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Jesus gave us the church. Some assembly required  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
June 1, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:36-43, 50-53

Next week we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the United Church of Canada. But I got too excited this week, so I want to talk about that today. Besides, next week is Pentecost, and I want to discuss that for sure next week.

[image: sarcasm mode on]

You know, there are a couple of scriptures that really make me wonder why anyone would want to be a Christian. One of the classics is Galatians 2:20, where St. Paul says that we have to be “crucified with Christ”. Now that just does not sound good. But the other reading I think would discourage people from becoming Christian is the text we just read from Acts.

Jesus promises the coming of the kingdom of God, but then he up and leaves. Jesus promises us the kingdom, but then he leaves it up to us - with the help of the spirit, granted - to actually do the work. I mean - what is the point of being Christian if we have to solve our own problems and to do all the work ourselves? What is the point of being Christian if we still have to think for ourselves?

[image: sarcasm mode off]

Christian tradition tells us that Jesus gave us the church. However, there are at least 2 problems with that idea. For one thing, Jesus was not Christian. Jesus would never have even heard the word “Christian” in his lifetime. He may have created a new community. But there is no way that he imagined that community moving beyond the bounds of Judaism. And certainly not becoming the largest religious ecosystem on the planet. I know that it’s very traditional to say that Jesus was the first Christian, but that is just not historically sensible. Jesus never even heard of Christians. We’ve talked about this point before, so happily for you I will not expand on that today.

The other problem is that Jesus did not so much leave the disciples with the church. Jesus just leaves the disciples. Both Luke and Acts describe Jesus promising to

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send the spirit - which is great. But instead of Jesus being part of the welcoming committee, Jesus just legs it.

[image: different lenses on christianity]

Which in part explains why there are so many different churches. So many different ideas of what Christian living should look like. So many different flavours of Christianity. If Jesus had actually created the church before he headed to heaven, we might have a lot more uniformity within Christianity. Whereas today in fact we have very little. If we consider the entire global Christian community, there is very little - if anything - that all Christian groups actually agree on.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying whether Jesus being a little more proactive would have given us a better church. I'm just trying to discuss what actually happened based on the writings in the Bible. And history. And the simple reality is that Jesus did not leave us the church.

[image: DIY project]

Instead, Jesus left us with some great ideas, the spirit, and a really worthwhile DIY project. You remember DIY. Do It Yourself! And one key is to remember that do it yourself does not mean you have to do it alone. We'll get back to that in a bit.

[image: egg, wheat, sandwich]

Saying that Jesus left us the church is like handing someone some eggs and some wheat and telling them that you have given them a chicken sandwich. I don't think so.

[image: confused?]

But you know, there is at least one other possibility. What if Jesus did in fact leave blueprints for a church. (Not as a Christian enterprise of course.) And the disciples just did not understand it. In the gospel of Mark - for example - the disciples consistently fail to get the point that Jesus is trying to make. There are numerous stories in Mark where Jesus shares a parable with the crowds. And later, when they are on their own later, the disciples ask Jesus, "What was that all about"? And Jesus has to explain it to the disciples. What if Jesus tried to leave a blueprint but it was just not understood or appreciated in the moment. Perhaps because his ideas were just too radical.

During Jesus's ministry, he said a lot of things that were fairly conventional. But I

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would argue that Jesus's big contribution to humanity was his vision that we are commanded by God to love each other. Well, even that is conventional if we understand it to mean love the people who are just like us. The radical part was Jesus's call for us to love everyone - including our enemies. That was truly radical. That still is truly radical today.

I suspect that the disciples did not get that particular point. Because a Jewish expectation 2000 years ago was that the messiah would come with military force and defeat the Roman empire. 2000 years ago, for Jewish people, salvation meant salvation of the Jewish people as a group. Salvation was understood to be a corporate event. Given the strong feelings of Jewish exceptionalism 2000 years ago, it's hard to believe that the disciples could possibly have understood the radical love that Jesus preached.

