

**WORSHIP MATERIALS for
HAMILTON CONFERENCE WEEKEND on
SUNDAY, MAY 28TH, 2017**

Thematic focus for the service:

Overall Theme:

Holy means that these changes are “of God.” It does not throw out everything, but it does force us to focus on what the Spirit is teasing out of the Church in this time of Great Emergence. Transformation is at the centre rather than taking time to tend “sacred cows.” God is the *author* of this Holy Shift!

Shift means that these changes are a part of the rummage sale God initiates within the church every 500 years (cf. Phyllis Tickle). It is Emergence Christianity. It is both exciting and terrifying – just like the Remits we have been considering since the last General Council.

The two words together deliberately evoke our usual profane reaction to change not of our own initiating. It resonates with our anxiety now that we know Christendom is certainly long gone. It vibrates with the fear we hold when uncertainty rears its head within our lives – especially within our lives of faith. We cling to certainty but, as former Moderator Peter Short once said, “The opposite of faith is certainty.” The uncertainty within which we find ourselves fosters a deeper faith journey.

Scriptural Basis for Theme:

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 (from The Message)

“God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, ‘Help! Murder! Police! before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.”

“What’s God going to say to my questions? I’m braced for the worst. I’ll climb to the highest tower and scan the horizon. I’ll wait to see what God says, how God will answer my complaint. And then God answered.”



“Write this. Write what you see. Write it out in big block letters so that it can be read on the run. This vision-message is a witness pointing to what’s coming. It aches for the coming – it can hardly wait! And it doesn’t lie. If it seems slow in coming, wait. It’s on its way. It will come right on time.”

Revelation 21:3b-5a (from NRSV)

“See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God’s own self will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Theme Exploration:

Certainly in this Great Emergence of our times, it seems for many that the former things are falling away, that the institutional church is dying, that there is no longer solid ground on which to stand and to proclaim the Good News of our faith. It’s apocalyptic. We are mourning our losses. We are grieving with tears of frustration at a lost dream of what could have been (and we fool ourselves to believe actually was). We are in pain because our assumptions of security, of belonging and of existential and spiritual rootedness are being torn from deep within us. We need time to lament.

Yet our lament also includes feelings of betrayal. We have been faithfully following what we thought was the Way of Jesus, yet our numbers are dropping, our finances are diminishing, our passion seems to be lagging, our fatigue is mounting and our hope is dimming. We complain loudly to God, demanding answers which fit with the way the church has “always” been. Our memory and our emotions muffle our ability to listen to God’s calling into new ways of being, cloud our ability to see beyond what we have always done. We act like we are dying.

In the midst of our dying is our resurrection. As the Spirit moves dramatically among us – in places and in manners we cannot predict – we are invited to join in the Kin-dom of God where all things are being made new. We are invited to bury our former ways, our former understandings and our former structures in order to embrace what is emerging through God’s call. As we dimly perceive what might be as we peek into God’s future Kin-dom, we find Companion Jesus walking with us in our struggle to re-vision our mission in Canada as the United Church. As we peer into the opaque

possibilities emerging, we find God’s grace wiping away the tears of grief and of loss to be replaced by our eager anticipation of new life. As we wriggle painfully out of the cocoon of our former identity as the once-was United Church, we find that pain will fade as we explore our new butterfly wings of transformation into the United Church which will be. Through it all we trust in the One who speaks it into being as all things are made new. We need to lean in to this new thing.

We are not alone. We listen carefully in communion with one another. We follow the Way of the Kin-dom of God accompanied by Emmanuel, *God with us*. We become co-creators of this Great Emergence God calls into being. The work is challenging, creative, strange, inspiring, painful, soul-enlivening and filled with promise. It is our collective Call. It is our becoming.

Calls to Worship: *(pick what works for your context)*

We come listening for you to speak.

We come, O God, wondering what will be.

We come crying out to you.

We come, O Spirit, laughing in our joy yet still afraid.

We come, O Risen Christ, as we look around and worry.

We come waiting for your voice in our hearts.

We come at your invitation.

Have you come to embrace the mystery of faith’s journey?

We come to root ourselves in the ground of our being.

Have you come with an ocean of joy filling your hearts?

We come vibrating with joy for we are ready to celebrate!

Have you come to open your hearts like flowers to feast on Love?

We come to drink deeply of abundant blessings as we rejoice!

Have you come to give of yourselves in answer to God’s Call?

