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The Development of a Diverse Urban Congregation in Canada: The Death of Business-as-Usual at St. John's Lutheran Church in Toronto¹

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The 1993 directory at St. John's Lutheran Church in Toronto is divided into ten groups: English, Eritrea, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, India, Persia, South Africa, Tamil and Zaire. Eleanor Brennenstuhl is the only elder with a German last name. Trustees have names like Bobby Nyen, Berta Szyiko and Eyasu Yoseif. The Finance Committee is made up of a Tamil, an Eritrean and a long-time Anglo² member. The directory lists 313 family units with some connection with the congregation,³ although not all listed are formal members.⁴ When an earlier attempt to publish an integrated directory confused those who do not alphabetize by the first letter of the last name, it was decided to divide the directory into ethnic communities.⁵

How did St. John's reach the point where the printing of a church directory would involve problem solving? The answer begins in the early 1900s when St. John's was a typical Eurocentric Lutheran mission of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Ninety years later, long-time members are experiencing a painful transition. The death of business-as-usual is present alongside obvious signs of new life.

I focus on St. John's to provide an example of the issues that can arise when an urban Canadian Lutheran congregation ministers among people from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. The research plan involved interviews,⁶ a review of the church archives, a walk through the parish, and participation in a multi-lingual worship service.⁷

The article will give a brief history of St. John's, describe the parish neighborhood and current programs, identify factors contributing to change, describe and analyze the consequences

of ministry among diverse people and suggest what parishes in Canada can learn from St. John's.

Historical Perspective of St. John's Lutheran Church

St. John's began when the Rev. D. Kleist was commissioned as a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod missionary to Toronto in 1902.⁸ From 1910 to 1930, the congregation worshipped in a chapel on Shaw Street.⁹

A great boost to St. John's vision came in 1919 with the arrival of the Rev. Ernst Hahn who served his entire 32 year ministry there. About the same time, St. John's transferred from the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (then the Canada District) to the English District.¹⁰ The present church building on Concord Avenue near Ossington and Bloor Streets was dedicated in 1930.

Pastor Hahn's ministry emphasized outreach to speakers of English and to European immigrants. During the Depression, the basement of the new building was used by the Trinity Lutheran congregation. Later, after World War II, St. John's sponsored Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian services for immigrants from the Baltic countries; by 1950, St. John's had 1,000 members. The immigrants later organized their own congregations and moved to other buildings. Over the years, St. John's showed much interest in foreign missions, and the Rev. Ernst Hahn, Jr., son of the Rev. Ernst Hahn, Sr., became a missionary to Muslims in India in 1952.

From 1951 to 1960, the Rev. George Bornemann continued to promote a missionary spirit. Congregations were started in Port Credit, Scarborough and Willowdale. A Polish Lutheran congregation in exile worshipped at St. John's from 1954 until 1960.

A gradual decline began taking place in the congregation and the neighborhood after 1960, and by 1988, a *Globe and Mail* article offered the following assessment of what had happened at St. John's:

As with many downtown churches across Canada, the congregation was growing older—and smaller. There had not been a Sunday School for a decade. Most... members... had moved out of the neighborhood years before, and many had joined the new, more vigorous suburban Lutheran churches... Surrounded by Argentine cafes, Italian cheese stores and Islamic butchers, the 59-year-old

building was badly isolated, out of touch not just with the new ethnic groups who had moved into the working class neighborhood but with the city at large. For a year and a half, the church had no minister and some members wondered whether the time had come to die.¹¹

A spirit of discouragement afflicted the tiny flock, and there was serious talk of closing the church's doors. Pastor Ernest Hahn, Jr., Interim Pastor before the arrival of Pastor Michael Drews, remembers having bad dreams about the church closing down during the transition period in the mid 1980s. "Some thought it was time to close the doors and sell the place, but there was a core of people who said no, we've been in ministry here and we should be able to continue to develop the ministry particularly in reference to the whole multi-cultural scene. That idea has always been here—to serve other people, to open our doors to refugees."¹² Pastor Drews encountered the following reality when he arrived in 1987.

A once vital congregation of 1000 worshipers had been on a downward slide for a quarter century. Fifty people for worship, three years ago, was an inspiring attendance. Children were a thing of the past, with no Sunday School for a decade. A five to ten kilometer commute meant that members did not evangelize their neighbors for the congregation. Adult children of members had long ago moved away. A resolution to close the church was turned down, but hopes were not high.¹³

The situation, he says, "looked quite hopeless...[but] was only a step away from the resurrecting power of God".¹⁴ The Rev. Hahn and his wife Greta were already involved in "Hospitality", a ministry which helped local congregations relate to Hindus and Muslims.¹⁵ "Hospitality" led to requests from Tamil refugees to help relatives escape from the conflicts of Sri Lanka, and Drews was quickly drawn into this refugee ministry.