But in Christianity, salvation is a personal thing. Loving your enemy not only brings freedom and new life to your enemy, it also brings freedom and new life to you. That's radical! And I think I can see how the disciples missed that. Because people today continue to miss that point. Too many people today still believe that salvation is achieved through military and other aggressive means. Even people who claim to be Christian.

[image: DIY]

So on balance, I'm actually glad that Jesus did not leave us the church as a finished product. Because then it would have been stuck in the cultural context of 2000 years ago. DIY sounds like a lot of work, but at least we get to create the church that makes sense today, in our own context. And that is a wonderful gift.

[image: cat built wrong]

DIY is not always easy. Consider this photo of a home-built cat. Sometimes, DIY goes wrong. If you know church history you know that sometimes the church made decisions that turned out to be disasters. Like the Crusades to slaughter Muslims. Like centuries of antisemitic actions. But DIY is a call to do better. And we have done well sometimes too.

The United Church has offered practical support - food, shelter, legal aid - to Indigenous land defenders at places like the Wet'suwet'en blockade and Grassy Narrows. We did that even when we were getting backlash. I myself participated with over 50 other

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United Church ministers - plus about 8,000 allies - at the Grassy Narrows River run last September here in Toronto.

To me, those stories are the modern day version of Jesus flipping tables in solidarity with the oppressed. Radical love in action. Sometimes, DIY works well.

[image: United church crest]

The United Church of Canada has done pretty well embracing the DIY principle. 100 years ago - in 1925 - the United Church was created by combining 3 separate denominations together. And we have included other denominations since then.

[image: the 4 statements below]

The United Church has applied DIY principles to its expressions of faith. The first theological position was adopted in 1925 - called the "Basis of Union". But as we have changed, we have re-expressed our beliefs too. We created "A Statement of Faith" in 1940. We created "A New Creed" in 1968 which was revised in 1980 and 1995. And we created "A Song of Faith" in 2006.

And 6 years ago, the United Church decided to do a bit more DIY when we changed our administrative structure.

[image: 4-court to 3-court system]

We moved from a 4-court system to a 3-court system. In part, we moved to a simpler system because we had fewer volunteers. The United Church has always been largely a volunteer-driven organization. So we need a system of governance that works for the number of volunteers that we have. But the new system was also created to allow different expressions of "church" to develop. The move to 3 courts signalled that other changes are now possible. It enabled other changes to happen - including how we can interact with the Indigenous church. We changed because we need the church of today to function today.

[image: Shining Waters Regional Council]

We are located in "Shining Waters Regional Council". I remember being at the very first AGM for Shining Waters Regional Council in 2019. I was there as a member of the transitional executive, and as one of the chaplains. The AGM was focused on how to "be church" in 2019 and beyond. The theme was "Creating Connections" which actually

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described the entire weekend very well. In other words, the AGM was all about DIY.

Some of our time was spent in table discussion, and we were placed at tables based either on our geographic location or our passions. There were some fantastic passion-based tables. I hosted my own passion-based table to discuss “Compassionate Living through veganism”. We enjoyed some lively conversation around what compassionate living might look like. And how we might support each other in pursuing it.

One point of new connection for some was that we had a number of representatives from local indigenous churches. Including an indigenous person who is also an ordained minister that I shared classes with at Emmanuel College. And I have to say that I was really impressed with the indigenous engagement that year. Sometimes, local indigenous people struggle to be involved at these types of meetings. Sometimes they setup a very meaningful ceremony in an out of the way place which limits participation. Sometimes, indigenous activities are tacked on to the agenda like an after-thought. But in 2019 we worked hard so that Indigenous people would be treated respectfully. We wanted to hear what they had to say.

[image: sacred fire]

The Indigenous church hosted a “Sacred Fire” right at Georgian College, where the AGM was held. In fact, we selected Georgian College as the venue in part because they had assured us that having a Sacred Fire there was possible.