**We come to join hand in hand as we worship the Source of grace,
singing our union in the harmonies of life’s song.**

Possible Opening Hymns:

Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee	<i>Voices United</i>	232
Let Us Build a House	<i>More Voices</i>	1
Come In, Come In and Sit Down	<i>Voices United</i>	395
This Is the Day	<i>Voices United</i>	412

Opening Prayers: *(pick what works for your context)*

Let us join together in prayer:

Jesus, you are the Christ.

In your rising is our own rising,

but we struggle every day.

We want to be comfortable, relaxed, even,

but you reach out and touch us all.

With wounded hands you hold our hands.

With wounded feet you walk beside us.

With a pierced heart you enfold our hearts.

Your eyes gaze deeply into our own eyes –

you implore, you invite and you incite.

“Go! Tell! Share! Heal! Do it in my name,”

you command us with a smile.

It is a smile which knows from the inside out.

It is a smile shadowed with pain *and* with joy.

It is a smile both wry and companionable.

Strengthen us, O God.

Enable us, O Spirit.

Lead us, O Christ. Amen.

Let us join together in prayer:

God of wonder, surprise us once more.

Whisper to our minds, to our hearts, to our souls once more.

Open our lives to the possibilities in Jesus’ name

as we follow the Way of death and resurrection.

Inspire us with the power of your Spirit alive among us,

that we may become the new life we seek. Amen.

Let us join together in prayer:

Loving, creative God, we come as those who enjoy control.

We like to know what is going to happen so we can plan ahead.

We don’t like it when surprises throw a wrench into our plans.

It scares us – even terrifies us – when we ponder the future.

What will remain? What will disappear? What will change?

The shifts in our world, in our lives and in our church

squeeze our hearts with apprehension.

Will we lose what we have worked so hard to build?

We reach out to you, O God, in the midst of our fears.

Hold us. Comfort us. Strengthen us. Enliven us. Amen.

Children's Time:

Take pictures of yourself from a number of old photo albums which shows your changing looks from childhood into adulthood. Show those pictures to the kids one at a time, passing them around or projecting them on a screen. Ask them what they notice. After a short time, ask them what they think you'll look like in another ten years. Then ask them what they think they'll look like in another ten years. Wrap it up by assuring them that God will be with them through all the changes they experience through life. All they have to do is keep talking with God in prayer. Then share a "Repeat after me" prayer:

**Sometimes change frightens me,
but thank you for being there with me.
Thank you for helping me grow.
Thank you for teaching me love.
I trust you, always. Amen.**

Prayers of Confession: *(pick what works for your context)*

We snuggle into your welcoming embrace, O God,
seeking healing wholeness in confession.
**We admit it, O God.
We're scared,
wanting to squirrel ourselves into safe, predictable places.
We're unwilling – unable at times – to trust you.
"Change happens," we nod sagely,
"But only if we can control it, okay?"
Then your Spirit breathes where it wills –
uncontrollable by its very nature.
We turtle and try to protect what we have,
even as we are blown in new directions.
Will we ever learn to trust in faith?
Can we ever learn to trust in you?**
(Silent Prayer)
Amen.

Welcoming, inviting, loving God,
**you gave us life, and in that life, freedom,
but we became full of ourselves, taking all the credit,
assuming we knew it all and had life under control.
In our pride and through our overwhelming sense of power,
we turned from the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love.
Instead of power, we found weakness and the need to change.
In our weakness, we notice our brokenness.**

(silent prayer)

Forgive us.

**Help us to leave the comfort of our old ways of being
so that we can embrace our new home in Christ.**

Assurances of Grace: *(pick what works for your context)*

You don't have to hide under the cover of darkness,
skulking around for fear of being discovered and accused.
The risen Christ meets you with open arms,
inviting you to accept the abundance of God's grace,
to enter into the healing hug of transformation,
to be born afresh into new ways of living.
You are loved truly, fully, completely
for who you are and who you are becoming
because of who's you are. Thanks be to God!
Jesus weeps with us in our pain and our brokenness,
but he never leaves us,
always here to offer new life, new ways of being.
The Spirit blows where it wills and pushes us to unexpected joy
as we embrace Christ's hope and healing.
God's grace floods our lives each day and in every moment
so we carry blessing as a promise and as a commitment.
We are forgiven, loved, restored and enlivened.
Thanks be to God.

