

Café ministry stirs things up

Newfoundland parish makes transition from maintenance to mission model

By Stuart Mann

The residents of South River, Newfoundland, and the surrounding region have a new place to go for their coffee and lunch. The new café has a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, wingback chairs and plenty of parking. It even has wireless internet access.

The only difference is, the Emmaus Room Café is located in a church – or, as the Rev. Gerald Westcott calls it, the new house for the Anglican Parish of the Resurrection.

“We live in a coffee culture, so we decided to build and develop a café ministry,” says Mr. Westcott. “The very centre of our new house was going to be a café.”

Mr. Westcott was in Toronto recently to lead a workshop at the Vital Church Planting Conference. In an interview afterwards, he told the story of his parish’s remarkable transformation from a four-point charge with dwindling congregations to a single-point entity with a flourishing new home and a passion for hospitality, mission and liturgy.

When he arrived at the parish in 1999, he was faced with formidable challenges. Not only were the congregations shrinking, but it was getting harder to pay the bills and the churches operated in isolation from each other. “It was a maintenance parish and dying in almost every way,” he says.

Working with some parishioners, he started an initiative called Recreating the Community. “What we tried to do was work with what we had,” he says. “There were things already going on, obviously. So we tried to make that more of a collective effort.”

They developed one main liturgy on Sunday morning that moved to a different church each week. The service included a children’s program and a worship team with guitars and a keyboard. “We tried to develop a liturgy that was lively and attractive so that people might want to leave their community and go participate in it. We wanted to make it attractive to those who were already coming and those on the fringes.”

Meanwhile, all four churches remained open and evening prayer was held in them on Sunday nights for those who didn’t want to leave their community to attend the main service.

Mr. Westcott said the service and a new emphasis on working together helped to break down the silos that the churches were operating in. “Although the people in these four separate churches were Anglican, they didn’t know each other at all. So underlying this whole process was building new relationships.”

They also streamlined the administrative side of the parish, turning four separate vestries into one. “Not only did that save time, but everybody knew what was going on in all the points and everyone had a say,” he explains. “People got to know each other better. They started working together and discussing the parish and its future and everything else on a regular basis.”

The four church treasurers also began to meet as one group. “That enabled us to watch what our Sunday offerings were while we were going through the changes and whether we had financial support or not.”

One other area that needed immediate attention, says Mr. Westcott, was adult Christian education. That resulted in an Alpha course, which is still run today.

Once those initiatives were underway, Mr. Westcott formed a Rector's Council, made up of influential people in their communities. "We would dream and discern what we thought God was calling us to. These people had influence in their communities, so they could help share the ideas and develop conversations as we discerned and moved the vision forward."

He said getting people to work together in those early years was more important than thinking about what to do with the buildings. "I knew too many stories of multi-point parishes that tried to address the building issue first and tried to force a community instead of growing a community. It's not rocket science to figure out that we had to build new relationships before we could begin visioning about our mission and reaching out into our communities. If we didn't build new working relationships, we wouldn't have been able to move anywhere with the parish and I'd be long gone by now."

That first phase lasted about three years, and they evaluated their progress every three months. "We'd sit down and ask, 'Where are we? Are people still coming? Where's our financial support? Are people still doing our adult Christian education?'"

What they found was that a new community was evolving. "It happened all by itself: by us massaging the liturgy a bit; by encouraging people to move around; by getting everyone in administration to work together; by working on the whole adult Christian education thing. Over those three years, a new community evolved. It's beautiful when you look back on it."

By the time they asked the diocese to be reconstituted as a single-congregation parish, they already were one in spirit, he says. The diocese approved their request, they were renamed the Anglican Parish of the Resurrection, and they threw a big party to celebrate.

But some serious challenges remained, namely what to do with the four church buildings. This is when the years of working together and becoming one congregation both canonically and in spirit really began to bear fruit, says Mr. Westcott. "When we started talking about our buildings and our future, we had a whole new body of people to speak to it," he says. "In other words, if we were going to talk about liquidating one of our properties in the old model, we'd have six or 10 people come out for a meeting and there'd be no way you'd be able to talk about selling the building because that would be the only topic of the conversation. But with a new congregation made up of people from all the four communities, everybody now had a voice about all of the properties."

The parish eventually voted in favour of selling all four buildings and constructing a new one in a more visible location. "The collective wisdom was that, if at all possible, get into a new space because it would be like a new beginning and everyone could have equal ownership for that new start."

They soon learned that deciding to sell their buildings was one thing, but actually doing it was quite another. The opposition was "pretty rough," says Mr. Westcott, particularly from people who had never or rarely attended the churches but nevertheless felt a sense of ownership about them. It became a national story and even Peter Mansbridge of CBC News reported on it.

"There was a lot of opposition but we stayed focused on what we were doing," says Mr. Westcott. "Everyone's entitled to their own opinions and we had to respect those. But the only ones who had a say in what we were doing were the ones sitting in the pews on Sunday mornings."

The congregation began to think about what they wanted in a brand new home. “We were making the shift from a maintenance church to a mission church, so we wanted a house that reflected a mission nature, where we could find alternative ways to connect with the community around us. So we conceptualized a café church.”

They designed the building with three things in mind: hospitality, mission and liturgy, in that order. “We kind of turned upside down our traditional maintenance Anglican way of thinking,” he says.

The café would spearhead the parish’s hospitality. “It would be open every day and lunch would be available and we could run programs out of it that could benefit our region, like marriage, divorce, separation and bereavement support. Those kinds of things weren’t about liturgy: they were about connecting with people.”

The worship space would also be different. “We call it our Oratory, because we were accused of selling the church, but of course you can’t sell the church because the church is the people. We were very adamant that nothing about this building was going to be called church, but church-gathered. We designed it to be very participatory. It’s not a place where you come in and watch – you actually participate in what’s going on. Another principle was equality of celebration, so everyone would be on the same level and sitting in the round. The other principle was flexibility of liturgical space, so we can do a lot. If we want to change it 10 years from now, there’s nothing screwed to the floor.”

With those plans in mind, the parish started to design their home. They found a piece of land on a highly visible spot on the main highway that was central to the four communities.

Today, their new home is a reality. People – not just Anglicans in the parish – are dropping by the café for lunch and a coffee, and the worship space is filled with about 120 people on a Sunday.

Mr. Westcott says the café has produced some unexpected results. “The café has transformed our faith community because we have a common life. We see each other daily. Our relationships have deepened because of this. We’re not just spending time together on a Sunday or in a meeting at night.”

The daily availability of the café has also meant that the parish is connecting with other groups. For example, because of a working relationship with an employment agency, the local high school’s special needs students are doing their volunteer hours in the café. “People are coming to us and looking to partner with us,” says Mr. Westcott.

He says the transformation of his parish was undergirded by some key factors. One was a commitment to prayer. Another was a commitment to stay in the parish for a long time. “Hand in hand with that commitment is the exploration of deepening, authentic relationships, filled with integrity and heartfelt love.”