But 2 days before the AGM, we were informed that actually, no, there could not be a Sacred Fire on-site. And also that they could not arrange a fire permit in time for an off-site location. Georgian College did have a prepared site for a flame, but it turned out to be a gas burner. Even worse, there were strict instructions that nothing could be burned in the flame. Not even sage grass or tobacco. Which are pretty much essential requirements at a Sacred Fire ceremony.

[image: sacred fire Georgian college]

Moreover, the image that most of us have of a Sacred Fire is in some secluded spot in the middle of a forest, or perhaps on the shore of a lake. But this gas burner was located about 100 m off highway 400. Instead of hearing the crackle of the flames, and

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the sounds of wildlife all around us, we were treated to the sounds of the highway. I pointed out to my friend that highways are like rivers. Because highways today are transportation routes, like rivers used to be. So we could imagine that the 400 was like a river. She had the good grace to laugh.

[image: sacred fire]

But in spite of all the problems, the indigenous community persevered and did their best to present their teachings. In spite of the very inappropriate site and location. Because I was on the Regional Executive I knew all about the problems and solutions. But when it came to sharing their teachings they did a fantastic job of making their teachings very meaningful. Their leader only slipped once, referring to the gas burner as a “Sacred Appliance” instead of a “Sacred Fire”. When the time came to extinguish the flames, a person knelt down and shut off the gas valve. It did not look very authentic. But it felt very authentic because of the gracious way that the teachings had been shared. The sacred fire - in spite of many limitations - had been a blessing for our AGM.

That example from the indigenous community is in fact our own story too. As the church evolves we are changing the way that we look too. The Shining Waters AGM had a much better mixing of ages and ethnicities and mother tongues than I had seen at previous Toronto Conference AGMs. The music was upbeat. And for the first time in United Church history scheduled meeting times included time to gather in a pub. Faithful UCC people came together and were allowed to drink alcohol while we shared our stories. And the sky did not fall on our heads! We were also together to watch the Toronto Raptors make it through to the finals, but that’s another story.

Another part of the meeting was about social justice. We had a proposal to create a Social Justice Commission. That would allow social justice issues to percolate up from the grassroots and find a home within the Region. The idea was to have some way for the Region to make public statements on social justice issues. You might think that such a proposal would be a slam-dunk in the UCC. But I’ve been around long enough to know it would generate a lot of heat. The heat came from the concern that some of the members could “go rogue” and make social justice statements representing the Region that were not endorsed by everyone. And the primary fuel source for the heat was how the UCC

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understood social justice in Palestine-Israel. But people - including me - argued if the Region is not allowed to make any statements about social justice, then we are not really a church at all. And the motion passed.

Even as the church starts to look different, it is not at the cost of our mission. Our form might change, but our purpose does not. If the indigenous community can still share their teachings around a “Sacred Appliance”, it gives me hope. Hope that our message - both for the UCC and for CITP - can continue to be shared even if we start to look a bit different. Our form might change, but our reason to be here does not. We still share the message of radical love with our community.

[image: lego people]

And what are the building blocks we can use to build the church? Well, the key ingredient in any church is not the blocks. It's the people. People are the raw ingredients for us to DIY the church. And so the church continues to be built. Every day the church continues to evolve. That happens in the wider church. And that happens right here at CITP too.

The church is still a very worthwhile DIY project. What shall we build here? What's your passion for the church right here? Right now?

DIY does not mean that we do it alone. We do it together. It means we each bring what we have - our faith, questions, stories, scars, skills, our wounds, And we build something together. Will it be imperfect - probably. Will it be messy - definitely. Will be be sacred - absolutely.

As we celebrate 100 years of the United Church continuing to be built, let us open our hearts to all the voices in the room. That we can build an imperfect, messy, sacred and meaningful place where all are welcome.

*Amen.*