**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

Study Guide- When the Church stops working #7

**Ch. 7:  “Out of the Family Basement”**

This chapter is largely a case study illuminating the tension between encounter, watchwords, and success measured in secular terms.  There is no moral to this story, but there is meaning.

**Traps of Small Churches**: Root and Bertrand tell us that small churches (especially rural ones) tend to get caught in two traps: 1. Family—extended families dominate. 2. Endowment effect—we tend to overvalue things that we own or are invested in, such as our building.  Both these effects are reinforced by comfort.  We are comfortable with our family and with our stuff.

These traps can make such congregations less that hospitable to newcomers.  There is no room at the “family table” for them, or the “table” is not accessible (i.e.: we like our building and don’t want to change it by adding a wheelchair ramp).

**Feed My Sheep:** Howard the seminarian, motivated by his life-long catchphrase “feed my sheep,” led Queenston UCC into a ministry beyond its family and building.

Some new folks came to Queenston when Howard started there, and he led this tiny congregation of established families and new folk with biblical preaching and regular communion.  Eventually his guiding phrase emerged as the church’s watchword—“feed my sheep.”  That they literally did by breaking out of the endowment trap of their building, buying a food truck, and participating in community food truck events hosted by another church.  The whole process took time and was messy, but it had an effect. Queenston’s watchword had become a vital ministry.  It took an outsider’s perspective—Howard showing up as their part-time pastor—to get the folks of Queenston to look past their families and building to what God was doing in their midst.  The watchword, “feed my sheep,” came from Howard’s own experience of God, his called to reach the marginalized, and became part of the congregation’s experience of God.  The food truck ministry enabled the congregation to look beyond itself and the immediate crisis of its decline and wait for God, for the watchword, and that took them into a new phase of their congregational life.  Their inward gaze became an outward testimony to God’s grace in their lives.  They had been feeding themselves; now they were feeding others, God’s lost sheep.

**Trevor’s Tenure**: Howard took his next call before the food truck project had been realized, so its final execution was under his successor’s ministry.  Trevor got the food truck going and reached out to the student population, part of his passion and call, which increased attendance but strained the budget.  Young bodies have small pockets.  The food truck never did do much that was measurable for the ministry of Queenston, but project energized the congregation, something that the new, younger folks coming in valued.  In the process, and new watchword emerged.  Trevor’s catch phrase was, “You are loved and you are enough.”  This phrase had critical ambiguity and led to a lot of discussion—especially the second part about “enough”—but it also struck a chord with new folks coming in.

In fact, the “feed my sheep” watchword can be read in different ways.  Both that and Trevor’s “You are loved and you are enough” resonated with different folks in different ways, but both provided focus for the Queenston congregation.  The phrase “enough” was comforting, but with their dramatic growth and the need for money, there was never enough.  The secular “acceleration” kicked in, and eventually Trevor got burnt out and left for another church.

**Watchwords Need Champions:**  Howard’s and Trevor’s tenures and watchwords came in quick succession (the two pastorates together were seven years) and tended to collide.  Howard and Trevor were the champions of their watchwords, so when they left, their watchwords faded.  Watchwords need champions in the congregation not just their pastors.  “If the pastor is the only one who has the watchword, it will disappear with them, even if God is not yet done with it.”(138)  The food truck ministry never really had a fully impact, and eventually the church sold the truck.

**The Moral?** The moral of the story?  Root and Bertrand do not recount this story as a morality tale, a story about decisions or actions to avoid. The point of watchwords is not to remember mistakes but encounters. “The real crisis that Queenston UCC faced was not one of decline.  The real crisis, as always, is how to encounter God who is God.”(138)  The story of Queenston can presented as a success by secular standards: increased population.  But Root and Bertrand tell it as a story of encounter.

The food truck ministry was the outworking of Howard’s “feed my sheep” watchword, which encapsulated a story of his encounter with God.  When it became the congregation’s watchword, it led them to move from a focus on decline to a focus on encounter, to bring their encounters with God in their tradition of shared meals into the community.  It was a costly and audacious move for a small congregation, but it occasioned further encounters with God as they moved in faith into an unknown future and showed the love of God to others by feeding them.  That continued after the truck was sold as it was used to feed even more “sheep.”  Yes, Queenston UCC grew in those years, a practical and measurable indicator of success by such standards.  But the encounter is the real success.

The point is not about objective measures of success but the waiting on and encounter with God.  Watchwords remember those encounters and lead us to further encounters.  But they are fragile; they lose effect when we take our eyes off the goal of encounter.

**REFLECTION:**  Are Root and Bertrand telling Southminster that everything will be alright if we go out and buy a food truck?  What should we be doing?  How do we wait on God?  What watchword(s) might emerge as we wait?  What encounters have we had with God that will shape our watchword(s).  Who will champion our watchword(s)?   How do we keep our focus on encountering God and not be tempted to focus wholly on what is next?  You are invited to join together for Lunch in Fellowship Hall about 11:00, after worship to discuss watchwords for Southminster and other learnings from “When The Church Stops Working”.