I, relatively new at the time, began involving the congregation in [refugee] sponsorships. For the most part the families and friends in Canada promise to care for the newly arriving people, leaving the congregation free of overburdening financial commitment. Welcoming the new people with little gatherings, struggling together over more complicated sponsorships, a Tamil picnic led to developing a monthly [Tamil] worship service.¹⁶

What started as refugee sponsorship led to Tamil worship services and expanded in 1989 when an Eritrean Lutheran pastor arrived in Toronto, looked for a Lutheran Church and found

St. John's in the Yellow Pages. The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, a fourth generation Lutheran, recalls the birth of St. John's Eritrean ministry two months later:

We came here by accident, although as a believer I can say that nothing is an accident....We introduced ourselves as newcomers, and the relationship was established from that day on. Pastor Drews was very supportive and so we continued worshipping here. He introduced us to the Church Council and there was a proposal to them that we could be involved in ministry with Eritreans at St. John's....We started our first Eritrean worship gathering here on July 4, 1989.¹⁷

In the next two years, St. John's became a much busier place with five worshipping groups: English, Zairean (French), Eritrean, South African and Tamil. The weekly Food Pantry had a devotion translated into Spanish and Portuguese.¹⁸

The current reality of St. John's contrasts sharply with the fear in the mid-1980s that the congregation would have to close its doors. Doors that were almost closed are now decidedly open, although concerns about finances and dwindling membership of long-time members still remain.

The Neighborhood of St. John's

A walk through the St. John's neighborhood is a walk through the world. Bloor Street is lined with stores with signs in Greek, Portuguese and Italian. Around the corner from the church a Middle Eastern Market with Islamic flyers in the window sells meats and pastries. Posters promoting political and religious events are plastered on utility poles, and men are begging for money on Bloor Street.

The houses around the church are modest, two-storey brick homes with high-rise apartments standing closeby. On Thursday mornings, when I arrived to interview people, cardboard boxes left over from the Food Co-op stood in front of the tidy church building. The first time I visited, an Asian woman was doing Tai Chi in front of the church. A long-time member says the neighborhood is a working class area where people settle when they first immigrate to Canada.¹⁹

Previous pastors lived outside of the neighborhood, but the Drews' family bought a house five blocks from the church, hoping to get to know the area and the people and involve the church more with the community.²⁰

Description of Current Parish Programs

In a letter to the Steering Committee in May 1993, Pastor Drews linked the past and the present of St. John's:

The English Worship Service reflects a rich history and tradition of Lutheran presence. The 40-50 Anglo worshippers and 25 home-bound persons have been the foundation of St. John's ministry. This group, through its vision, mission and support, have allowed the development of a congregation, multi-cultural, multi-racial and international in outlook.²¹

Current activities can be divided into the typical ministry areas of worship and music, education, social ministry, koinonia and administration. Some of these happen in one cultural group, and others mix groups.

Worship and Music

Worship happens in English, Tigrinya, Tamil, French and South African languages. At the largest weekly service, speakers of Tigrinya²² from Eritrea gather on Sundays at 9:45 a.m. for worship led by the Rev. Zerit Yohannes. They come not only from Lutheran backgrounds; some have Roman Catholic, Coptic and Pentecostal roots, and others did not belong to any church before coming to Canada. In 1992, an average of 83 people worshipped weekly in Tigrinya.²³ An Eritrean Martyrs' Service in 1992 attracted 700 worshippers.²⁴

Anglos worship on Sundays at 11:15 a.m. This group is made up of long-time Lutherans of European origin (most of whom have been members of St. John's for decades), university students²⁵ and people from Ghana, Guyana, Guatemala, India and other countries.²⁶ Average 1992 attendance at English services was 56 people.²⁷

People from Zaire in Central Africa attend a third weekly worship service at 3:30 p.m. on Sundays, and average attendance at this French language service in 1992 was 22.²⁸ This group has a Pentecostal style, not a Lutheran identity. Monthly South African worship has an attendance of about 35,²⁹ and monthly Tamil worship for people from Sri Lanka has an attendance of 12 people.³⁰

People from all language groups meet quarterly for multi-language worship with singing, prayer and scripture reading in many languages.³¹ In 1992, average weekly worship attendance

for all services together was 177 people. Multi-lingual worship averaged 200.³²

Where once a large choir sang Bach chorales in the English service, today a small choir chants the Psalms and leads the singing. This choir has attempted to attract an international group but so far has not been very successful.³³ Both the Eritrean and Zairean groups have choirs that sing during their worship; Chorale Jericho, a second Zairean choir, sings during English worship and for other churches and community groups.

Education

In a May 1993 letter to the Steering Committee, Pastor Drews gave his vision for Christian Education in the parish: "Christian Education activities need to reflect inter-cultural, multi-language classes. The children and youth will reflect a multi-racial grouping."³⁴

The reality is that most Sunday School students are Eritrean children and teenagers who do not speak enough "church" Tigrinya to understand the Eritrean worship.³⁵ For this reason, classes in English take place at 9:45 a.m. in the basement during the Eritrean worship with a few Anglo children also attending. The Superintendent was a Baptist missionary to Eritrea for 23 years and came to St. John's because of the presence of the Eritrean community. The Sunday School has four classes and an average weekly attendance in 1992 of 50 children.³⁶ Classes for younger children are taught by Eritrean teachers, and Pastor Drews teaches Catechism to about 14 teenagers.

