

**Envisioning the Future**  
**Burlington Baptist Church**

ETF Committee Report

December 2016

# Executive Summary

## 1. Current situation

- Burlington Baptist Church is currently a strong congregation with committed and appreciative members, good leadership, stable finances, a well-maintained building and a tradition of service to the community
- The congregation is divided over the question of worship. Many appreciate the traditional style, while others feel it is time for change.
- There is a widely shared opinion that an aging and declining membership is going to create serious problems in the near future.

## 2. The Future . . . if present trends continue

- Membership will continue to decline.
- The aging congregation will find it difficult to maintain the current organizational structure and ministry programs.
- Revenue is likely to plateau at some point, and then decline.
- There will be increasing demands on the minister to provide pastoral care to members who are currently providing such care to others.

## 3. Alternatives and challenges

- Membership growth will be hard to achieve without significant change to current practices.
- While some members may embrace change, others will experience it as the loss of things they love about BBC.
- Changes to worship must be rooted in a larger vision and mission plan that goes beyond people's preferences for one style or another.
- Programs that serve the community are necessary for the church to retain its sense of identity and mission, but they will not necessarily bring in new members.
- The new minister will preside over a period of change at BBC. Experience with leadership of organizational change, the ability to deal with diversity and even polarities of opinion, and personal maturity will be essential qualities in the new minister.

## Committee Mandate

The Envisioning the Future committee was created by the BBC church board in February 2016. Unfortunately there was no written mandate provided by the board. At its inaugural meeting the board chair outlined her expectations; these comments are taken from the consultant's notes of the meeting:

- Reaching out widely to the congregation for input
- Using a more streamlined process
- Addressing the nature of the future ministerial team
  - There has been 1 minister only for the past several years
  - The congregation examined the possibility of hiring a youth minister last year
  - Terry is likely within a year or two of retirement
  - The report should provide guidance to the search committee
- Producing a “discussion product” by the congregational AGM in November if at all possible, particularly something related to the ministerial search
- Interim reporting to the board

Circumstances conspired to make it impossible to meet the board's timeline for submission of this report.

- Originally the board hoped to have the initial meeting of the committee in February or March. However there were delays in appointing committee members and finding a date for the inaugural meeting. As a result that meeting did not take place until May 30. This had a considerable impact on the anticipated schedule.
- Two of the seven people appointed did not respond to meeting invitations or any other email communications. A third person attended the first two meetings but withdrew in early August for personal reasons, leaving only four people (plus the consultant) on the committee.
- Rev. Terry Dempsey announced that he would retire effective December 31, 2016, roughly 9 months earlier than expected. This meant that the ministerial Search Committee began its work before this report was completed, contrary to the original hopes of the board.

## Committee Activities

The committee met on:

May 30

July 6

September 12

November 29

In addition the committee organized a Town Hall for all congregants on October 30. Copies of the questions to be discussed at the Town Hall were distributed to congregants in advance. Some people who were not present at the Town Hall (plus a good number who were) submitted written responses to those questions. See Appendix A for a summary of the responses.

Individual members contributed to this report through:

- data-gathering and interviews both inside and outside the congregation;
- reviewing written responses to Town Hall questions from individuals and table groups;
- contributing substantial amounts of written material;
- reviewing and approving earlier drafts.

The consultant submitted an informal progress report to the board chair on September 14, and a summary of Town Hall responses relating to the ministerial search on November 30.

## Current Situation

As it approaches its 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, Burlington Baptist Church finds itself looking back on a history of proud achievement while looking to the future with some apprehension.

### Strengths, Identity, Contributions

The written responses from the groups and individuals who submitted answers to the questions at the Town Hall provide insight into the congregation's view of itself. The first category of questions asked "What do we do well?"

1. In your view, what are BBC's principal strengths and assets?
2. What could a new member find at BBC that they wouldn't find in another Burlington church?
3. If BBC did not exist, what would be missing from the Burlington community?
4. Who are we serving now? Describe the people who would most likely be attracted by what BBC offers to prospective members.

The committee grouped the answers by similarity of sentiment. Using the headings as a guide, it is apparent that the congregation is proud of its:

- Friendly culture
- Many programs offered to members and others
- Competent leadership and stable finances
- Focus on the broader community
- Flexible, accessible building
- Uniquely inclusive values (in comparison with other Baptist churches)
- Traditional style of worship

An observer from outside the congregation cannot help be impressed by the passionate way congregants care about BBC. The presence of roughly 50 active participants at the Town Hall bears witness to this.

### Worship

The Town Hall questions about worship revealed two sets of strongly held but opposing opinions about the congregation's current worship practices.

