

Planting Seeds, Watching for Harvest

Jessie Schut

Last spring, we carefully chose seeds that would grow well in our vegetable garden and in our climate. As an afterthought, we scattered a packet of mixed flower seeds in an empty space. The results of our work were mixed. Some vegies did well, and others fizzled. But the flower garden was unexpectedly beautiful!

The garden has lessons to teach us as we engage in church work. We can do a lot of planning, but sometimes the random acts create a greater splash. It's as though God has ideas for our church that we haven't even thought of, and if we are open to following an idea, though it is only a sketchy, dim vision, we may be in for a surprise.

The story of Margaret Evans's stay at Comox Valley Presbyterian Church (CVPC) last summer, funded in part by PCC grants for projects that are innovative and creative, illustrates this idea.

Last year, student Margaret Evans visited CVPC in February to speak of her experiences as a PWS&D volunteer in Kenya. Several folks who heard her speak were so impressed by her maturity and

insights, they wondered if she could work in our church over the summer. Her youthful enthusiasm and insights might be just the boost we needed to breathe new life into our congregation.

This in no way implies that CVPC is a dying church. Planted in the '90s, the congregation built a multi-use facility on two acres of land. It has a

reputation as a warm and welcoming place. We have a great choir, and last year built a community garden that is much appreciated by folks in the Valley. The Comox Valley's population has boomed in the last decade, thanks mostly to an influx of retirees, and a number of these have joined the church. More are likely to do so in the future.

But, like so many other congregations, we have a huge



demographic hole where the young families and children should be. It was hard to find committed leadership for our very small Children in Worship program, especially when children's attendance was sporadic. Yet our congregation loved children. Were we doing something wrong?

We thought Margaret might show us new ways of ministering in a meaningful way to young families. She was excited about the idea. We decided to go for it, although it was only an idea with potential. The possibility of having Margaret come was like spreading those flower seeds. Who knew what would come of it?

Applications were made to the *Creative Ministry with Children and Youth Fund*^{**}, which assists PCC congregations planning innovative and creative ministry projects. We also applied to some other church funds as well as to the Canadian government for subsidies for a summer student. When all the funding came through as requested, we booked Margaret's ticket. Even when the government subsidy was withdrawn at the last minute, another benefactor came through with the money. We were delighted with these blessings.

Margaret arrived June 2, 2011. We decided on three projects. Margaret would organize a week-long program for children in the community; she would also plan a summer barbecue for the congregation to invite members' feedback on programs at CVPC and suggestions for new avenues of service; and she would investigate possibilities of cooperating with neighbouring churches. Registrations for our Day Camp "Passport to Adventure" came in quickly, so we were off to a flying start.

The summer was a busy one for all who were involved. There were many times when we wondered what we had gotten ourselves into. We found out that carefully planned activities sometimes fizzled while last minute ideas were hugely successful. We learned that insurance is a huge part of planning activities, that churches get messy when occupied by children, and that more advance planning would have avoided practical problems. We learned, more importantly, that we could cope with these last-minute, practical problems.

We also found out that neighbouring Comox United Church was a great resource and was very willing to cooperate, even providing several leaders and youth

helpers for the Day Camp. The Valley's Youth for Christ organization was also enthusiastically supportive. When asked, many CVPC members gave good, useful feedback on the strengths and potentials for growth in our congregation.

Through Margaret's creative planning, we learned that a traditional morning VBS program isn't the only way to reach children. Our all-day program with church-

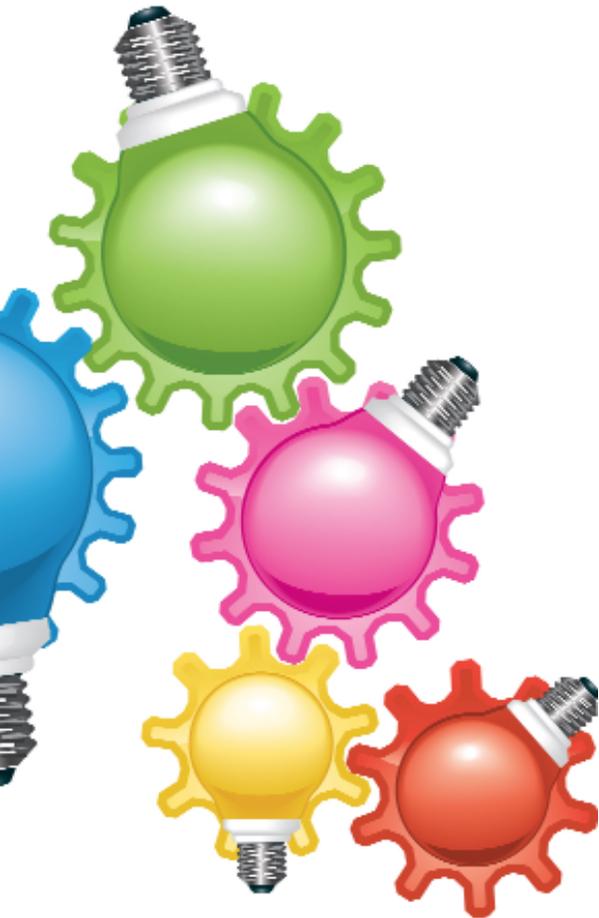
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centred activities in the mornings and field trips in the afternoons was highly successful. The International Potluck on Friday evening filled the church with families sharing their favourite dishes from around the world. Margaret also attempted to organize outings for the parents of the children, such as kayak trips. Such a thing hadn't occurred to us. She preached in our

church, and we saw the gospel through new eyes. Having her as part of our congregation was a truly rich gift.

We also faced some hard realities. While we have an idyllic dream of a church full of young families, we may not ever achieve that dream. We found out what it was like to have 30 active children running through our church building day after day, and we learned that it



taxed the limits of our energy. Bringing children from the community into our church for a day camp is a start, but it does not result in more children on Sunday mornings. Only one child, to our knowledge, didn't have a church home. We realized that to minister to the children, we also need to minister to the parents. A summer program with good intentions is only a drop in the bucket. There is work to be done.

We learned that in our congregation there are many gifts, and a generosity in using them. Some volunteered as leaders, but many more provided assistance behind the scenes. As well, Margaret's presence in our congregation was a challenge and a blessing. The questions she asked opened us up to new ways of looking at our church. She became an important part of our community, and loved us. She showed us how to focus on what we have, rather than on what we're missing. New life is not incompatible with older members!

Most of all, I think we learned that when we challenge ourselves and step out in faith, being open to possibilities, God blesses us, sometimes in ways we couldn't have planned. Our congregation now has more information and ideas than it did last year. We would love to have more children, but in the meantime we are charged to do our absolute best with those who do come, and to love their parents as treasures. The summer showed us that we as a congregation have the makings of being wonderful "grandparents" to these younger families, and we can build on this idea.

Would we...will we...do it again? I think so! Margaret, who is now a theology student preparing for ministry in Vancouver, wants to come back and build on what she's learned. Our experiences last summer have revealed other avenues we could explore. A footstep at a time, we are walking, trusting that God is laying the ground before us in this garden we call the church.

Jessie Schut is a writer and church educator, formerly with Faith Alive Publications. She is married to Al, mother of four, and grandmother of five. She is one of the retirees mentioned in the article, having moved from Edmonton five years ago, and is now a member of Comox Valley Presbyterian Church.

** Creative Ministry with Children and Youth Fund of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) assists sponsoring groups in planning new one-time or ongoing ministry projects within the PCC. Details of the fund and the application can be accessed through The Presbyterian Church in Canada website at www.presbyterian.ca/resources/online/203