Other learning events include an Eritrean Bible Study on Saturday afternoons,³⁷ adult courses in English on Thursday mornings, and events such as refugee orientation sessions and presentations by international visitors. For example, Black theologian James Cone spoke in 1992, sponsored by the South African Ministry and the Ujamaa Afrikan People's Organization, a political group.³⁸

Social Ministry

Social ministry includes a weekly Food Co-op, the Friend-to-Friend Thrift Store and a refugee committee.

The Food Co-op meets Wednesday mornings in the church basement, bringing together 250 people³⁹ from the neighborhood who distribute donated food to each other. At 11:00 a.m. each Wednesday, Pastor Yohannes leads devotions (translated into Spanish and Portuguese) in the sanctuary for Co-op members who want to attend. An average of 80 people attended these weekly devotions in 1992.⁴⁰ Most Co-op members have no other connection with St. John's, although, originally, members of St. John's helped start the Co-op.⁴¹

The Friend-to-Friend Thrift Store on Bloor Street was opened to help raise funds for ethnic ministries; so far it isn't making money, but it does sell used clothing and toys at low prices to people from the neighborhood. On the day I visited there, Pastor Drews' wife Janice was serving a variety of people—young and old—from all over the world, and a volunteer from Angola was sorting clothing and toys. A refugee committee manages a refugee sponsorship program and has motivated groups to sponsor many Tamils from Sri Lanka.⁴²

One member, a former nurse from Ghana, now works at Levi-Strauss, and for the past three years she has obtained hundreds of pairs of jeans to give away to the church and community. In 1993 the Zairean group took responsibility for the distribution of the jeans.⁴³

Koinonia

Koinonia is experienced as each of the ethnic groups gathers in its own language(s). Racially-mixed koinonia happens at coffee hours, at potlucks following multi-lingual services and at parties where the food is as diverse as the people. The *Globe and Mail* described one Christmas party in the church basement:

Santa Claus stumbled more than once over the unfamiliar names of the Iranian children as they gathered for their share of presents. The buffet had expanded beyond such old favorites as sauerkraut and meatballs to spicy fritters from Sri Lanka, Greek bean stew and stuffed vine leaves from Iran. Pride of place in the evening's entertainment was given not to the elderly German choir but to a teen-aged Tamil dancing girl in a sari, whose gyrations gave more than one older church-goer pause.⁴⁴

Administration

St. John's has two full-time pastors: the Rev. Michael Drews and the Rev. Zerit Yohannes. An Eritrean secretary, Mehret Astaha, manages the office, welcoming visitors with a cup of black tea with cloves.

Congregational Meetings and a Church Council make administrative decisions while a Steering Committee, formed in 1993, evaluates the ministry and makes recommendations about the future. Vice-President Alice Greifenberger describes the origins of the Steering Committee: "When budgetary concerns arose, a decision was made to appoint a Steering Committee to review both the past and the future. In addition to organizational meetings, the Committee and the Council spend one Saturday considering matters under the guidance of [a pastor from outside the congregation]."45

Factors Contributing to Changes at St. John's

The interviews show that three main factors are contributing to change at St. John's: a history of interest in missions, the ethnic and racial composition of Toronto in general and the neighborhood in particular and pastoral leadership style.

History of Interest in Missions

A 1954 letter from Pastor Bornemann shows that long-time members began long ago to adjust to many cultures gathering in one building. When St. John's was opening its doors to Latvians, Estonians and Hungarians for worship and Bible Study, Bornemann wrote:

Because of difficulties experienced since January, 1954, we ask that all affiliated congregations schedule their regular services to be held two hours apart, so that the Estonians may have services at 2 o'clock, and the Latvians at 4, or the Latvians 2, and the Estonians at 4. In other words, no Sunday service is to begin before 2 o'clock. Moreover, we request that all services end in the evening by 6 o'clock.⁴⁶

Bornemann described scheduling problems with baptisms and weddings and wedding rehearsals and concluded with these conciliatory words: "Rather than have disturbances or feelings that are bad to grow between us, we would request that this be followed. This is the recommendation of our Church Council,

for we are anxious to serve and help as many as we possibly can....We want everything to run as smoothly as possible in your church and ours."⁴⁷

Racial and Ethnic Composition of City and Neighborhood

The racial and ethnic composition of Toronto and the neighborhood around St. John's contributes to the increasing diversity of the congregation. To Pastor Yohannes, Toronto's diversity is a natural thing. "Being an immigrant myself, I accept the diversity in Toronto as a natural thing. Canada is a country of immigrants— especially in Toronto it's obvious."⁴⁸ Other interviewees commented on the racial and ethnic composition of Toronto in general and the parish in particular as factors in changes at St. John's.

