

**The Small Church Story Project:
What Is Your Story Now?"**

Revs. Doug Dunlap and Susan Craig

A common narrative in our time speaks of the decline, even death, of rural churches, across America, and in Maine. We are reminded of the often-cited Mark Twain quote: "Word of my death is greatly exaggerated." There are, in our time, here in Maine, small churches – even *very* small churches - that not only are clearly *not* dead, but are doing remarkably well! Indeed, some have created "new ways of being church", and by so doing have rich stories to tell of spirited worship, joyous fellowship, dedicated love and service to their neighbors, and a committed embrace of responsibility for their well-being.

Gathering those stories, and sharing those stories with churches of every size, small *and* large, is the goal of *The Small Church Story Project*, launched in 2014 from a lunch table discussion at the Maine Conference Annual Meeting. The Project is now engaged with seven Maine congregations, and welcomes more congregations to share their stories. Intrigued – truly, *moved* - by the worship experience, and fellowship experience, and witness to outreach, of the New Sharon UCC Church, where Doug holds membership, he decided to undertake a gathering of stories of small churches across Maine. Over the past 18 months, with the assistance now of Rev. Susan Craig, one or the other of us has arranged visits for seven churches located in Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Washington, and York counties. We attend worship, meet with the congregation, and hear from the pastor or pastors (when there is a pastor), for the purpose of gathering the new story of each particular church.

We invite the congregation to tell its story *now*, and the *now* is an intentional focus – not the way the church once was in, say, 1850 or 1950, or even 2000, but the church now. Our most basic questions? *How do you worship, engage in fellowship, and serve? What is precious to you about the church now? What makes it possible for you to create this (new) way of being church?* We do a great deal of listening.

What have we found? We look towards Fall 2016 to assemble all the stories, and summarize our findings, possibly for an Annual Meeting workshop, and possibly for a published article. For now, this ACE item provides a sampler.

The Whitneyville Church, Moose River Church in Jackman, The Forks Church, and the Andover Church, faced with the departure of pastors for quite different reasons, raised up laypeople from the congregation to proceed toward Licensed Ministry – and did so in different and creative ways of educating and supporting these new ministers. The New Sharon Church functions without a pastor, and has added new worshippers! The Madison Church, which officially closed in 2014,

selling the church building, has reinvented itself as a house church, meeting weekly for Bible study, conducting worship for local nursing and boarding home residents, and providing spiritual care to members and friends in frail health. Remarkably, one of the Bible study group members in Madison has recently become a Member-In-Discernment. The York Beach Church has Story Project visits and discussions still in process. Part of their story is that the members literally and figuratively cleaned out the past to focus on the future by clearing out the basement! They hold outside worship beside the church building in summer and thereby have attracted neighbors and summer visitors. There is now a regular Saturday morning prayer service, and every 5th Sunday there is a Service of Healing. They opened up their once-closed church parking lot for beach parking – gaining interest in the church from summer visitors.

More examples. When Head Start funds for Washington County were cut, the Whitneyville Church opened the doors of its fellowship house to a Mothers Group for mothers of children who had previously been enrolled in Head Start. This past winter The Andover Church hosted a program of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill to create a local support initiative with the church in a leading role. The church also started a program called “The Hungry Kingdom” to provide healthy meals, sourced largely from locally-raised food – for the 25 student elementary school in town. They provide community lunches in summer – for free. As mentioned above, the Madison Church provides once-per month worship in a local Nursing Home, and two Boarding Homes.

The church at The Forks – even though primarily a summer season church - holds Christmas Eve and Easter services in the Town Hall. Situated by the Upper Kennebec River, and across a road from a white water rafting outfit, the church offers an annual “Blessing of the Rafts”, plans to hold outdoor worship services, and has been specifically welcoming of long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail – thereby welcoming to their church people of all ages, and from all over the world. The New Sharon Church operates an afterschool program called “Tuesday’s Children”, provides once-per-month take-out food sale “Pies Plus”, and a community concert series from January to June. York Beach has offer community concerts as well, is looking towards making its education center space open to families with children, and has refocused itself as an outward-looking, community church. In Jackman, the new Licensed Ministers, local people who have come up through the congregation, were asked to participate in the local high school graduation – a first.

These would be remarkable ministries for churches of any size, large or small, but over the winter few of these churches have more than 20 people attending worship, and for some the number is under 10. These are very small congregations. Yet they continue to celebrate worship, and they are committed serve. They do so joyfully. Most are now gaining new members who are attracted by the personalized worship experience, a welcoming sense of fellowship, and visible acts of love of community-as-neighbor.

As for worship, for New Sharon, for Madison, and for Whitneyville in winter, services take place around a table. In New Sharon each worshipper sits at a place where an unlit candle is placed,

to be lighted during the prayer time. Each person in worship has the opportunity to light the candle from a Peace Candle that is passed, and offer prayer joys and concerns. Every person. In some of these smallest churches the liturgists for the day are asked to volunteer at the time of the service. Someone always does! The morning sermon may be offered by a pastor, but may also be offered by a layperson – or it may occur in the form of a discussion when every person present has the opportunity to speak of how the Word of the day touches one’s life.

What do the people have to say about these new ways of being church? Remarkably, we do not hear people longing for the good old days. “Worship is so much more personal now.” “I benefit from hearing how others of our small congregation speak of the Scripture – how these apply to their own lives.” “I used to be shy about [voicing] prayer joys and concerns; now I am grateful when my turn comes. “People of the town depend upon us. We feel called to continue our ministry.” “I used to leave the running of the church to the pastor; now we are all taking responsibility – and this is good.” “We have added members since we embraced our smallness – people who want a small, personalized church.” “We realize that the church is not the building; as the song goes: ‘The church is the people.’ ” “We are living ‘being church’ ”

Significantly, all churches contacted report the importance of affirmation from ministers of the Maine Conference – those in Conference leadership, and other experienced pastors in the Conference who have encouraged a forward look, and offer their consultation and training. To be believed in by others contributes to a spirit within in these small churches that they truly can “create new ways of being church.”

There is much, much, more detail to share – about each church, and about the factors that make “new church” possible. We continue to visit churches. As noted above, we currently are in conversation with the York Beach Church (Union Church). We are seeking a connection with churches in Aroostook County.

How about your church? Would you like to share your story? We welcome hearing from you! Contact us at dallandunlap@gmail.com, and we can arrange to talk. This is an exciting time to be a small church!

Douglas Allan Dunlap (Rev.)
513 Holley Road
Farmington, ME 04938
207-577-9353
dallandunlap@gmail.com