- One group appreciates the familiar, traditional style of worship.
- The other group finds worship too predictable and not very satisfying.
  - There were many suggestions for improving various aspects of worship, especially music and preaching.

### The Minister

No one should be surprised that there were many answers to questions about the most important qualities and functions of a minister, and many suggestions for the search committee. In summary, people have diverse and very high expectations for their minister. They want their new minister to be:

- ❖ An excellent communicator
- ❖ A dynamic preacher and worship leader
- ❖ Friendly and approachable
- ❖ Pastoral and compassionate in his/her care for congregants
- ❖ Closely connected to the community (and resident in Burlington)
- ❖ Knowledgeable, wise and spiritual
- ❖ A good leader
- ❖ Younger than most of the members
- ❖ In full support of the congregation's progressive and inclusive values

### Trajectory

Like many Christian congregations in Canada, BBC experienced rapid growth in the 50s, 60s and 70s. The first building was opened in 1954 to be followed by expansions and major renovations in 1960, 1972, and 1989. These projects reflected the need to accommodate a growing group of people, and a belief that such growth would continue in the future.

At some point that growth reached a plateau, which was followed by a period of slow decline. A congregation's vitality can be measured in three broad categories:

#### 1. People

Objective and accurate statistics of membership and worship attendance are difficult to come by. However, there is a broad consensus that there has been a decrease in both numbers.

- Rev. Dempsey reports that there are 144 entries in the church's telephone directory, the most accurate estimate of "active" (as opposed to nominal or official) membership. These entries represent one or more people living at the same address.
- It is estimated that 10 years ago average Sunday worship attendance was roughly 130-35 people; today it is 90-100. Compared to the glory years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there is a much-reduced number of children and young people participating in church activities. Rev. Dempsey estimates that on a typical Sunday there are 3-7 children in church.

When asked "What concerns do you have about BBC's future?", Town Hall participants mentioned the decline in numbers and the age of the members more often than other subjects.

There is a broadly-felt concern that the average age of membership is increasing every year, although the committee lacked objective numbers to measure the accuracy of the concern. The feeling is that younger people are not joining the congregation at a rate needed to offset both the natural losses and the inevitability of aging.

Numbers aside, the members of BBC remain strongly committed not only to the survival of the church, but also to the values for which it stands. They demonstrate this commitment through their participation in a variety of activities undertaken in the congregation's name.

## 2. Ministry

The church maintains a large and impressive list of committees, activities and ministries in which members of the congregation are engaged. See Appendix C for a complete listing. On the face of it the congregation's ministry remains vital. Many of the programs demonstrate engagement with the wider community, also a sign of health.

However, all of this activity requires a large and active group of volunteers. Many are concerned that there aren't enough people with enough energy to maintain current ministries, and they worry about burn-out.

Town Hall responses identified many needs in the Burlington community that BBC could address in the future – if there were money and people enough to address them.

### 3. Finances

BBC has been able to balance actual revenues and expenditures, or even realize surpluses up to 12% of revenues, in most of the last 10 fiscal years. In addition it holds approximately \$210,000 in “liquid assets” according to the treasurer.

However, there are some signs of caution in this otherwise optimistic financial picture. Seventy percent of contributors to the congregation give less than \$2,000 per year and 41% give less than \$1,000. This leaves the church financially vulnerable if any of the remaining 30% stop giving due to death, infirmity, change of financial circumstances or other causes. While this situation is not very different from what would be found in most congregations, it tends to cause heartburn among those responsible for BBC's financial well-being.

Town Hall participants mentioned finances as a concern, particularly because many members are on “fixed incomes”. (“We have too many seniors on a fixed income” is a lament heard in a large number of churches across the land.)



# The Future

***If present trends continue***, the future of BBC is likely to be characterized by the following.

## 1. Fewer congregants and a higher average age.

Church membership is affected by things that the congregation can do nothing to change. For example, Statistics Canada website's page on the fertility "megatrend" begins with these words:

Let's see, your great-grandfather was 1 of 7 children. Your grandmother was 1 of 4 children and you are 1 of 3 kids. You are thinking of having 1 or 2 kids, or, if you happen to be a statistician, that's currently an average of 1.61 children per woman.

Over the past 150 years, Canada has changed from a high-fertility society where women had many children during their lives to a low-fertility society where women are having fewer children overall and at increasingly older ages.

Despite some fluctuations, the [total fertility rate](#) in Canada has been below the replacement level for over 40 years. In fact, 1971 was the last year the [replacement-level fertility](#) of 2.1 children per woman was reached—meaning that couples, on average, had produced enough children to replace themselves.