Possible Hymns Before the Sermon:

Spirit, Open My Heart	<i>More Voices</i>	79
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling	<i>Voices United</i>	333
I Have Called You By Your Name	<i>More Voices</i>	161

Sermon or Meditation:

(If you don't have someone to preach available – perhaps based on the notes about the Conference theme above – you are welcome to use the letter Hamilton Conference President Gord Dunbar provides below.)

“Holy Shift!”

Whatever possessed me to choose as my theme for my two-year Presidency of Hamilton Conference something that is so rude and likely a little too cheeky? After all, am I not supposed to be the “spiritual leader” of the Conference, for the almost 300 churches from Tobermory to Fort Erie and from Mississauga to New Hamburg? Where is the dignity a theme titled “Holy Shift?”

Consider the lament of the ancient prophet Habakkuk. To the prophet, it appears that everything is going down the drain, that justice and law is a joke. The very ideals into which people of faith are called to live no longer seem to be how people are living out their lives. Oh, Habakkuk has tried. He has tried mightily. He has sounded the alarm like any good prophet would, but to no avail. No matter how diligently, how starkly or how loudly he shouts, nothing seems to happen. He is ignored – not just by the powerful, but also by the marginalized, the poor and the downtrodden.

Habakkuk looks at the world around him. Instead of law and order he witnesses chaos and anarchy. Instead of cherished traditions which have been handed down from generation to generation, he sees nothing but quarrels, violence and fighting. Instead of justice, mercy and peace, he experiences evil run amok. He perceives is a world and a society which has no anchors, no familiarity, no certainty, no **faith** – unless it's faith in what you can get for yourself and forget anyone else.

He throws his hands into the air out of disgust, despair and defeat. He shakes his fists at God and demands an answer. He's braced for the worst. Maybe God will smite him, but at least he'll have an answer. He even promises to climb the lookout tower to scan for signs of God's response. He has a furious complaint and it just doesn't seem like God is answering.

We often feel the same way. We look around and see a multitude of grey heads and fewer and fewer children and youth. We scan over our balance sheets and note with growing alarm how tight our

finances are becoming – if not already deeply into the red. We notice more and more of our neighbouring congregations are closing or amalgamating, no longer sustainable communities of faith. Many of our neighbouring congregations are using part-time ministry personnel because they don't have enough resources for full-time. The resources we give to the Mission and Service Fund – the way the United church reaches into this country and into the world – have slumped. Even the United Church Women are diminished.

We remember, though. Oh, yes, we remember. We remember in the early sixties when a new United Church was dedicated every week. We remember when Sunday Schools were filled to overflowing. We remember when worship services were crowded – and not just on Christmas and Easter – and no one would miss church for a hockey game or a soccer practice. We remember when even federal politicians listened to the United Church for guidance and for insight. We remember when reaching into the world made a huge difference to those on the margins in far-off regions of Canada and overseas. We had clout.

We remember and we lament. Like the prophet Habakkuk, we lament what we once had. Like the prophet, we despair it won't turn around anytime soon. All we can see is chaos, anarchy and disorder. We see an enormous shift in how churches survive, let alone thrive.

We demand answers from God, fearing that we'll hear nothing but silence.

Just when we are becoming certain there is nothing, God speaks to Habakkuk. God tells the prophet to write the answer in big, block letters. “Make sure no one can mistake what I'm going to tell you. These letters need to be so large you can read them running at full tilt. After all, you're right. Everything **is** changing. I am eager for the change. I can hardly wait. This change, though, will come right on time – but in **my** time, in my time.”

You can almost imagine Habakkuk shaking his head as he tries to absorb God's answer. Perhaps the prophet finds the image of childbirth crowding into his head. Perhaps he begins to understand that any emergence, anything new, anything worth waiting for takes time to deliver. It takes nine months to deliver a baby. How long might it take for God to give birth to a new church?

Oh, there are signs that something is growing. The body changes. The rhythms of life change. You begin to notice, but you're not sure what it will be until the time it is born.

Perhaps it makes you think of the Revelation of John of Patmos when he writes that God will be in the midst of it all, that all our tears of sorrow, of lament, of despair, of grief, of hopelessness will be wiped away. God will be there to make all things new.

You see, the theme "Holy Shift!" is not as profane as you might have thought. Certainly, what we **think** the theme is saying reflects our upset – and maybe a possible Anglo Saxon verbal reaction to this change, this emergence. Nevertheless, this shift we are experiencing is authored by God. It is God who is labouring – with us and with many others – to bring into being something new. There is trouble for many of us who like certainty: we just don't know what that something new will be. As eager as it may be to come, as eager as we might be to welcome it into life, it will come on its own time and that time is still not complete.