Paul Sodtke, a LCMS pastor doing doctoral work at the University of Toronto, talks about the relationship of the diversity to the ministry of St. John's: "We're in ministry to people that live in the downtown area. If you don't make some attempt to reach the groups around you, then you're a private club and not a church."⁴⁹

Pastoral Leadership Styles

The leadership styles of Pastors Drews and Yohannes also have an impact on the increasing diversity in the congregation. Pastor Drews' theology of ministry sets the tone for the ministry and is a significant factor in its development. In May 1993, Drews told the Steering Committee: "The spiritual foundation of the congregation remains firm. Christ's commission to make disciples of all nations is locally focused and personally experienced within the congregation."⁵⁰

Later in 1993, Drews expanded on this theology of mission:

We acknowledge that there are many open doors. Many more people of other languages are in our midst. Welcoming and relating personally to one person or family results in many others relating to and being interested in the Christ that is in our life. We thank God for the gifts of people in our midst and what they are sharing with us.⁵¹

Some respondents lamented that Drews does not always go through formal channels to obtain Council approval for welcoming new groups to use the building.⁵² This has been a

source of conflict in the congregation but no doubt has also been a factor in the multi-cultural growth. Drews also overlooks Missouri Synod regulations about communion practices and women in leadership. The congregation welcomes all baptized people to the Lord's Table, and women not only assist with communion distribution, they serve as Council officers and elders. Drews' flexibility with denominational rules plays a role in the message the congregation communicates to newcomers.⁵³ The fact that the congregation is a member of the English District rather than the Ontario District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has some bearing on Drews' flexibility.

The Eritrean group led by Pastor Yohannes brings together Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Coptics and Pentecostals who have differing views of the meaning and practice of Holy Communion. Yohannes has solved this problem by not serving communion at Eritrean services. Lutheran Eritreans, who are used to communing four times a year, now commune in the multilingual services.⁵⁴ This liturgical flexibility has been a factor in the gathering of a large group of Eritreans who come from differing backgrounds.

The Consequences of Ministry Among Diverse People

All of those interviewed articulated both blessings and problems inherent in such a diverse parish. The following section describes both benefits and problems expressed by the people of St. John's.

Benefits

The benefits mentioned were learning, working towards unity, survival, evangelism, observing familiar customs and reflecting the urban and global community. One person mentioned ministry in a diverse society as a key to opening up the scriptures.

Most respondents identified the parish as a place for *learning*. Pastor Drews reflected on what he has learned from each culture: quiet humility of Eritreans, willingness of Anglos to open the doors to new groups, bold outspokenness of South Africans, strong faith of Tamils, sense of community of Ghanaians, love and emotional support of Hispanics, joy and excitement of Zaireans.⁵⁵

Laypeople made these comments about benefits:

—This has made me know more about other countries and other people—how their food tastes and how they communicate... how big and wide the world is and what goes on in the world. On Pentecost people put on their costumes and you can admire them. If a human being can produce this, God is able to do more...⁵⁶

—It helps us learn to form a more integrated society, lay down our racial tensions and know greater fellowship and understanding.⁵⁷

—The church becomes aware of upheaval in the world—for example in the prayers for Sri Lanka.⁵⁸

—We can learn from each other to respect and accept differences. Both differences and the similarities are a blessing.⁵⁹

—One big advantage is learning from one another. We've only scratched the surface of what we can learn from the Eritreans and what the Eritreans can learn from us. There's all kinds of stuff in the Eritrean culture that the rest of us haven't even begun to learn about.⁶⁰

Some see multi-cultural ministry as *working towards unity* across ethnic and racial lines.

—It's a microcosm of the universal church of Christ with people gathered together.⁶¹

—The multi-cultural worship speaks for itself when you see the children holding hands. We are one in God. It's a reminder even with the people who have problems accepting others.⁶²

—In Christ, we are the same. So if we come together, it's good. We can learn that God is neither Black nor White nor Green nor any color. Then we could all get together and know all the people who come to the church because the church is for everybody.⁶³

—We mix together and have a common social way of tackling things like education, family concerns.⁶⁴

Others see *survival* as a motive for reaching across cultural and economic lines. One year after arriving at St. John's, Pastor Drews told a reporter that the only place for the church to grow was among newly arrived immigrants and refugees.⁶⁵ A recent member repeats the history he heard from long-time members and adds his own commentary:

Before Pastor Drews was called, they honestly said we've got to do something or we might as well close up—it's going downhill. Expanding in the direction of multi-cultural ministries guided by Pastor Hahn [Jr.] was an idea they had....Even survival would be in question now if we didn't have the programs going on because we wouldn't have the people.⁶⁶

Evangelism is also mentioned as a benefit. Pastor Yohannes is concerned about "doing evangelism and accomplishing a

faithful mission". He mentions "growth of the church—both spiritually and number wise—both quality and quantity"⁶⁷ as an advantage. Others mentioned "the potential to reach out to more new people"⁶⁸ and "introduce newcomers from different backgrounds into the church".⁶⁹ One said, "This is a mission field in our backyard...We have a commitment to spread the Gospel to the whole world; *that's right here!*"⁷⁰

One woman mentioned the reverse evangelism often described in liberation theology:⁷¹ "They're a witness to me. They don't do it intentionally; it's just a part of their life."⁷²

A Ghanaian member says she enjoys *the chance to observe familiar customs* at multi-lingual worship services: "We sing in our language and yell and dance and show how the church does it back home. We go close to the altar and dance and put in the offering. We make a lot of noise and clap and sweat and sing so loud. I forget any burdens, any problems. I say, Oh God, thank you."⁷³

A long-time member says St. John's is *a reflection of Toronto and the world*: "It's the way Toronto is, and it's the way the world situation is moving: globalization. I think it brings the world to your feet."⁷⁴ She adds that ministry in a diverse society is *a key to opening up the scriptures*: "I think of the Gospels and ministry in the community, and the Samaritans are in the picture and the Lord is befriending the Samaritans who are enemies. It gives a different dimension to the Gospel; it brings it home."⁷⁵

Problems

Respondents also described many problems that surface when such a diverse group of people gathers. Problems include disunity, different ideas of what it means to be the church, disputes over power and control, sharing of resources, communication breakdown, and racism. I will separate these areas to identify them, but in reality they overlap.