Among other things this trend implies that a church needs to attract roughly three times as many young families to maintain the size of the Sunday School it had in the 1960s.

As Appendix B points out, participation in religious institutions in Canada has been on a steady decline for several decades, despite high levels of self-reported "spirituality". This trend has affected all of the mainline denominations, so BBC is far from alone in this.

Town Hall respondents noted societal forces that tend to reduce church attendance as one category of things they are concerned about in BBC's future.

## 2. Greater difficulty maintaining current organizational features

BBC's organization is characterized by a multiplicity of teams, committees and other groups (see Appendix C). Declining numbers of volunteers will

make it more difficult to populate all these groups and continue operating in the current manner.

This factor has qualitative as well as quantitative aspects. As work is shared among fewer people, those who remain will experience greater demands on their commitment, time and energy – resources that may be diminished as the volunteer pool ages.

Declining numbers may also increase the perception that BBC is led by a small, elite group of insiders. It is impossible to know how many people share this perception or to what extent it reflects reality. It is worth noting, however, that those who participated in the Town Hall welcomed the opportunity to have a say in matters important to the congregation's future. The board might consider creating similar opportunities in the future as a way of addressing the "elitism" issue.

### **3. More demands from the members for pastoral care**

Older members, on average, require more pastoral care (e.g. visits at home or in hospital) than younger ones. As one member of the committee put it, people who once served will now **be** served.. Added to the decline in the number of willing and capable volunteers, this may place greater demands on the minister's time.

### **4. Increasing financial pressures**

It is quite likely that revenue from the offering plate will eventually start to decline. Donors who are now in their 70s or older come from a generation characterized by its sense of civic duty and loyalty to institutions. These people also tend to be more generous in their charitable giving. Younger cohorts do not exhibit these characteristics to the same degree.

This will create pressure in several areas:

- a. Attracting and retaining a well-qualified, full-time minister.
- b. Maintaining the building in its current state of good repair (let alone adding desirable features such as an elevator to the second floor, additional parking, etc.).
- c. Paying salaries to other staff such as church secretary, janitor, musical director, etc.

- d. Maintaining the current balance of “liquid assets”. As current revenue declines and the possibility of operating deficits increases, there will be pressure to draw down investments to pay for traditional programs.

## An alternative future?

In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, after Scrooge has been shown a vision of a ghastly future by the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, he begs of the Spirit, "Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life."

Like Scrooge, we seek assurance that the future is not completely determined by forces beyond our control, that there is something we can do to alter its course.

The ETF committee had neither the mandate nor the time to study various strategies that might alter the course of the congregation's apparent trajectory. However, it is possible to offer a few comments.

### **1. Church growth**

It appears obvious that the solution to a decreasing membership is growth. And if the congregation's average age is increasing, the remedy is to attract younger people. Combine them and you have the strategy encapsulated by a rhetorical comment from one of the Town Hall table groups: "If we cannot get more youth, what is the alternative?"

The tactics suggested for attracting more youth (or families with children) tend to fall into predictable categories:

- a. Hire a younger minister who will appeal to younger people.
- b. Hire a youth worker (second minister or lay worker) to create a youth ministry program.
- c. Change the worship service to make it more appealing to younger people.

In a blog post brought to the attention of the ETF committee by one of its members, Rachel Held Evans says:

Time and again, the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates - edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, an updated Web site that includes online giving. . . What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.

Another possible tactic for church growth is offered by a column in the December 5, 2016 issue of the *Globe and Mail* by David Millard Haskell,

Associate Professor of Digital Media and Journalism / Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University. In it he reports a finding from recent research he conducted:

Through statistical analysis of survey data from a near-even mix of growing and declining church attendees and their clergy, we found that conservative religious doctrine, known for emphasizing a more literal interpretation of scripture, is a key driver for church growth in mainline Protestant congregations. Liberal doctrine, which emphasizes a metaphorical interpretation, leads to decline.

The committee is not recommending adoption of conservative religious doctrines; it is clear that the congregation would not tolerate it. We include Haskell's comments here only to indicate that a theologically progressive congregation like BBC faces headwinds in the attempt to bring about membership growth.

## 2. Change

The question posed by all variations on the church growth strategy is this: to what extent are current members prepared to make substantive changes in order to attract new members?

One of the Town Hall questions asked "Which aspects of BBC's customary ways of doing things could you agree to see changed?" The responses included this comment: "Change could be a strong word for some. Maybe slight alteration?" There were several other comments that stressed that changes should be gradual, not extreme, and reversed if unsuccessful.

