries are important in every area of my life and ministry. If I do not lead myself properly, I will not be able to lead my congregation properly.

The diocese has a social justice responsibility as an employer. The present system in the Muskoka deanery has retired part-time priests working under the same contract expectations as full-time priests, and we do it out of love for our parishioners and obedience to our calling. This unjust system could serve as the rationale for the diocesan executive to pass a motion that mandates all congregations to be under the supervision of a full-time person.

It is also a diocesan responsibility to re-mission Christendom ministry for a non-Christendom context and to provide the staffing required. The challenge is that many diocesan bishops are born into a Christendom culture and may have the same unchallenged Christendom lens as the congregation. They cannot call forth what they do not know and understand. A new model for regional ministry must be introduced to and adapted by diocesan bishops in order for change in dying congregations to emerge.

Specifically, a highly pastoral ministry of presence must be transformed into a ministry that awakens and challenges the congregation. The approach to ministry should have an ethical integrity found in its cohesive circular aligning of the biblical, theological, historical and evangelical call with the evangelical goal of mission. The method of ministry should stimulate and mentor the interior devotional formation of the human heart towards discipleship and eventual transformative conversion.
How is this possible unless the priests and bishops have a personal experience of transformative conversion? It seems unlikely that we will be able to lead others to encounter God in this way unless we as leaders encounter the living God in a transformative experience.

8.4 Recommendation: Casting a Vision

Third, my experiences while writing this thesis taught me the importance of vision. A good vision can serve as a major positive disorientating dilemma for a congregation in decline. In the case of St. John’s, the threat of closure drove us to establish a vision for the church. But the threat of closure created a motivation for a vision out of fear. It would have been better to establish a vision beforehand—a vision based on trust and hope in God’s future faithfulness. Such a foundation for vision would have a more positive motivation for the church. In my experience, vision is essential for a congregation in decline.

Priests should not be afraid of upsetting the status quo in aging parishes. It is the very upset caused by a vision that will lead to transformative change. When a rural parish closes, a nearby congregation may wonder if it will be next, but this fear often causes the congregation to cling ever more tightly to its dying structures and present systems. The priest must be willing to overcome this fear and bring about change.
Late-stage Christendom rural congregations are ready for this perspective change because the concern over whether their church will close due to aging parishioners and decline in attendance is serving as a disorientating dilemma, a catalyst, that presently is not being mentored reflectively through the learning stages of a perspective change.

One way to encourage parishioners to be involved in the vision is for them to have a greater role in synods. Decisions in rural congregations are made through consensus or by the matriarch or the patriarch in the congregation, so the parishioners are not well versed in parliamentary procedure or Robert’s rules. Rural parishioners are generally not used to speaking at microphones in front of several hundred delegates. The issues that come up at synods tend to be complex, and rural delegates tend to be concerned with what is happening locally in their own pews and so leave analysis of the issues to others. In the end, the decisions affect them, but they are quite unengaged with synodical issues. They seem content to leave the shaping of the future to others, which contributes to the assumptions and attitudes of unworthiness. The priest should push against this lack of involvement.

In hindsight, after the structural changes had taken place in 2007 I could have held another vision weekend to establish a new vision going forward rather than continuing with the 2002 vision. At the time, I did not recognize that a new vision was needed. My experience highlights the need for priests to be trained in how to establish a prayerful vision with the congregation and to guide the congregation through the process of implementing the vision. Some priests may also need training in how to recognize the needs of the congregation and how to form a vision. The diocese can have a key role in preparing and training priests in
these areas. Priests also need encouragement—priests in rural ministry will not easily change the mindset and culture of small rural congregations.

It seems natural that a vision must also be cast by the diocese. In the spring of 2016, the diocese distributed a document called *Bishop’s Recommendation on the Reorganization of Muskoka Deanery*. Sadly, this was born out of the decline of local congregations and too many buildings. However, it is an excellent step towards casting a new vision for the deanery. The local church leaders will need to bring this vision to the congregations and to encourage individuals to support the recommendations and adopt the vision for their own congregations. This visionary publication is serving as a disorientating dilemma and hopefully will move forward as a fruitful catalyst.

