



EQUIPPING FOR... LEADERSHIP

A Year of Possibilities

Living out your congregation's 2018 resolutions

As we think about the year to come, many of us are adopting resolutions to increase our health and happiness in 2018. These resolutions often require that we make specific changes in the ways we live our day-to-day lives. What would it look like if congregations also adopted a practice of crafting resolutions? What changes would your congregation decide to make in 2018?

In this issue of *Equipping for Leadership*, Andrea Perrett, recent Vancouver School of Theology grad and Registered Dietitian, will help us navigate the roadblocks to change and learn how to become rooted in Christ, our source of life and transformation.



Recently I did a quick search on The Presbyterian Church in Canada website for the word *change*; 3560 results appeared. Apparently we talk about change a lot in the Presbyterian Church. While this simple web search is not a foolproof metric, it does add to the feeling that change is all around us in the church.

As a recent seminary graduate, starting out in the PCC, I knew that change would be an ever-present topic in my congregation. However, as I dig into this new vocation, I am finding that it is actually my previous experience as a Registered Dietitian, not my shiny new M.Div. that continues to inform me about how to navigate these waters of change.

I'm excited to share some insights on change from a nutritional perspective and explore how these principles can inform how we approach change in congregational settings.

Roadblocks to Change

The people who come to see me for nutritional counselling know that they will have to adopt new practices and let go of others. While some people, such as pregnant moms, are eager to embrace new nutritional habits to support the growth of their babies, most often the people sitting across the desk from me are struggling to make changes in their lives.

It has been my experience that, in general, people know what they need to do to live a healthier life. Yes, there are the specific nutrition details that I can fill in for people about what types of leafy greens are





the best source of iron, or what types of fish have higher amounts of omega-3 fatty acids. However, people more or less know and understand the basics of healthy eating. Honestly, your grandma was right; eat your veggies, drink your milk and don't eat too many sweets or junk food.

People already have much of the nutritional knowledge they need. The problem is, for most people, just having the knowledge is often not enough for them to make a change. If it were that easy, there would not be a billion dollar diet industry.

The same holds true for the church. As worshipping communities, we often know the types of changes that we need to make, but that does not always translate into action. We know that we need to spend more time listening to God, being responsive to the Spirit and learning to be vehicles of Christ's light in the world. Yet, the path to making what we know needs to happen into a reality is not always clear and we find ourselves relying on our human capacity instead of trusting that is God is at work in our churches.

Although we are armed with knowledge and resources, change seems daunting. We find ways to put up walls of resistance; even in moments of crisis we fall back into familiar patterns or rush to quick solutions instead of discerning and taking steps towards a healthier future.

From a nutritional perspective, one of the reasons why simply having knowledge is not enough for us to make behavioural changes is we live in an environment that promotes unhealthy living.

Making healthy choices is definitely not just about whether or not a person has the willpower or motivation to transform their life. Behavioural change is terribly difficult and runs counter to our natural predispositions. Making changes requires altering well-ingrained habits in favour of what we know we should do. The challenge of doing what we know we should do in churches arises in part from the fact that church culture was once dominant and there had been little motivation for us to make changes.

Towards a Theology of Transformation

A major theme in Paul's letters was the call to personal and collective transformation. Alongside the communities that struggled with transformation, Paul also wrestled with inner conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in his letter to the Romans.

In verse 19 he sums it up: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." At the end of his life, the great evangelist, who worked to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth, is struggling to maintain changes in his life. He knows what he needs to do, he has the knowledge, but he just cannot seem to live fully in this new life.

As he says in verse 25b: "So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin." Even for Paul, knowledge coupled with a deep desire to change does not always translate into action.

No matter how much motivation or willpower we think we have, like Paul, we are constantly drawn back towards those things that are not life giving. It seems to me that this is akin to how we live in an obesogenic world that works against the health of our bodies.¹ We also live in a sinful, broken world that promotes sin. A sin-ogenic environment, if you will.

1. We live in an environment that promotes obesity. The Western World is a place where we are predisposed to weight gain and, the ready availability of high caloric foods, makes it increasingly difficult to lose weight. See Lake A, Townshend T. "Obesogenic environments: exploring the built and food environments" *J R Soc Promot Health*. 2006 Nov; 126(6):262-7.

We are sinners who live in a world that makes it easy for us to continue to sin and alienate ourselves from God. As *Living Faith* (2.5.5) says, “We cannot escape our sin, nor the sin of the world.” Sanctification is terribly difficult; living in the fullness of life in Christ requires obedience and commitment, neither of which is easy.

However, making the changes that allow us to live into that fullness has never been up to us on our own. It is only through the grace of Jesus Christ, and our life in the Spirit that we are able to make any changes in our spiritual life. Paul also finds comfort in this truth. “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

Paul knew his only hope for change was in rooting his identity in Christ. The same is true for us. Making changes for healthier lifestyles and for our continuing sanctification have to be grounded in our identity in Christ.

Transforming Identities

With regards to behavioural change, it is when we build up our identity as a veggie lover or avid walker that we are better able to tolerate the distress of not doing those other things that we really want to do. It is about building up the ability to choose to do those things our grandma told us to, not because we don't like those other things anymore, but because it goes against the identity of who we really are.

