

Transitions for the Beaufort United Church Community

By Shannon Coulter-Low

The objective throughout the course of this research project has been to identify and learn about the circumstances surrounding the decision of the Beaufort United Church community to initiate the construction of the adjacent seniors' residence, Villa Beaufort, in the context of declining church attendance and an ageing membership. The church is located in the Beaufort community of Beaufort Village and is often transformed into a multi-purpose space, for events that are church related or otherwise. According to Minister Reverend Coughlin, church membership numbers about one hundred people but services usually only attract between twenty and thirty people at a time. For this research I interviewed both the Minister, Reverend Ron Coughlin and Lyle Cruikshank, President of the board of Villa Beaufort and the chairman of the church's board.

In preparation for my site visit and interviews, I drew information from a variety of academic articles, web sites and media coverage. The article *Church Growth and Decline in Historical Perspectives* by John Smylie¹ was useful to obtain a contextual background on the subject, albeit from an internal and American perspective. Smylie describes the attempt by Protestants to move away from understanding the decline in membership quantitatively, proposing that the denominations may find a new life in the process of dealing with this loss.² He also points out that liberal churches are more likely to experience a decline in membership because they do not provide meaningful answers to spiritual questions and do not offer strict enough form and discipline, in contrast to more conservative denominations.³ The second article is from a recent Quebec publication, entitled *What Future for Which Churches?*⁴ It covers issues revolving around transitional uses for churches within the Quebec context. Thirdly, the article *American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age*⁵ was useful because it theorizes the reasons conservative Protestant denominations increased in membership during the 1960s and 1970s, while more liberal denominations declined.

The websites of Villa Beaufort and the United Church of Canada were helpful in providing an overview of both institutions. According to the Villa Beaufort website, the building has 50 apartments for semi-autonomous seniors with moderate incomes. Newspaper articles from local West Island papers provided some context about the project. Notably, it sparked a heated debate before its construction because of concerns over increased traffic, densification and noise.⁶ However, the reality of the need for seniors' housing won out and the lot began construction in May of 2012, opening its doors for occupancy this month.

I attended the service at Beaufort United Church on Sunday morning only a short time after Villa Beaufort opened its doors. The residence was built in the church's backyard and on the previous site of Angell Hall. The sanctuary is the largest remaining section of the church, and has been divided in two, with temporary walls in the back that enclose a nursery, previously located in the Hall. The space could easily hold about 500 people, however there were only about twenty-five people sitting on the remaining church pews, most of whom were seniors. Perhaps

because there were so few people, the service was quite intimate. Members stood up at the beginning of the service to announce their respective events or fundraisers, and it was evident that despite the size and age of the congregation, many are still heavily involved in the church's community life. The short service was read out by Reverend Coughlin who discussed the early church's apocalyptic worldview, in a sermon entitled "Something is About to Happen". The service was followed by a showing of a film made by community resident Jobie Weetaluktuk about the after-effects of the Canadian government's aboriginal schools on Inuit children.

My first interview was done after the service on Sunday with Reverend Coughlin, who has been with the Church for over two years as interim minister. He was able to give me a succinct description of the church's internal structure. He described the church as very liberal, with a democratic system on both the local and national level. It is in this way that the Church's members were able to initiate the construction of the seniors' residence, a solution which was legitimized by the fact that relatively few people were using the large space, the need for affordable seniors' housing in the West Island and the need for financial security.

My second interviewee was Lyle Cruickshank, president of both the Church Leadership Team, and the Villa Beaurepaire Board. Mr. Cruickshank has been a member at Beaurepaire United Church for over thirty years, and was instrumental in the realization of the project. Perhaps the most interesting product of the two interviews were the similarities in how both described the importance in giving back to the community and how that had helped to sustain Beaurepaire United over the years.

In approaching Beaurepaire United Church, it was important to avoid any premature conclusions, including the development of a thesis, in order to keep an open mind. As such, my research was mainly observational and descriptive, in order to keep an open mind and answer my proposed question: how has the development of the Villa Beaurepaire residence affected members of the church community? After some deliberation, it became evident that the questions should instead be, how has the nature of the Beaurepaire United Church led to the development of Villa Beaurepaire? This was the result of the discovery that it was not an outside party who proposed the development of Villa Beaurepaire, but the church's members themselves. The answer to this question is multifaceted. The development is the result of its location within an active neighbourhood whose level of community involvement implies an attitude of support that encompasses providing adequate housing for seniors. The housing market and demographics of the West Island are such that many elderly residents are "house poor", meaning that although their homes are worth a large sum, their pensions can no longer support the house expenses (taxes, maintenance costs), nor can they manage the upkeep of the house. Moreover, the initiative to build Villa Beaurepaire was the result of a dramatic church-going decline and as Mr. Cruickshank has pointed out, the need to justify the usage of such a large space by so few people. Finally, the nature of the church as a part of the United Church of Canada diocese and of its members as proactive and open-minded community thinkers has led to the initiative and planning of the residence.