One problem mentioned was *disunity*: "The 'we' feeling isn't there."⁷⁶ Lack of the "we" feeling is most easily felt at social events like potlucks:

—This is where it breaks down. We're together at worship. Then we come downstairs for a potluck, and everybody goes into their own group. There's a table with the older Anglo people huddled together in the middle...we stick together naturally with people

who are like us.⁷⁷

—There aren't that many opportunities to get to know the others, to understand or become friendly with other groups. You can accept them as friends but then to really feel that is another matter. If you're on the committees with them—for example, on the Steering Committee, it's working.⁷⁸

Another problem is *different ideas of what it means to be the church*. This problem is reflected in worship, political activity and stewardship.

A photograph of a worship service many decades ago evoked a strong emotional response from a retired organist. The picture shows the chancel lined with many clergy dressed in cassocks and surplices. "That picture breaks my heart. It used to be a very liturgical service. I was playing the organ and we had a big choir. We have no choir now. The liturgy was sung. The whole service had a different feeling entirely from the way it is now. It breaks my heart not to have it the way it was. It's a whole new world today."⁷⁹

Long-time members express reservations about multi-lingual worship with drums, amplification and dancing.

—There's been some fairly heavy resistance to worshipping in different languages—having the scriptures read in different languages. It's long and drawn out and confusing. Older people are not receptive to that. Sometimes there's drums, and some people don't like it. And amplification—they have great resistance to that kind of an intrusion in their service. For the people to worship [with us in English], that's no problem at all. But some find it disturbing to have different languages or different types of music or certainly if they dance during the worship. People express their religion in different ways.⁸⁰

—These multi-cultural services bring people together, and that was considered to be a good idea, but... sometimes it's confusing. You hear one language and then another one back and forth and sometimes people pray in their own language and it's chaotic. If it goes on for two hours it gets a little long...too much of a good thing.⁸¹

Tension over drums, amplification, dancing and multi-lingual worship is only one level where dissatisfaction surfaces because of differing expectations of what it means to be the church. *Political activity* in the church is another level:

—The South Africans wanted to deal with Apartheid and issues back home and that's political stuff and people get really upset. There was an inter-faith march for peace and against Apartheid that was going to start at St. John's and people were upset. The issues

got mixed—partly it was a procedural issue. There was a question about whether or not it was approved by Council and I think it hadn't been, I'm not sure. And the other thing was probably that it was a political thing. It's a sense of vision and a sense of trying to cope with a lot of changes all at once.⁸²

—The South Africans are a politically active group, and this is something that I do not tolerate. Without the Council's knowledge and the congregation's knowledge, [the South Africans] had a protest march to be organized here, published that St. John's is the headquarters of this march. And it ends here at St. John's. And to have a service—they called it a service, but to me it was not—it was speeches of various protests about racism and women's rights...it was a protest march.⁸³

Stewardship is another area where people across the cultures have different ideas about what it means to be the church. This difference causes conflict because the dwindling Anglo group has been giving most of the financial support for the whole ministry through offerings and bequests.⁸⁴

Pastor Yohannes describes the problem stewardship presents for the Eritrean community:

The concept [of stewardship] among many Eritreans is [unfamiliar]. They don't understand that the church is us: the people. We understand that the church is the building, the administration, the hierarchy, the priests. Congregational participation and responsibilities and dedication with their giving especially when it comes to the offering, the people aren't educated, even the Lutherans. The Swedish church is supported by State money. The problem starts there from the Swedish missionaries who established the [Eritrean] church 125 years ago.⁸⁵

Yohannes says that most of the Eritreans are students with low incomes. He is trying to teach them about stewardship, but they are not used to the idea of supporting the church themselves.⁸⁶

Power and control over use of congregational resources and the congregation's future is another area of dissension. The conflict involves fear of loss of power and control and resistance to relinquishing responsibility. Here is a sampling of general comments about power and control:

—One of the obvious problems is the so-called mother church or the mother community with traditional attitudes. There's a fear of the unknown, of new people coming in and assuming responsibility and possibly taking over, not quite understanding who they are, fears about the property.⁸⁷

—For some it's the fact that maybe the other cultures are taking over rather than the Canadians keeping control. It's losing control of the situation and being absorbed into something else....⁸⁸

—Sometimes it's [an issue of] the right of ownership. [Long-time members] see that because they are members, they are kind of the owners or the leaders. Until you go through the system and make a formal commitment to membership, you're just a guest. You don't really belong. I don't have any proof to validate that but sometimes I think it comes out. Most newcomers aren't members.⁸⁹

Sharing resources such as staff, space and finances is a clear problem. For example, the Steering Committee has addressed concerns about pastoral care for older members.

