

Message from the Moderator – AMC 2022

When historians study the effect of Covid-19 on the world, I wonder what they will say about 2022. If 2020 was the year of shock and pause and 2021 was the year of frustrated desire, 2022 might be the year of emptiness or, perhaps more generously, the year in-between.

While vaccine distribution and the emergence of variants with less severe outcomes resulted in a widespread return to in-person activities, including church, it was not the jubilant return I imagined in my 2020 report. For many people, the rhythm of their lives changed over the prior two (2) years. Whether through a combination of hybrid work arrangements, narrowed social circles during the pandemic, or the continued polarization of political rhetoric, investment in the institution of church seemed to drop dramatically in 2022. AMC has not been immune from this, seeing attendance drop to the 30s and 40s.

Adding to AMC's woes was the challenge of securing an interim pastor. We seriously explored the possibilities with two people and extensively consulted with several more along the way. Mennonite Church Manitoba was a tremendous resource throughout this process, continually recommending names and even cold calling prospects, all while navigating its own leadership shuffle with the retirement of Rick Neufeld from the position of Director of Leadership Ministry in May 2022 and the competing demands of other congregations in the conference seeking to fill as many as 18 vacancies in 2022. Unfortunately, as the summer waned, the prospect of a securing an intentional interim pastor became dim and it was clear that relying on worship committee to fill what was anticipated to be a relatively short gap in formal leadership with lay-speakers, guest speakers, and creative services was unsustainable and, frankly, unfair to that extremely diligent group.

The combination of post-covid socialization anxiety and the lack of conventional leadership left AMC somewhat meandering in the wildness. We experienced a time of contraction, not only in attendance numbers and donations, but also in spirit and identity. I expect I am not alone in feeling that it just took a lot more work and energy and time to continue to care for the church and for each other. It took work to hope, to dream, to imagine a future for AMC.

It might be tempting to say we persevered, tightened our belts, and marched on, but I think that does a disservice to the time of wandering. As those who have suffered loss or experienced depression might know, the bleakness is simply with you. We did not persevere, we just survived. I don't have a wonderful poem to share about this experience, although I imagine one might exist, but suffice it to say that these moments are part of our story too. It is not a concession or a weakness to acknowledge a time of contraction. It isn't necessarily anything to celebrate either. But it is honest.

It was an honest reckoning with the effect of wandering too long that led the Search Committee to recommend a shift in focus from an interim to a permanent position and we began actively recruiting Erika Enns-Rodine to fill that position in August. Meanwhile, we also engaged Harold Peters-Fransen to provide bi-monthly sermons to ease the burden on the worship committee. Both of these moves seemed to spark hope and renewed optimism about AMC. Leadership Committee quickly (and perhaps too quickly) endorsed these steps in September and the congregation approved hiring Erika in November. The desire to participate in that congregational meeting was strong with numerous people

requesting proxies or submitting their vote electronically if they were unable to attend in person. Moreover, the outcome was unanimous and expressed a unified vision about a critical step in the future direction of AMC.

It is likely that AMC would have benefited greatly by a period of intentional interim pastoring. It is generally a worthwhile exercise to deliberately engage in self-reflection and visioning. Our period in the wilderness was not deliberate but it was not unproductive either. For years, AMC has struggled with what it “should” be doing as a church. In the wilderness, there was no space for “should”. There was only gratefulness for “could”. And we have much to be grateful for as, even in the wilderness, we could do a fair bit.

We have seen renewed interest in the role of children in the church. Without the burdensome expectation that they should be in Sunday school, we discovered that they could be creative, progressively decorating the Christmas during the Advent season, they could be musical and lead our congregation in song, and they could be leaders amongst each other and share their skills to solve problems together.

We have seen a renewed interest in community engagement. AMC has never really felt that it should proselytize, but we were reminded of the many possibilities inherent in true evangelical faith, including the sharing music and soup with our neighbours, that give a broader purpose to church life.

We have seen people share and speak and to take on new roles in the congregation. While there are still a number of vacancies, people are actively volunteering for committees and seem eager to have a say in shaping the next chapter of AMC. Of those remaining from the contraction, there is a renewed sense of ownership in the future of AMC and this is very encouraging. There were even a few new and familiar faces that graced our doors from time to time.

I can still feel the work behind finding hope, so it is unclear if our time in the wilderness is finished. Hiring Erika as a permanent pastor is not a salve for the bleakness and we should be cautious not to conflate the unsettledness associated with being in the wilderness with the discomfort inherent in such a change in leadership. But what does seem clear, at least to me, is that we have contracted to a place from which we can start to imagine a multitude of possibilities for the future of AMC. The unfurling of those possibilities will benefit greatly from having competent leadership in place to guide us.

In the history of AMC, I fully expect 2022, for better or for worse, to be remembered as little more than the time between Dan Kehler and Erika Enns-Rodine, otherwise empty of accomplishments or significant events. While Covid has generally caused the weeks, months, and years to blend together, our time in the wilderness will likely be forgotten. What I hope is not forgotten, however, is the gratefulness we felt in receiving people and their gifts as they could share them and the willingness to remain together in the face of imperfection. The future of AMC is uncharted and a new chapter is beginning. I encourage us to remain open to the possibility of what could be.

Loren Braul