For this document to serve as a disorientating dilemma that will lead to transformation conversion, church leaders need to encourage the lay people to choose to become increasingly involved in the wider practice of ministry. As lay people use their gifts to serve the church and community, they will demonstrate the basic principle of adult education, a seeking-to-learn attitude. The natural challenges in ministry will offer real reasons to reflect and self-examine, which in turn may lead them to work through the stages of a perspective change.
8.5 Further Study

I see the necessity for an overarching educational theory for mission. I see every small rural community using Mezirow’s stages as learning modules and embracing life-giving change and becoming the people God called them to be. Some of the leadership is caught in the same web of assumptions that the parishioners are, and my hope is that this thesis will sufficiently jar the old belief system.

It is my observation that the demands presented by the 21st century necessitates a missionary church, and presently we are still structurally, canonically and administratively the church of the establishment, comforting those in the pew with our pastoral ministry of presence. To implement these three recommendations, an effort is needed by the diocese, the priest, the lay leaders and the parishioners. The Anglican Church of Canada can further study how to encourage self-reflection, personal experiences of transformative change and vision-casting at the diocese level. Each diocese can then explore how to prepare, train and mentor priests to be reflective mentors who establish vision with the congregations and lead them through the stages of perspective change. Priests can also explore ways of training lay leaders to inspire reflection among the congregation.

Thus, three components of ministry should work together: the leadership of the dioceses, the priests and lay leaders, and the individual parishioners. If self-reflection leads to transformative change within the leadership and congregations, then dying parishes will have
a chance for re-missioning. The new life that God desires to bring about in the lives of the people can take root.

For my role in furthering the work of this thesis, in the fall of 2016 I will be offering a workshop on how to write a spiritual autobiography. This workshop is in the development stage and is expected to be offered as a pilot project as the re-missioned retreat house at Milford Bay as a component of their mandate. The time frame for this workshop non-credit course is two hours for the introduction with as a gradual progression to completion within 10 months. My goal through the workshop is mission, formation and discipleship through ministry and transformative conversion leading to personal evangelism. The merits of this initiative need to be considered as a prerequisite, non-credit course for seminary and a concluding assignment in all theological courses, so content is integrated into the life experience of the student.

8.6 Epilogue

I retired on December 31, 2014, because St. John’s could not afford their portion of the half-time stipend, and the parish did not resolve this issue. The bishop asked me to do an interim in a neighbouring rural six-point parish.

I found different circumstances in the Parish of Muskoka Lakes but the same contradictions that had presented at St. John’s in 2002 and the depressing circumstances I seem to meet in rural ministry everywhere I visit.
I began my ministry in my new setting by setting a choice before the parish. I let them know I was not a palliative care chaplain and had no intention of babysitting them while they slowly died, so if they called me, it was a call to life-giving change. The parish responded positively and have moved forward seemingly with joy.

Within a month, I called them to a prayerful planning vision weekend. Guided by their vision they responded to their decline and changing circumstances with a goal to re-mission the lakefront rectory as a retreat house with a mandate for spiritual development, outreach, hospitality and education. They had the Internet installed and have sponsored two international podcasts, gathering a local ecumenical community.

Last summer they hosted a Trinidadian seminary student from McMaster who brought a strong prayer ministry to the parish. Then they offered to host a family of six from Syria. Midweek morning and evening prayers in the church keep awake their vision and re-missioning efforts as God’s work among us. On holiday weekends they host a young children’s interactive music concert as a friendly evangelism initiative. On Christmas Eve they put aside the traditional Anglican Eucharistic celebration and gathered the non-churched community for a reading of the nativity, mixed with carols of all kinds. The puppets joined us in the sanctuary. Later in the evening the faith community gathered for its Christmas Eve worship.
One of our elderly couples has been unable to get to church, so we hold house church at their
place once a month. People come whom I have never seen before, which never happens in
the traditional church setting.