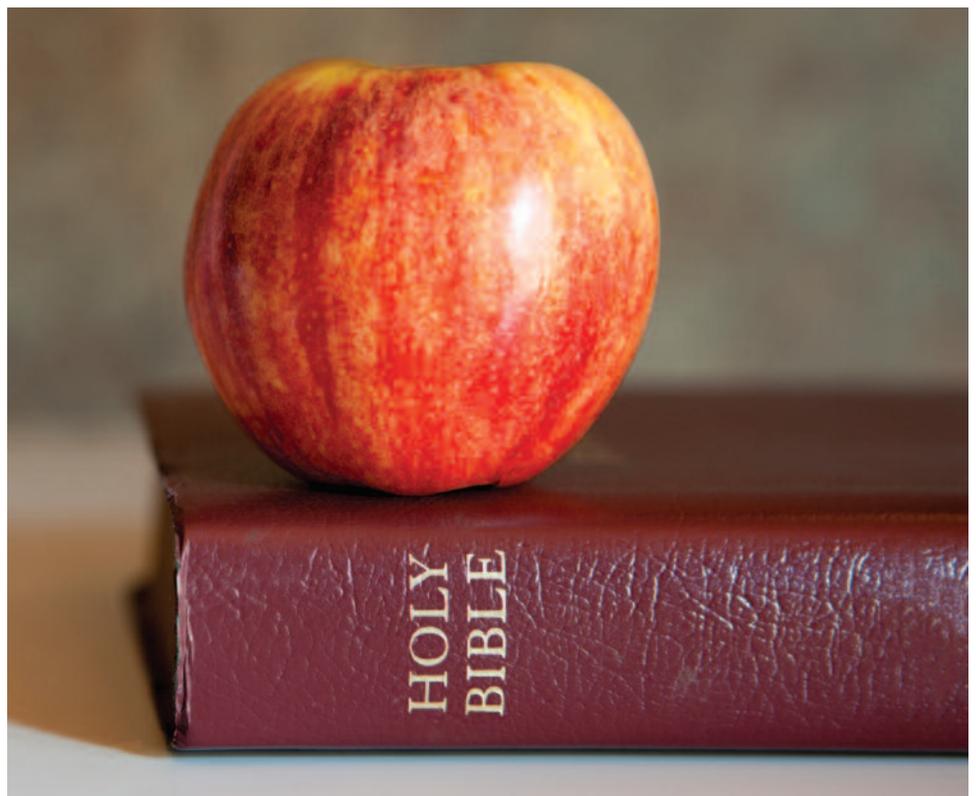
While you cannot draw a perfect connection between healthier lifestyle changes and sanctification, our ability to grow in holiness is rooted in our identity as follower of Christ. When we are able to acknowledge our brokenness and that our

only help and saving grace comes from Jesus Christ we live into our identity as Christ's own. As we ground ourselves in this new identity, we are better able to embrace and encourage change in our personal and congregational lives.

As congregations we mistake our identity when we limit our understanding of ourselves to the stories of our past. Our collective identity as the church is in Christ who required his followers to be open and responsive to the call to radical changes.

To put this into practice requires daily choices that move us in a new direction. If you are a person who wants to become an avid walker or veggie lover, you need to start taking a stroll each day and eating more vegetables.

There are many ways that churches can move into a new direction, such as reading scripture, creating a space for regular communal prayer, teaching members how to become disciples and living in ways that demonstrate care. This is tricky business, but we are not in it alone. Our ability to change is rooted in our identity as children of God, and allowing the Spirit to move and do its work among us.



Exercise 1: Grounding our Identity

Increasing your awareness of God in the world and in your life is a key aspect of spiritual transformation.

Make a “God sighting” journal

Throughout the day make notes of where you have seen the Divine at work in your life and community. At the end of the day or week review this to see where you’ve experienced God’s presence. This could be done as individuals or as a group.

How to use this in a congregational setting:

Invite elders to keep track of where they see God at work in the congregation. At the beginning of each session meeting, share these insights with the group. These stories can then also be shared during worship as a way build up your congregation’s life with God story.

Set a reminder

Choose a prayer or a piece of scripture that keeps you grounded in your identity in Christ. Set alarms, write down reminders or schedule at times throughout your day to recall that prayer or verse.

How to use this in a congregational setting:

As a congregation, find a verse that captures your identity. Print bookmarks, read it at the beginning of meetings, weave it in to worship, include it in the bulletin or text it to people when they need encouragement.

Exercise 2: Behavioural Change Experiment

When starting out with change, the task can seem overwhelming, but change does not happen all at once. With nutrition, taking small steps and slowly adding and expanding the goals is a key to success. Try this experiment with your session, small group or congregation to begin with making behavioural changes.

Gather ideas

As a group make a list of all the changes that you could possibly think of or desire to make.

Find a starting place

Rank each idea based on how important it is for your group to make this change AND how confident you are that your group can succeed in making this change. Choose one of the ideas that is important and you are confident about as your starting place.²

Set a Goal

Make one specific, manageable goal that you can monitor your progress on. Make sure to assign responsibilities and schedule time to review your progress. As you take steps towards achieving this goal, increase the frequency and intensity.

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from you!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your story of leadership and congregational vitality. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 ext. 271. Find more great ministry ideas through our weekly Facebook post *Take it Up Tuesday*. Follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/pccconnect.

2. Stott, N. C. H., M. Rees, S. Rollnick, R. M. Pill, and P. Hackett. “Professional responses to innovation in clinical method: diabetes care and negotiating skills.” *Patient education and counseling* 29, no. 1 (1996): 67-73.