There is a perception among some that with all the ministries going on, the pastor's time is spread much more thinly. Particularly the homebound are not getting the pastoral care they want....The perceived problem is that the pastor's time is diverted away from older members who aren't getting their fair share. Will their congregation provide the pastoral care that they think they deserve? Maybe that's not a good word to use in the church, but that's the perception. It's their church; they put a lot into it, and they think they're sort of owed something in response.⁹⁰

Older members also worry that money saved in previous years is almost gone, and the congregation has a deficit. The Eritrean ministry has an annual budget of about \$50,000. The Synod provides only \$15,000 annually in subsidy, the Eritreans themselves give about \$7,000 in offerings and the Anglos are responsible for the remaining \$30,000.⁹¹

Communication is another area of concern. Differences in language and culture produce misunderstandings but these are only the beginning of the communication problem. Deeper communication problems revolve around the use of formal communication channels. Questions about building use raise the related issue of what the relationship is among the groups:

In the last couple of years there's been an explosion of groups—Tamils, South Africans, Zaireans—worshipping at different times, sometimes in English, sometimes in another language. Their relationship with St. John's... didn't go through the official channels. When the Eritreans came, it was formally set up with full agreement ahead of time and understanding who the staff would be and what the relationship would be. It hasn't been 100% clear whether [these newer groups] are under the supervision of St. John's and part of the formal structure. They are in a sense, yet they do their own thing in a sense. Sometimes you need to deal with picky issues

so they don't come back and bite you... things like building use where concerns come back about one of these groups. Something happens that someone doesn't like and then the question is exactly what is their status. Behind that question is the question of what is our vision of ministry here. I suspect that those who are upset have a different vision of what the ministry should be... It's a way of saying Whoa! We don't know what's going on here [or] who's in charge.⁹²

Racism is a delicate subject that relates to all previously-mentioned problems. One Anglo member objects to the use of the word "racism". He says: "Somebody has said the congregation is racist. It's so far from the truth it isn't even funny. St. John's of all the churches in the English District is probably the most outgoing and generous. Some people are outspoken, but they are very sincere. They have high principles and they expect people to keep them."⁹³

One of the first Africans to come to St. John's has a different perspective. She perceived racism in the following incidents:

There was one time when [the choir] had to robe and sing in church. If I touched a robe [she would say], "Don't touch it. It's mine. Don't touch it, it's this person's. Don't touch it, it's that person's." One of the others said, "What are you doing? She sings all right. She's been practicing with us. Who did you say these robes were for? Those people haven't been here for years. Come. Let me pick you out a robe."... So I said, "Why don't we form a choir because the other choir was made up of four or five old people." We wanted the young ones to join. It was announced in the church that anybody who wants to sing in the choir should stay for practice. Nobody stayed. Just us. Why didn't they stay? There's just a few white people that stay with us. Is this because of *us*? When we came to this church... it would be full of tea and coffee and doughnuts. When just a few of us were Black, they [white people] were here. Now they're gone. So where are they?⁹⁴

An Anglo member gives this analysis:

Part of the problem is racism and prejudice. It's okay for people to worship here but we have all these restrictions—like who can be an officer—and it makes it so difficult when we have a large, diverse group for many people to meet those requirements. It automatically leaves them out. People say it's okay for people to come here if they don't make a lot of waves.⁹⁵

But newcomers *are* making a lot of waves. One member thinks that the root problem is *handling change*. He thinks that for some people there has been too much change too

fast. "Once word gets around that your doors are open (not in the traditional way of saying everyone's welcome—they can all come in but what's attached to that is—if they do it *our* way) once word gets around that St. John's is a church for people of diverse backgrounds, it really snowballs....the thing takes off."⁹⁶

What Changing Urban Congregations Can Learn from St. John's

This concluding section suggests what St. John's can teach those who are trying to evoke a new unity in the Body of Christ that cuts across lines of culture and economics in this rapidly-changing multi-cultural society. The suggestions are (1) take risks in welcoming strangers who knock at the door; (2) expect differing ideas of what it means to be the church; (3) acknowledge the conflict as necessary; and (4) acknowledge and dismantle racism.

Take Risks in Welcoming Strangers Who Knock at the Door

At a number of *kairos* moments in the history of St. John's, at least some of the people were willing to risk welcoming those who knocked at their door. When Pastor Yohannes and his family arrived, Pastor Drews and the Church Council saw the potential for ministry with Eritreans and decided to offer a place for a new mission to develop.

As the changes were taking place, the long-time members could not foresee that eventually the Eritrean group would outnumber the Anglo group, that Zaireans and South Africans would also be worshipping in their midst or that multi-lingual worship with drums, amplification and dancing would replace English worship four times a year.

Yet at some critical points, sometimes without going through formal communications channels, someone risked opening the door a crack to the strangers who knocked. One member thinks St. John's can teach other urban parishes to "be open to the people who come...If a group comes and asks if you have a place where they can worship, be bold enough to say yes. Be bold, be inviting, take risks."⁹⁷

Expect Differing Ideas of What it Means to be the Church

Once the door is ajar and people begin to come together across racial and economic lines, they can expect to encounter different ideas of what it means to be the church. These differences range from worship practices to stewardship to visions of the purpose of the church. Ministry for the future in urban congregations can expect traditional North American ideas about what it means to be the church to be challenged repeatedly by people who have had a different experience of the church in other countries.

