

## Looking to the future: A Visioning Session with Canon Marilyn Malton, Sunday, April 6, 2014.

Marilyn came early to St. Matthew's on Sunday, April 6 to join us for worship and our traditional Lenten soup lunch (proceeds go to the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund). After a short introduction [1] she first commented that, from reading the bulletin and learning of all the community outreach and parish activities, she could feel the warmth and commitment of the congregation; sharing worship and lunch with the St. Matthew's congregation, she added, allowed her to witness the degree of involvement in ministries all around during and after the service.

Our clergy and the couple dozen parishioners in attendance were then guided by our facilitator through a series of conversations - some at large, others in smaller groups - about our current joys, and future dreams for our parish in the next 3 to 5 years. In the course of three hours, we were able to pray, listen to God and to each other and generate many ideas, all the while reviewing the feedback received from the congregation over the past few weeks. Several concrete next steps were outlined to help us continue planning for the future, God willing, with a clearer vision. The session closed by all joining in "The Grace", and thanking Marilyn for her time and guidance.

This visioning exercise, a meaningful process as it happened, may be summarized as follows:

**Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, who called your church to witness that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself: help us to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may be drawn to you; through him who was lifted up on the cross, and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

**Vision for the future:** What will be the focus of God's ministry through us, at St. Matthew's?

Marilyn had compiled all the responses to the two questions previously sent out by our rector. The responses were arranged in diagrams [2]. They are summarized as follows:

1) *What makes your heart sing about St. Matthew's?*

We should count our blessings! Parishioners are thankful for the people engaged in ministries, willing to take on work and leadership. They feel good to be involved at St. Matthew's, since it gives them a sense of belonging, and they identify it as a place of nurture, care and challenge. They consider the clergy and music inspiring and see the outreach ministries as evidence of the compassion and generosity of the congregation. They feel God's close presence working as "...folks take care of each other."

2) *What is your big dream for St. Matthew's in the next 3 to 5 years?*

There were responses regarding the physical space, in terms of accessibility, repairs and upgrades, but also connected to the deeper goal of creating a safe place of welcoming peace and closeness to God. Enhancement and growth of ministries (continue existing ones, promote other aspects such as Arts and Bible studies), music, stewardship and leadership were also mentioned.

**Digging Deeper:** Visioning is only meaningful if it can be put to practice through real connections, both within the congregation and with the community.

The information from the previous section served as a stepping stone that led to a round of small-group conversations on how to strengthen those existing connections. This generated many additional ideas and insights about where we want to go as a congregation, and more importantly, why?

There was a good discussion about different age groups (families with young children, teens, young adults and up). Some questions made everyone pause and reflect: Can we be everything for everybody? Where should the emphasis be? What remains in the end? In all honesty, the group recognized a desire for teens and young adults to expand their horizons, and to provide them with a good foundation that they will carry with them in life. Some may return to St. Matthew's; others might be in different cities or even other countries. In the same manner, we considered being welcoming to new parishioners for the sake of offering hospitality and discipleship, not because we have an anxiety that our congregation is going to fade away.

Another important observation was that our church is not just a building, although there is already a committee planning the renovation of our physical space. We agreed on the importance of renewing our spiritual space in harmony with the physical space.

We have many good things happening already, and there is also an opportunity for improved communication, and a willingness to be flexible. We are interested in growing and welcoming new families; in order to do so honestly, we have to acknowledge that it will be our spiritual space, and our love of God, for our faith community and each other which will prove to be attractive to other people. Paraphrasing one of the parishioners in attendance: if St. Matthew's were a wagon, it would be a fine one, maybe in need of a new wheel or some repairs, but the driver and passengers would be a happy and loving troop; the destination might not be as important as the journey, so the wagon would slow down and make room for some hitchhikers, who might be searching. The wagon would be welcoming and the newcomers would have fun, and they would love the wagon and the troop so much, they would join in this wonderful journey...

**Reflecting together:** At this point Marilyn requested for everybody to pause, and ponder the basic question: What is your preliminary sense of where God might be leading you as a congregation?

After some soul searching, more conversation, and Marilyn's help, the group reached the conclusion that we should have faith because God already has a plan for us; all we need is to learn what that plan is, and then follow through with actions: taking the time to appreciate the great gifts that God has given us (and which make our hearts sing); carefully considering the requests and proposals of as many parishioners as possible (our hopes and dreams for St. Matthew's); setting a communication plan (to make real connections) and finally, creating a short list of next steps to get the process going.

