

“Toward 2035 – a Prophetic Voice?”
Trinity United Church, Uxbridge
Sunday, February 15, 2026

Transfiguration Sunday 2 Peter 1:16-21

Today is Transfiguration Sunday – the day when the disciples, Peter, James, and John, saw Jesus rise into the air, and to the left and right of him stood Moses and Elijah – representing the Law and the Prophets from the Old Testament. Our reading this morning comes from the second letter of Peter, which was added to the books of the Bible in the 4th century. There is differing opinion on who authored both 1st Peter and 2nd Peter. You might be familiar with these words from the first letter of Peter, “Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands ... Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex.” (1 Peter 3: 1,7) In the second letter, Peter goes back to this moment of the transfiguration – a moment of transformation for him – as he connects Jesus with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.

Look at these rather remarkable words about the prophetic message: “So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place.” (2 Peter 1:19.) The Venerable Bede, an English monk from the Middle Ages, commented on this passage, “In the night of this world, so full of dark temptations ... what would become of us if we did not have the lamp of the prophetic word?”¹

While the 21st century isn’t plunged in the same gloom as the 600s, there is a sense that as a church, we have been losing our way slowly over the last few decades. I understand that some of you have read the ‘Toward 2035’ presentation from the National office. You have probably seen several graphs that depict data from 1992, 2023 and with a projection to 2035. And you will not be surprised at its declaration of perceived ‘vulnerabilities’ in communities of faith as we move towards that 2035 marker. Deficit budgets; less than 50 at a worship service (including online); no clergy in place. In this Toward 2035 report, as a denomination, we are accepting, not postponing, the inevitable future for many of our churches – that they will close and disband, or amalgamate.

Here is my question to you – with what you have read of the Toward 2035 document and discussed, do you perceive anything prophetic in its message? Prophetic words can be a light in a time of shadows, in a time of uncertainty about the path forward. As Walter Bruggemann writes, “Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us.”² But what are these new futures? If the Toward 2035 document is in any way prophetic, how do we, as the church, respond?

There is something called ‘Theory U’ that I have had practice using during my time as clergy to the United Community Ministry (or UCM for short) – a collaborative ministry just north of here – initially from Beaverton over to Lindsay area. Theory U is about learning to anticipate the future as it emerges in the present. Otto Scharmer picked the letter U for his theory

¹ Feasting on the Word Bible Commentary, Year A, Vol 1, Theological Perspective, 450.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 111.

for these reasons: “One traveled down the left-hand side of the U from surface to source, differentiating levels of perception (projecting, perceiving, perceiving perception, intuition), and then up the right hand side of the U, passing through different levels of action (envisioning, enacting, embodying).”³

Theory U is about trying to anticipate the future and hold a space for it. And to wait *with anticipation* for something to emerge. Now the ‘something that is trying to emerge’ – how do you know what that is? You know it by ‘hunch’. Hunch isn’t something we give much weight to in church meetings – we want documented reports and data charts before we decide to move forward. We aren’t really interested in following through on someone else’s hunch just because they say they have one. And yet, in the UCM, 20% of my call was to observe what was trying to show up – my hunches. Explain that to most M&P Committees across Canada today.

Hunches might lead to a change in the status quo of how we ‘do’ church. Here’s one ‘hunch’ I had while at the UCM, and it continues to want to emerge. There will be a shift in the ‘pastoral identity’ of the clergy. My hunch is that the ‘shepherd’ role of the minister, long associated with our congregations, will shift. Because one person cannot provide pastoral care to several congregations in a collaborative. Others will now share in this ‘shepherding’ energy – in the caring, guiding, and supporting. And it will come from a resurgence of identity in the laity. What has typically been a ‘clergy’ role, only delivered by clergy, will become more typically provided by the people in the congregations. Here is evidence of exactly this happening – in an upcoming workshop on February 19th, offered by the United Church Rural Ministry Network, is this description: “Lay-led Leadership Workshop” If you are engaged in lay-led ministry without regular clergy leadership, what kinds of training do you most need? How might a lay-led, collaborative ministry model in rural contexts be developed and flourish?”

The other part of Theory U is to hold the space for whatever is trying to emerge. As a church, we don’t hold space well. We fill it up with church work. Look at a typical Council or Board meeting – is much time ever spent in holding a space for ‘pondering’ or imagining what is trying to emerge? No. We go right to the money discussions, the property repair discussions, the work of community dinners, etc. We fill our time with running the church in the ways that we have always run it.

Otto Scharmer, the person behind Theory U, writes, “Staying with it” means holding the space for something to be born that is not quite there yet – building and evolving the holding space for something new to develop and be born.”⁴ Scharmer noticed as well that where his attention was placed, that energy would follow. This is part of the ‘anticipation’ component of creating an open space. That something will emerge. Scharmer writes, “The way I pay attention shapes how the social reality around me unfolds. *I attend* [this way], *therefore it emerges* [that way]. Why? Because **energy follows attention**. Where you put your attention as a leader, as an innovator, as a change maker, or as a parent, that is where the energy of the system around you will go – including your own energy.”⁵

³ C. Otto Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications* (Oakland: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018), 19.

⁴ Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U*, 29.

⁵ Scharmer, *The Essentials of Theory U*, 40.

Since retiring from the UCM, I have had the joy of working with groups of churches who are trying to ‘listen’ for the future that is trying to emerge in their communities –Peterborough, Kingston, and over to the churches just west of here, Mount Albert up to Sutton over to Queensville – the Northern York United Church Cluster. There is something about energy following attention. There is a traction beginning to be visible across our church, and in our region, in the conversations, in the pilot projects, in the gatherings and events where collaborative ministry is the talking point – and where the Regions will be permission giving – to say, yes this has energy and momentum – run with it!

Canadian theologian Sarah Travis writes about this reframing of ‘ecclesiology’ or how we are church, “Hope for the church, I believe, is located not in the possibility of returning home but in the fact that we have been released for something new.”⁶ I do believe that there is something prophetic about the document Toward 2035. It points to a reality that is trying to emerge in the present – a shifting of how we do church, how we ‘are’ church. Silo ministry, as in single point charges, will become less favoured than a collaborative ministry, where clergy and laity share their gifts across several communities of faith. The tradition of one church, one pastor, will recede into the past, and an enriched and provocative menu of options for congregational formation will begin to find definition in our church.

Again, Walter Bruggemann, the man who knew more about biblical prophecy than anyone I know, writes, “The dominant ... misconception ... is that the prophet is a future-teller, a predictor of things to come (mostly ominous), ... while the prophets are in a way future-tellers, they are concerned with the future *as it impinges upon the present.*”⁷ We are in this place in history where the future is indeed trying to impinge upon the present – we can see it in the conversations around us, in our Region and in the National Church. We can see it in the energy and momentum found in discussions for ministry alternatives to the status quo – one church, one pastor. It is an exciting place to be.

As Douglas Hall reminds us, “While we cannot *know* what the future of the church will be, we can trust that God will be faithful.”⁸ When it comes to faith, this is something we can understand. That God is and *will be* with us as we explore and create space for what is trying to show up, in this church that we call home.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Sarah Travis, *Metamorphosis: Preaching after Christendom* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 58.

⁷ Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 12.

⁸ Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where are we headed?* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 80.