Acknowledge the Conflict as Necessary

The waves that newcomers at St. John's are making are as necessary to moving in the direction of wholeness as is the grief that the long-time members express because the church they once knew lives only in their memories. The "wholeness to which [hu]mankind is destined"⁹⁸ cannot come without acknowledging the conflict as necessary. Christians will encounter the conflicts intrinsic to their time and place whenever they proclaim the Gospel in word and deed across lines of cultural and economic division. When they confront social evils like poverty and racism, Christians will meet with resistance from those who benefit from the status quo. When they themselves are the ones who stand to lose power and prestige, Christians may encounter conflict even within themselves. The church can foster open discussion of the areas of conflict, identify the roots of the conflict and see conflict as a gift that is necessary on the way to becoming a whole people of God.

When diverse people gather, it is inevitable that some will *break* established rules on the road to *changing* established rules. Some of this rule-breaking is due to the ambiguity of the situation. Pastors Drews and Yohannes have made difficult choices which are offensive to some. In the name of hospitality, Pastor Drews has sometimes chosen to welcome strangers without going through formal communications channels. Pastor Yohannes omits communion from Eritrean worship, and the Eritrean community communes only in multi-lingual services. As is their custom, South Africans sponsor political activities in the sanctuary, and Zaireans serve beer at wakes in

the church basement.⁹⁹ These actions are controversial, but in an ambiguous situation, where people do not yet have shared rules or customs, they have made choices which seem to them to be the best choices under the circumstances.

When the resulting conflict is seen as a necessary part of process, it can become a resource for a broken community that is destined for wholeness. The conflict begs the question, "What is really important to *all* of us here?" Without considering different answers to that question, wholeness in vision and action cannot come into being.

Acknowledge and Take Steps to Dismantle Racism

Responses to the interviews indicate that racism is a difficult issue to face in this integrating congregation. Although the word *racism* is not a comfortable word for some of the people of St. John's to use for the friction in their congregation, the conflict that was mentioned by interviewees corresponds to Joseph Barndt's description of white racism in the church.¹⁰⁰

While this is not the place for a detailed account of Barndt's analysis, I think Barndt sheds light on what is happening at St. John's when he identifies intentional and unintentional factors that keep people from experiencing the "we" feeling. Some of these factors include people's "*anesthesia*" to their own racism,¹⁰¹ tension over "who will define and... control the church",¹⁰² and the desire of long-time white members to have prime decision-making power.¹⁰³ At St. John's an attempt is being made to involve people of color in decision-making, but a "cultural curtain"¹⁰⁴ that seeks to prevent cultural interaction between white people and people of color still divides mixed gatherings such as multi-lingual worship services and social gatherings.

Some find it hard to accept charges of racism in light of the way the congregation opens its doors to so many newcomers. But the interviews confirm that side-by-side with much evidence that racial barriers are being broken down is evidence of the same racism that afflicts the local and global community. This racism makes it difficult for members to become partners in vision and action across cultural and economic lines. There is no hope of dismantling this racism without first helping *all* the people who gather at St. John's to recognize and acknowledge their own racism and educate themselves to relate in new ways.

The power and control issues that surface at a personal, institutional or cultural level in integrating congregations are the very place where the Gospel can enter and begin to break down barriers. At St. John's, people with little previous opportunity to practice working together with those outside their own race are having that opportunity. Mixed leadership groups such as the Steering Committee have been places for people of different races to work together and acknowledge and analyze deep issues of power and control, to hear from others that their actions are perceived to be racist and to engage in cooperative visioning and decision-making.

Conclusion

The book *Conflict Resolution: Cross Cultural Perspectives* offers the following analysis of what normally happens when cultures cross: "Problems arise when people with different cultures and goals come together and interact. The modes of adjustment or conflict are various, but usually one group dominates or attempts to dominate the other. Eventually some accommodation is reached, but the process is likely to be long, and for the weaker group, painful."¹⁰⁵ Add the Gospel to this reality, and there is hope—not of avoiding the conflict and resistance but of making use of the conflict to come closer to the elusive "we" feeling.

Margaret Allemang, who was baptized at St. John's in 1913, still hopes to reach that "we" feeling. Like a modern-day St. Paul, she encourages her congregation:

This is a dangerous period we live in if the negative attitudes take over. It's a threatening period as well as an exciting period. We all need commitment to move forward and see that good prevails as we know it through the Gospel. We all have this heritage of the Gospel; we're here because of that. We need to make sure that good prevails and our values are translated into a picture that takes in the world.¹⁰⁶

The Rev. Roland Kawano, a United Church mission executive in Toronto, predicts that Canadian society will increasingly look like a picture that takes in the world. He says: "There may come a day when the white Anglo-Saxon majority will become distinctly visible against the larger numbers of darker-skinned peoples. This Anglo group will then become a new visible minority."¹⁰⁷

The people of St. John's are already living as if Kawano's prediction has come true. If Kawano is right, St. John's is on the cutting edge of discovering what it means to be the church in urban Canada today.

Appendix: Interview Questions

The following questions were used at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Toronto, Ontario on October 28 and November 18, 1993.