On the other hand, Town Hall participants were asked, "If at some point in the future BBC could not operate as it does today, what is your reaction to the following possibilities? The options and majority responses appear below.

	Would Consider	Would <b>Not</b> Consider
Part-time ordained ministry	X	
Sharing the minister with another congregation	X	
Sharing a building with another congregation	X	
Merging with another congregation	X	
Meeting in people's homes without a minister		X

Meeting in some other location (school, coffee shop, etc.)		X
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In addition, answers to the Town Hall questions indicated that at least some people are prepared to consider changes in:

- Worship practice
- The church name (may not need to be Baptist)
- The way the congregation organizes itself

One group even recorded the comment, "Everything is up for change."

However, the tolerance for change among current members is not universal. Some people are very reluctant to see congregational practices change, probably because they find the *status quo* meets their personal needs. Others are less satisfied with the way things are today, or feel that change is necessary as a means of ensuring that the church will have a good future.

The church board will need to decide how much of a sense of urgency to communicate to the rest of the congregation.

### 3. Worship

The topic of worship and music has been vexing BBC for some time. It came up as an issue in the discussions of the ETF committee, and it appeared in the work of the group charged with producing a strategic plan in 2010-11.

Worship tends to be a lightning-rod issue in many congregations. Some people love things exactly as they are, while others hunger and thirst for change. In this environment making meaningful changes to worship practice is filled with risk.

Change in worship (or anything else) must be based on more than personal preference. I like praise music and you like Bach. Where do we go from here?

The only way change will be accepted is if it is seen as an integral part of a congregation's over-all mission plan. Noted church consultant Peter Steinke says that a clear understanding of its mission is an essential part of

the congregation's "immune system". It enables a congregation to distinguish what is essential to the functioning of a healthy system from a dangerous invader from the outside.

The question is, why do we use praise music in our worship? What purpose would it serve to use Bach instead (or rock, country, folk, gospel, Broadway, soul or any other musical idiom)? Does it help us achieve our mission or does it hinder? Or is the choice irrelevant?

One way of bridging the gap between those who are satisfied and those who want change is to find opportunities for increased congregational participation in worship. This suggestion shows up in comments made at the Town Hall. The board may want to ask the Worship and Spiritual Care team and the new minister to explore options of this sort.

#### **4. Mission to others**

BBC has an enviable record of service to the community and a strong cadre of volunteers who want to see it extended. Yet even the committed seem fearful that these programs will have to be curtailed or ended if sufficient recruits cannot be found to provide the necessary hands and feet.

The committee offers a few comments:

- a. There are resources in and available to the congregation. It makes sense to begin planning with an inventory of assets (defined in the broadest possible way). Once the congregation knows what it has and can mobilize, it can move on to subsequent steps. It only makes sense to build on strength.
- b. There are unmet needs in the community. A colleague of the consultant who was once a missionary in Tanzania says the following:

The reason the church is growing in Africa is not because it has great preachers or beautiful churches. I have been there and I know that the preaching and the buildings are no better than what we have here. It is growing because the congregations serve the needs of the people in their communities through ministries of *diakonia*.

- c. There are people on the ground who encounter the needs of the community in their work. They include police, politicians, community agencies, school teachers, emergency medical providers and so on.
- d. There are potential partners in the community also. While the humbled state of the church – compared to the way we remember things in days gone by – may be an embarrassment to some, it may also open doors to new avenues of cooperation.
- e. The value of ministry activities should not be judged by “bums in pews”, i.e. how many new people join BBC as a result. That might be a happy by-product, but it is not the purpose. God calls Christians to love and serve the world, not to fill churches.

## **5. The minister**

From the comments produced by Town Hall questions it is obvious that the congregation expects the new minister to be possessed of every personal and pastoral virtue imaginable. This is natural. Unfortunately, it is inevitable that BBC will have to settle for a human being with frailties and defects.

It is possible, however, to extrapolate from the Town Hall input certain qualities the search committee might consider priorities.

- a. Comfort with polarity  
Members of BBC might all like one another, but they are not of the same mind when it comes to many important issues facing the congregation. The new minister will have to find a way to bring people of disparate views together so that decisions can be made and implemented.
- b. Experience with congregational change  
BBC is likely to face large-scale changes over the coming decade. It is not likely to be the right sort of environment for a minister who is looking forward to a period of predictability and calm.
- c. Emotional maturity  
There is a very good chance that things will get worse (by traditional standards) before they will get better. In these circumstances the minister will be a natural scapegoat. The incoming minister must be prepared for this and not take it personally.