But like a swelling pregnancy, there are signs of its gestation. In my travels across Hamilton Conference I have seen promising signs, indeed.

There's a small congregation just northeast of Hanover called Crawford United Church. Like many rural congregations, it is a caring, committed community of faith, but resources are shrinking. In response to that challenge, the congregation has reached across Conference boundaries to explore a shared ministry with another congregation. Far more than a survival strategy, the strengths of each congregation seem to be a wonderful fit, complimenting each other, likely leading to renewed mission and refreshed purpose.

I attended the ribbon-cutting and dedication of a community hall nestled up beside Bethel Stone United Church near Paris. This is another rural congregation which has a vision of how to serve the community thanks to a generous legacy donation. Thiers is a very different manner by which they are called into the world, but it is one that has fostered lasting and powerful relationships.

I have attended Halton Presbytery's yearly conference hosted at Wellington Square United Church in Burlington. It is called "Ministry

in Motion" and creates a place in which ministry personnel and lay folk can gather to consider how to do church differently – missionally and sustainably. It has become an incubator for those exploring the Holy Shift within which we find ourselves.

I attended a Waterloo Presbytery meeting at Trinity United Church in Elmira where the congregation is moving toward building a new facility which will feature rental accommodation. The exciting aspect of this project – even though it appears their building will change significantly – is that the new facility will fund their ministry instead of our usual scraping enough together to pay for the building. At the same time, they will be building relationships into the community and making a difference.

I attended a ribbon-cutting and dedication service for the renovations and the expansion of Pelham Community Church in Niagara Presbytery. Not only is their congregation growing, but they incorporated windows from another United Church in their design, they utilized a legacy gift from a second congregation to help fund the addition and they navigated the transition with the assistance of a neighbouring congregation from a different denomination. See what's emerging?

Indeed, the Skylight Festival in Paris the past two summers and continuing this summer is a fabulous example of how church is emerging in different ways – ways we never considered – but ways that enliven. In the midst of our seeming apocalypse, resurrection is our reality.

So, when you hear the theme "Holy Shift!" think of them as both challenge and as promise, for God is making all things new.

In eager anticipation and faith-filled joy,
Gord Dunbar.

Possible Hymns After the Sermon:

Do We Dare	<i>By Wanda Stride</i>	Music provided below
As a Fire Is Meant for Burning	<i>Voices United</i>	578
Make a Joyful Noise	<i>Voices United</i>	820

Offertory Prayers: *(pick what works for your context)*

Let us join together in prayer:

Take what we offer, O God, as you take us –

**our lives and our living, our love and our loving –
blessing us for your mission and ministry.**

**Transform us into agents of healing for an aching world
as we share the gifts with which you have blessed us.**

Amen.

Let us join together in prayer:

Holy Mystery, you are Wholly Love.

In response to all you have given us,

**we dare to offer ourselves and our gifts,
trusting that you will use us to bring healing and hope
to your people and to your creation. Amen.**

Let us join together in prayer:

We want to give you our first fruits, O God,

Yet, as our offering was collected, we looked closer.

**Bits of paper and clinking coins don't seem like first fruits,
but we offer them to you as symbols of our witness –**

**our witness to our collective discipleship,
our witness to your work among and within us,
our witness to our commitment to good news,
our witness to what continues to emerge in faith.**

**Bless and use these gifts – and us – in Jesus' name,
that we may grow into your Holy Shift! Amen.**

Community Prayers: *(pick what works for your context)*

Do we hear it?

Can we listen carefully enough

to hear the sounds of your living water,

or are we distracted by the babbling of the brooks of our thoughts?

Beside the streams of your gift of living water, O Christ,

we open ourselves to you.

We may speak our thoughts aloud into this safe space of worship,

or we may speak our thoughts silently into your heart,

but we unburden ourselves to you:

(Silent Prayer)

Even as we navigate the rapids and the turmoil of our worries,

we open our perceptions to see your living water.

The light of your Son glints brilliantly

from each glistening wave crest.

As we listen carefully to the chuckling of that sustaining water –
your living water which opens us to dreams of what might be –
we taste the sweetness of your blessing us to act.