1. What brought you to St. John's?
2. What are your most important faith values?
3. Do you hold a leadership position at St. John's?
4. What is the length and history of your involvement here?
5. Describe your current involvement at St. John's?
6. How far do you live from St. John's?
7. What do you think of the diversity at St. John's?
8. What do you think of efforts to blend the many cultural groups at St. John's (e.g. multi-lingual worship, cultural and educational events)?
9. What are the advantages of having such a diverse parish?
10. What are the problems in such a diverse parish?
11. How do you deal with problems in the parish?
12. What do you think other urban parishes can learn from St. John's?
13. What are your hopes for the future of St. John's?
14. How does your faith shape those hopes?
15. What decisions would you like to see St. John's make for the future?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share?
17. May I use your name in reporting the results of this research?

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Toronto for its willingness to make its experience available to the wider church by talking openly about the joys and struggles of being the church in a setting that crosses cultural and economic lines.
- ² Many interviewees used "Anglo" to refer to long-time white members who speak English.
- ³ St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Address and Telephone Directory, 1993.

- ⁴ The Rev. Michael Drews, interview, October, 1993.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Interview questions are included as an Appendix.
- ⁷ I completed fifteen interviews, 45 to 90 minutes in length, with nine Caucasians, four Africans (three Eritreans and one Ghanaian) and two Tamils (from Sri Lanka). They included nine men and six women. Most interviewees have a leadership role (pastor, Church Council or Steering Committee member, Sunday School Superintendent, members of the refugee committee, thrift store volunteer). Of the eleven lay people interviewed, five are new to St. John's within the last five years, and six are long-time members.
- ⁸ *A History of Saint John's*, February 5, 1967, Archives, St. John's Lutheran Church, Toronto.
- ⁹ Early historical information, unless otherwise noted, comes from *A History of Saint John's*, February 5, 1967, Archives, St. John's Lutheran Church, Toronto.
- ¹⁰ "Brief Highlights of St. John's," Archives, February 5, 1967.
- ¹¹ John Allemang, "Once-dying downtown church revitalized by work for refugees," *The Globe and Mail*, December 26, 1988.
- ¹² The Rev. Ernest Hahn, Jr., interview, November 18, 1993.
- ¹³ The Rev. Michael Drews, "Adding new perspectives: How one congregation developed various ethnic ministries to survive," *Practice of Ministry in Canada*, September, 1990, 6.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, interview, November 18, 1993.
- ¹⁸ Drews' Family Christmas letter, December, 1992.
- ¹⁹ Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.
- ²⁰ Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- ²¹ The Rev. Michael Drews, May, 1993.
- ²² Tigrinya is one of nine major languages in Eritrea.
- ²³ 1992 Annual Report, Archives.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ The Rev. Michael Drews, pastoral letter, May, 1993, Archives.
- ²⁶ St. John's newsletter, October, 1993.
- ²⁷ 1992 Annual Report, Archives.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ The Rev. Paul Sadtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- ³⁴ The Rev. Drews, Report to Steering Committee, Archives, May, 1993.
- ³⁵ Laura Steele, interview, October 28, 1993.
- ³⁶ 1992 Annual Report, Archives.

- 37 Bulletin, October 10, 1993.
- 38 Flyer for the event.
- 39 The Rev. Michael Drews, "Changing Ministry in a Changing Neighbourhood," presentation to the English District Great Commission Convocation in 1991, Archives.
- 40 1992 Annual Report, Archives.
- 41 Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 42 The Rev. Ernest Hahn, Jr., interview, November 18, 1993.
- 43 Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 44 John Allemang, "Once-dying downtown church revitalized by work of refugees," *The Globe and Mail*, December 26, 1988, Archives.
- 45 Alice Greifenberger, 1992 Annual Report, Archives.
- 46 The Rev. George Bornemann, letter, September 16, 1954, Archives.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 49 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, St. John's Lutheran Church, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 50 The Rev. Michael Drews, May, 1993, letter to Steering Committee, Archives.
- 51 Newsletter, October, 1993.
- 52 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 55 The Rev. Michael Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 56 Betty Boamah, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 57 Jacob Cherical, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 58 Sellathurai Sivaguru, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 59 Aster Fessahaie, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 60 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 61 Jacob Cherical, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 62 Aster Fessahaie, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 63 Betty Boamah, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 64 Sivaguru Sellathurai, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 65 John Allemang, "Once-dying downtown church revitalized by work for refugees," *The Globe and Mail*, December 26, 1988, A20.
- 66 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 67 The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 68 Laura Steele, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 69 Musa Aron, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 70 Val Hack, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 71 See Clodovis Boff and George V. Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, Paul Burns, trans. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989) 223-224.
- 72 Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 73 Betty Boamah, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 74 Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.

- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 78 Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 79 Esther Riner, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 80 Val Hack, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 81 Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 82 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 83 Val Hack, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 84 Ralph Riner, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 85 The Rev. Zerit Yohannes, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 The Rev. Ernest Hahn, Jr., interview, November 18, 1993.
- 88 Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 89 Janice Drews, interview, October 28, 1993.
- 90 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 91 Ralph Riner, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 92 The Rev. Paul Sodtke, interview, November 18, 1993.
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- 94 Betty Boamah, interview, November 18, 1993.
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- 106 Margaret Allemang, interview, November 18, 1993.
- 107 Roland Kawano, *Global City: Multicultural Ministry in Urban Canada* (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Book, 1992) 7.