

A Hope For Renewal



St Stephen's, Summerland, BC

By Judith Chidlow on April 1, 2023
Topics: April 2023

While at a quiet day sponsored by the Sisterhood of St John the Divine (SSJD), the leader expressed sorrow at the collapse of St Stephen's, Summerland. Collapse, I thought, was not right.

Our text for the first reflection was from Psalm 139, a very heartening reminder that God knows and understands us well.

Ps. 139:18 *"I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you."* The next text for reflection was 2 Corinthians 4: 8, 16-18. Corinthians 4: 8 begins *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair."* St Stephens' afflictions were from loss of membership. During the first shutdowns to prevent the spread of COVID, the parish lost members due to death in old age, and to people moving closer to loved ones, to be cared for by them. A few more members moved away as restrictions eased. Hall rentals contributed to our income before COVID, so without them and the lost members, our ability to pay bills diminished. A stewardship program did help, but the losses of members and lack of hall use continued. Yes, we were afflicted and perplexed as to what to do about it, but we carried on as best we could. We cut our costs, laid off our secretary, and sadly had to admit we could not pay our incumbent. He left with our love and blessing in November.

And yet we are not crushed, nor do we despair. We are digging in, reducing costs where possible, trying out new things, working to form new partnerships. Hall rentals are nearly back to pre-COVID days. We are blessed with two retired clergy who are helping us by volunteering to lead services 3 Sundays a month for a while, and supporting lay members in reading Morning Prayer for the remaining Sundays. We are working hard and prayerfully to find new ways to succeed as a church with less than half the pre-COVID membership.

Corinthians 4:16 begins with, *"So we do not lose heart ..."* That's better, but how do we hang in there? We have moved into a new era of church life. This new era has no manual, no way of knowing what will come next. After we take a step, we pause to evaluate and decide on the next step. At each council meeting, as we end with the doxology, and someone reminds us that even though we don't know how this will work, we know that *"God can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."*

What has happened to us is not collapse, but the beginning of renewal. Maybe even transfiguration.



Judith Chidlow

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