As the music of the flowing of your blessings serenades our souls,
we look across the world and imagine how you equip us for change:
we see the too-rapidly developing famine spreading like a cancer
across the south Saharan territories of Africa

and into the southern countries of Africa,

while you whisper to our hearts, “It’s up to you;”

we read media stories of fear, of isolationism, of racism, of hate
that seems to be swallowing the world in poisoned relations
and we listen to Jesus’ words,

“Love one another as I have loved you;”

we wonder if the Royal Commission on Missing and Murdered
Indigenous Women and Girls will actually make a difference
amidst grand promises and great fanfare,

while Jesus’ words fall once more on our hearts,

“As you did for these, you did it for me;”

We listen to your Spirit whispering to us of transformation –
transformation into what we can become,
transformation into what we can help our world become,
transformation into new possibilities

because of our baptism by living water.

In gratitude, we lift our hearts in prayer-filled thanksgiving.

(Silent Prayer)

O God, may your living water bathe us

with hope, with joy and with love

as we repeat the words Jesus gave us to pray, saying:

THE LORD’S PRAYER *(unison)*

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Give us this day our daily bread;

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil:

**For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

We come to recognize your presence within and around us, O God.

We know you by many names:

Living, loving God; strong Mother God and warm Father God;
old, aching God and young, growing God;
even great, living God whom we never fully know.

Yet you come to us as Liberating God
whose laughter is our strength and our nourishment.

It seems strange to refer to your place amongst us, God of mirth,
as taking delight in our hits and our misses.

More often we see you as distant, as remote,
as one who demands our loyalty and our devotion.

Instead, your joy bubbles up
from within the pain and the sorrow of living.

Paradoxically, you meet us where we are,
offer us life lived fully in hope.

Thus, our transformed hearts rejoice as we give you thanks.

(Silent Prayer)

When we grieve those who have died, when memories wash over us,
we find ourselves more likely to laugh at shared stories than to cry,
finding healing power in that kind of deep communion you foster.

When we think about those in hospital,
those living with illness or injury or disease,
those mired in loneliness and fear and despair,
we wonder how we can bear the burden of caring.

Then we go out to visit,
finding ourselves relishing the grins of welcome,
the jokes about getting older
and the laughter at just being together;
it is our healing when we take ourselves too seriously.

When we look at the tragedies of the world –
feeling helpless and powerless –
we notice how people rise to the occasion,
caring for each other selflessly,
sharing meals, shelter and warmth,
shouldering the burdens together,
refusing to crumble into tears
but embracing laughter as a release.

It is then, O Christ, we see your welcoming face,
we feel your healing hands, we touch your shared wounds.
Paradox no longer,
we enter into the joy of living even in the midst of loss and of fear.

That's why we celebrate your loving Spirit's connection among us all.
In the silence we share our yearning for deep connection –
between our neighbours and friends, our family and strangers,
holding each one in our hearts as we pray:

(Silent Prayer)

May your laughter continue to bubble within us and among us
so we can share the joyous reality of loving and living
without taking ourselves too seriously.

May we hear in our inner ear Jesus' mirth-filled joy –
joy which transforms and makes new in the Way of Jesus –
as we share the words he gave us to pray, saying:

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(unison)*

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

**And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:**

**For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

Possible Closing Hymns:

Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah	<i>Voices United</i>	651
You Shall Go Out with Joy	<i>Voices United</i>	884
Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ	<i>Voices United</i>	468
Draw the Circle Wide	<i>More Voices</i>	145

Commissioning: *(pick what works for your context)*

We go from this place standing tall and confident.

**No longer bent over,
we go to live in Love every moment.**

We go from this place healed and whole.

**No longer ashamed of our uncertainty,
but trusting we have a place and a purpose.**

We go from this place with the Spirit's enthusiasm.

**No longer afraid to make a difference in the world,
but delighted to build relationships –
one touch at a time.**

While we may still worry, Living Christ, we rest our trust in you.
Bless what we have said and done today as a sign of that trust,
 knowing you are the author of our transformation,
 resting in the assurance of your gift of faith.
You do, indeed, make beautiful things out of us.

Go from this place in Christ's name,
 in-spired by the call into transformation.

We go as people empowered by the Spirit.

Go into the world as disciples of Christ,
 branches of the true vine.

We go as people blessed by God's grace.

Go into your "ordinary" lives,
 filled with Christ's new wine of promise.

**We go as people claimed by love,
 seeking to claim love for others in service.**