**Communication Plan:** The group pointed out a few practical ways to communicate:

- "The Journey" newsletter and our strong updated website are great assets that need to be preserved and continuously enhanced

- Word of mouth has always been a very effective (and inexpensive) way to invite people to come and share our spiritual journey.
- Our tri-fold pamphlets could be updated and then be distributed around the neighborhood.
- Activities at different times and different days, with the aim of reaching more people with differing schedules.
- Welcome new parishioners.
- Continue our outreach ministries and community-wide events (such as our Christmas Bazaar and pancake supper)

**Next steps:**

*Celebrate and be excited about who we are:*

- Continue and enhance our great music ministry
- Revitalize our physical and spiritual space
- Take care of our current parishioners and their needs, especially young families
- Continue and expand activities for all ages to involve more people
- Find ways to connect and unite people who attend our two Sunday morning services

*Send out a clear message of who we are:*

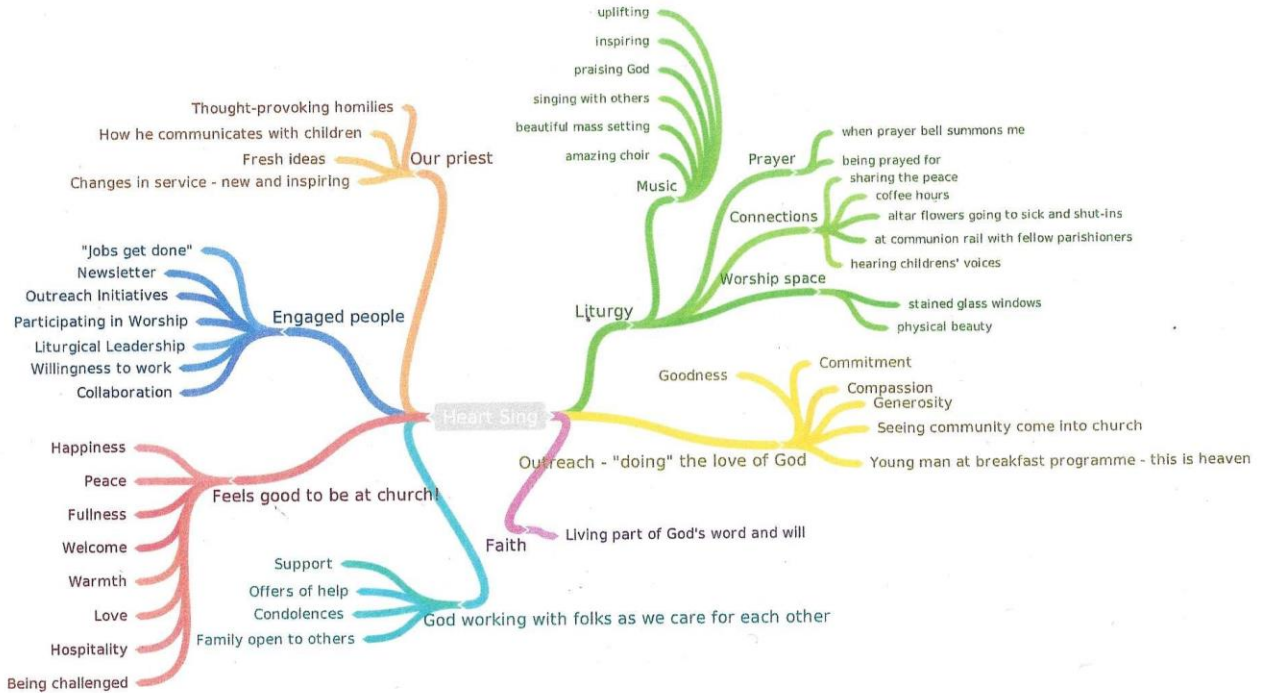
- Create a Vision Statement for St. Matthew's
- Write down a summary of the visioning exercise and post on our website (this document)
- Talk to at least two people about our vision: one parishioner who might not know what it means, and one member of the community who does not belong to St. Matthew's
- Implement the communication plan

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[1] Canon Marilyn Malton is the Director of the Renison Institute of Ministry at Renison University College in Waterloo and a parishioner at the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Kitchener. She has a Masters of Social Work in Community Development and Social Planning (Wilfrid Laurier University) and has been involved in facilitating person-centered and organizational visioning and planning for many years. Marilyn has a passion for working with groups to build on the strengths and gifts of individuals and organizations. Her Diocesan involvement has included serving on Diocesan Council, the Huron Catechumenal Network, the Huron Children and Youth Ministry Advisory Committee, and as a workshop leader at 53rd Weekend. She is an avid outdoorswoman and can often be found hiking, snowshoeing, or canoeing (not all at the same time!). Marilyn was appointed Lay Canon, Congregational Development by Bishop Bob Bennett in May 2010 and is the Co-Coordinator of the Diocesan Coaching Team. (Directly from: [www.congregationalcoach.com/Pages/MarilynMalton.aspx](http://www.congregationalcoach.com/Pages/MarilynMalton.aspx).)

[2] **DIAGRAMS**

1) What makes your heart sing about St. Matthew's? (think of a specific time or two in the last year that was especially life-giving/when you felt closest to God. Who was involved? What happened?).



2) What is your big dream for St. Matthew's in the next 3 to 5 years?