Worship has been revitalized through music. I now preach not to comfort and soothe but to
stir up and break open their hearts through the text so they can see Christ anew. I introduced
them to the biblical framework of total ministry as my method of ministry, and I talk and
preach openly about the benefits of upset and reflection, which they know as self-
examination.

Are these outward changes indicative of an inner transformation? I need to continually listen
to feedback from the congregation and challenge them to reflect on the changes. There is one
thing I know beyond a doubt: I have changed. My approach is not a ministry of presence
alone, but I challenge, inspire, question and “upset” the congregation. In this sense, my thesis
work has been fruitful on a personal level, and I hope that this “second chance” will afford
me the opportunity to lead congregations to transformative change for the glory and mission
of God. Amen.
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Dear Dr. Radner and Rev. Gail Marie Henderson,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "Transformative conversion: From believing to knowing"

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,
Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

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Tel: +1 416 946-3273 Fax: +1 416-946-5763 ethics.review@utoronto.ca hap://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/
Greetings to Everyone,

As many of you know, I’m enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry Program at U. of T. It is now time for the research which requires the thoughtful input from you who have experienced the life of ministry at St. John’s Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe. **This research, along with other resources being gathered seeks to increase the understanding of life-giving ministry in small congregations. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time, and no questions of inquiry will be asked.**

Enclosed is a consent form and a short questionnaire to which you are invited to respond. The questionnaire is time sensitive, so if you are willing to participate please return both to me in the envelope provided by __________, 2014 if not received by this date I will be unable to incorporate your responses.

This research aims to be totally transparent. If you have questions concerning any aspect of the research they will be answered as openly, honestly and promptly as possible. **Your responses on the questionnaire will be treated confidentially by me, but your identity to me, the researcher will be known.** I will declare at the onset of the research both the positive insights and the negative bias this familiarity may bring to my interpretation of the data.
Regards
Reverend GailMarie Henderson MDiv
LETTER OF CONSENT

I understand the data from the questionnaire will be utilized, along with other resources to increase the understanding of life-giving ministry in small congregations. I understand my participation in this research is fully voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw as a participant at any time with no need of explanation.

If I withdraw after my questionnaire is received, it and my consent form will be shredded, and any data which has been placed for analysis will be removed.

I understand every precaution is being taken to protect my privacy and I understand my data is confidential, except to Reverend GailMarie Henderson and will be exclusively used for purposes of analysis, neither names nor incidences in the questionnaires will be used in the final thesis.

I understand at the end of the project all questionnaires, consents and work sheets will be shredded and any electronic data being stored in a secure site at the University of Toronto or in my computer as encrypted data will be deleted or otherwise destroyed.

I am participating in this questionnaire without any coercion and my responses are freely offered to the researcher for forwarding her thesis and I am of the full age of consent.

If you have any questions or concerning about your rights as a research participant please feel free to contact the Office of Research Ethic at the University of Toronto at (416) 946-3273

Signed by   ____________________________________________________________

Date       ____________________________________________________________

Place    ____________________________________________________________
The Questionnaire

Before you begin please take a few quiet moments to think back on your experiences at St. John, taking notices of what you have seen, heard, touched, felt or even smelled. Feel free to use a maximum of 3 extra sheets of paper for your responses.

1. Please respond generally to the research question: What do you believe is going on at St. John the Baptist Anglican Church in Ravenscliffe that might account for what appears to be the new life springing up?

2. Please identify some characteristics of life in St. John’s as you experience it.

3. Please describe a time/event/situation or moment when you experienced new life at St. John’s. Can you give a rough date?

4. How do you experience God being glorified at St. John’s. Please only one example.

5. What is the moment you remember most clearly at St. John’s

6. Why do you attend St. John’s?

7. Do you believe St. John’s is a church in decline or on the cusp of new beginning?
   Why?

Thank You

Please mail the consent form and the questionnaire in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope provided