Smylie's article discusses the alternatives to looking at the number of declining church members from a qualitative point of view. He wonders "*what objection could we really make if it should please God to carry His work onward and reach his goal, not through a further numerical increase but through a drastic numerical decrease of so-called Christendom?*".⁷ At Beaufort United, the decline in church membership is very real, and as discussed in the article, has encouraged the church to work creatively with the community, perhaps carrying out their faith in a different sort of way. The article also discusses the possibility that it is mainly liberal churches that have seen a decline in membership because they do not respond as well to questions of meaning and existentialism, while the stricter, more conservative churches can provide the tools required to answer such questions.⁸ Therefore it is not that people are becoming less spiritual, but that in fact they are choosing denominations with more distinctive ecclesiastic styles that can offer them the discipline and structure they need.⁹ As Reverend Coughlin stated during his interview "*the United Church is a very liberal church, or I would say a more radical church. It has always been at the forefront of things.*" As such, the church's involvement in the community and its acceptance of marginalized members of society have encouraged more meaningful interactions with society, but according to Smylie, this is not what people look for in a church.

In Protestant theology, it is neither the Church nor the material objects associated with it that are central to one's relationship with God; it is simply a place for like-minded people to gather and worship. Although this is not always true in practice (one may take the Reformation as an example of the supposed overindulgence in material devotions), simplicity in décor is particular to Protestant churches such as this one. A distancing from the importance of place can be cited as a reason why community members were able to take the initiative to build the residence, even if it meant demolishing a large section of their building. According to Reverend Coughlin, at first people did not want to lose the Hall or see the disruption, but after some talking amongst the congregation, they approved it and were able to move ahead with the demolition. Reverend Coughlin stated that according to his personal beliefs, "*My sense of the church is of the people [using it] rather than the building itself.*" In this way the work of God is not only confined to the building, but is at work in the world. He commented that this idea of the religious community as sacred has helped him to have more flexibility in terms of building modifications.

The focus that the church places on community is perhaps one of the most important factors in deciding *what* to build. Church members are a part of the local Beaufort community and the local community takes part in the church's sphere by participating in an array of events (yoga classes, concerts, dog training, music lessons etc.) that have, until the recent demolition of Angell Hall, been ongoing. As both Mr. Coughlin and Mr. Cruickshank emphasized, they felt as though the community around them has supported the church for so many years and it was time for the church to give back to the community; saying thank you by offering a place for elderly people in need. According to Mr. Coughlin, the ethos of the United Church of Canada is that it exists not just for themselves, but also for the society at large as a way to promote justice and peace in the world. However, it is not only positive thinking that has resulted in the production of Villa Beaufort, but an incentive for forward thinking.

The decline in church attendance and their resulting financial difficulties are not unique phenomena, having become characteristics of many Protestant and Catholic churches in Montreal and elsewhere. What makes Beaurepaire United Church able to deal with such obstacles, avoiding the wrecking ball, is the impetus of its members for action, incorporated into the church's identity. When asked what they would say to a potential member of the church, both Reverend Coughlin and Mr. Cruikshank said that it would be important for new members to find a passion that the church could help to live out, from international charities and local committees to helping other churches out with their needs. Unfortunately, despite the benefits that such an attitude may have for the community, enticing new people by means of outreach activities is not easy. Reverend Coughlin noted that churches are not the first place that people look anymore when trying to find a group or a hobby. As Davie explains in Northcott's chapter on sociology in *Approaches to the Study of Religion*,¹⁰ the decline in public participation in institutional forms of religion denotes an individualistic attitude, wherein religious activity has become domesticated and privatized. Despite the initiatives of church members that have created a golden opportunity for giving back to the community in the form of Villa Beaurepaire, it is unknown how such an attitude will serve in the future when church membership continues to decline.

In the beginning of my research I set out to answer the question, how has the nature of the Beaurepaire United Church led to the development of Villa Beaurepaire? After a site visit and two interviews, it became evident that the answer is multifaceted. An analysis of the church and its community provides possible answers to this question; the necessity to find a solution to membership decline, the care and concern that the church has for the community, and the impetus for action possessed by church members such as Lyle Cruickshank. In this stage of transition for the church community, it remains to be seen how the parish will deal with shared space and continued decline in church membership. However, it is certain that the situation will encourage the same creativity that similar churches in Quebec are facing in this moment.

To enter a new space with the intent of doing research, it is crucial that the researcher do so without any preconceived notions beyond those that will give her or him general knowledge of the community. Evidently, the subjective bias is inevitable, however it is crucial that the researcher enter the field not with the belief that they can overcome it, but with the understanding that they must acknowledge its presence throughout their work. Ultimately, much like the approach of the phenomenologist, I found that a description of the church community proved most useful in order to work towards analyzing and understanding my collected data.

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Endnotes

¹ James H. Smylie, "Church Growth and Decline in Historical Perspective: Protestant Quest for Identity, Leadership, and Meaning." *American Presbyterians* 3, no 3 (1995).

² *Ibid.*, 203, 217.

³ *Ibid.*, 204, 210.

⁴ Richard Gauthier, et. al. *What Future for Which Churches?* (Montreal: Quebec Religious Heritage Foundation, 2005).

⁵ Robin Perrin, "American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic Factors in Church Growth and Decline," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989).

⁶ Rick Blue, "Seeing the future in seniors' residence." *The West Island Gazette*, 11 Apr. 2013, www.westislandgazette.com; Sarah Leavitt, "Villa Beaurepaire "Paradise" for Seniors." *The Chronicle*, 30 June 2010, www.thewestislandchronicle.com.

⁷ Smylie, *Op. Cit.*, 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 207

¹⁰ Michael Northcott, *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2001), 208.