

St. Paul's as a Commons by Rev. Dr. Ted Reeve

In the evolving work to define St. Paul's Orillia as both a church and community gathering place I'd like to try on the idea of it being a "commons." *St. Paul's Commons*. I don't want to lose the momentum we've gathered around being a "centre" but seeking the common good seems where we'd like our Centre to be heading. As many know I've been talking lots this year about the common good as a 21st century opportunity to carry our core values forward in language that can work across cultural/religious perspectives. To embody this ideal means living as commoners in different commons configurations.

A commons is both a *place* and a metaphysical, or spiritual, ideal. It embodies the hands-on experience of people seeking to live their higher selves in practical, mutually-beneficial ways. The practice of being *commoners* leads to understanding and conceptualizing what a world would be like if people cooperate with each other, even loved each other, and share this love and appreciation for our planetary home. These ideals get lived in the real-world experience of different groups of commoners figuring out how to manage resources, services, or today, information technologies, according to the context and needs of the community. These differ so there is no uniformity to application just the ideal of cooperation in seeking the common good.

As far as I can tell, St. Paul's has sought this common good for this community over its nearly two centuries of service. This is not to say that we have not been misguided, petty, and hurtful at times, but this is part of the ongoing need to lament and reconcile as we do the hard work of seeking the common good.

A pressing example of this lament/reconcile work is seeking to restore good relations with the Indigenous community who have lived on this land for 5-10,000 years. For most of this time these first peoples understood this land and water as a commons to be shared by all who would peacefully come here. Note "peacefully" being essential to this sharing of the commons. They believed that disagreements, large and small, would keep the fish from entering the weirs and thereby not be caught for food. The local customs/rules that sustainably managed this resource represent how a commons works. It is not a free-for-all but carefully managed so that all could benefit and those who exploited it were excluded. Reclaiming this long-standing commons ethic for all of us, not just the Indigenous community, would offer a fresh way forward. Those of us misdirected by the exploits of colonialism/capitalism and our complicit cultural/religious understandings could use this commons ethic to critically understand the differences between socio-economic approaches and find cooperative ways forward. It offers a third way into the mix so that options can emerge. This colonial/capitalist misdirection is hundreds of years old and so the way forward will take generations of dialogue and alternative practice. The hope is that St. Paul's can be a gathering place for inspiration and practice in seeking a new common good.

Another key dimension of moving us forward is focused attention on how we learn to cooperate with each other. This takes understanding, dialogue and practice. It needs to be done in a trusting, safe environment. Again, St. Paul's can be a place for this transformative work. Simple things like our rainbow flag has drawn a number of people into our building on the understanding that it is a safe place for all peoples, including the LGBTQ2S community, but also others. Again, it is not that St. Paul's is perfect at being inclusive but that we understand this as an ideal and that we intentionally try to practice it. The practice involves being conscious of our inherent prejudices and using dialogue methods to actively hear each other in non-judgemental ways so that we can find commonalities and move forward with them.

As you can imagine there are layers and layers of what it means for St. Paul's to be a commons and to seek the common good. It is exciting in that it is both an ancient practice – it is how we survived for most of human history – and a concept that can emerge again as a counterpoint, an alternative, to our dominant socio-economic ways of thinking. It is similar to how Jews and Christians need to contextualize (make relevant to today) their understanding of a shalom kin(g)dom. There remain core values of peace, mutuality, a redistributive ethic, but these will be implemented differently in 100 BC and 2018 CE depending upon the local circumstances. So Jesus speaking about his efforts toward the kin(g)dom to his synagogue in Nazareth are similar yet contextually different to our efforts at seeking the common good at St. Paul's Orillia. This provides us with deep roots and aspirational opportunities.

I hope I've raised more questions than answers about St. Paul's being a commons. In my experience of learning to think differently about something it takes some time to live with and explore the ideas. It takes some time to ask questions like: What are we trying to achieve? Who are we trying to convince? How will we achieve success and know it?

The reason I invite this questioning is that I've found the language of the commons, and the experience of commoners around the world, to be a compelling counterpoint to the dominant narrative of western society today. Our current narrative, unless revised, will lead us to unprecedented levels of ecological destruction and global human conflict. Our wisdom, experience, and technological capability offers us an alternative. We are like the proverbial frog in warming water. If we passively wait while the temperature rises, we are fooled and cook to death. The other option is to recognize the warming danger and take action -- jump out of the pot. The choice is before us.

For somewhat obvious reasons taking the leap is better than waiting it out. So why don't we change? Fear, self-indulgence, survival of the fittest worldview, and so on, all are factors that keep us from taking the leap to a common good ethic. Our world religions have been both part of the problem when promoting passivity but also have inspired great wisdom and prophetic action. How do we embrace this current need to change and join in the prophetic, liberative, joyous traditions of our faiths that invite a way forward? Whether inspired by this spiritual/religious tradition or just an ethic of human/planetary well-being we need to jump out of the warming water and reset our way of being in the world.