

The Role of the Unity of New Westminster Church in Post-Modern Community; Using social constructionist research for a “future forming” congregation.

Aaron Johannes, Ph.D., Liz Etmanski, Barb Goode, Nova MacCloud

Abstract

Many people hunger to be part of things and yet churches, once viable communities of practice in belonging, have taken on an oddly distant role in our worlds. This research project describes a series of facilitated dialogues using social constructionist principles, with the congregation of the Unity Church of New Westminster and their communities. Our small community based research group consists of the first author, two people who have been labelled as having intellectual disabilities, and a research manager who supports our events and provides an infrastructure. A goal for the congregation was to become clearer about their current state of transition, and where they were coming from, and what they might now do together, after bringing in a charismatic new Spiritual Leader (the title in the Unity Church for a minister who is in the process of ordination). Empowered by a well attended “community conversation” they felt ready and in need of some strategic planning support and to revisit their mission statement. This work resulted in an accessible report in plain language, delivered as a handout and as a presentation at their AGM, featuring graphics produced synchronously during our events. Areas of interest were maximising the church’s community development potential while building congregation member’s strengths and better including marginalised people. Social constructionism offers many practical applications to bring to the spiritual concepts of the Unity church framework and the mixing of the two bodies of knowledge initiated a lively, action oriented dialogue. Working with the church was a learning process that incorporated deep, respectful listening and permeated into the other parts of the researcher’s life.

Introduction

*In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset,
At a moment in my life when the night is due.
And the question I shall ask only I can answer.
Was I brave and strong and true?
Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?*

*And to fill the world with love
And to fill the world with love*

And to fill the world with love my whole life through

Leslie Bricusse, To Fill the World with Love, from Goodbye Mr. Chips
(a favourite song of the Unity of New Westminster Church
congregation). (Bricusse)



Student art project, “Disorganized attachment; attachment,” by Maely Doyon-Sargent with permission (Doyon-Sargent, 2019)

This research project began with curiosity about the changing roles contemporary churches play in our world(s) and in particular an interest in the burgeoning life of this small neighbourhood church which seemed to be coming out of a period of maintained senescence and into new possibilities and potential. While other congregations are dwindling and their churches closing or re-structuring, this small neighbourhood church was making plans, forming a new choir, renovating and restoring their building, hosting celebrations that incorporated dancing and singing, and the congregation was excited. I wanted to better understand what was happening and members of the congregation, when I talked to them about social constructionist principles and how these seemed to interweave with Unity theory and practices, intuited that this might be a way to understand their current state and envision a way forward. I made a tentative research plan, which the board of the church approved, and supports for the work of the research were covered by a small community grant from the TAOS Institute. We began work in April 2018 and ended a year later.

Background

Community and isolation

Historically, churches have been essential community gathering places and have led to connection, collaboration and guidance. They are not places, but the locations of one of the most accessible form of community building available to us. As Robert Putnam states,

Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. "The church is people," says Reverend Craig McMullen, the activist co-pastor of the Dorchester Temple Baptist Church in Boston. "It's not a building; it's not an institution, even. It is relationships between one person and the next." (Putnam, pp. loc. 975-977)

As a college instructor in human services, many of our assignments are reflective considerations of engaged learning and I am struck by the students' hopes for connection and a sense of belonging. In some cases this was particularly acute, as when a student in our studies of Baumrind's parenting styles asked which she should focus on as she had experienced all of them as a child whirling through the foster-care system and moving through eighteen different families, plus her birth family, an aunt and uncle, and her grandparents. Later she came back to ask for a reference letter, saying that I knew her better than anyone. She was in one class, once a week, for 13 weeks and while we had great interactions in class and around campus, I was moved by the idea that I, who knew her just a little, knew her best. I was also struck by the amassing body of new information gathered in various ways on what isolation and loneliness does to our bodies and minds. I was particularly concerned about reduced executive functioning in my students with intellectual, developmental and learning disabilities (Cacioppo, 2009). As Gergen states,

My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone. (Gergen, 2009, pp. loc. 99-101)

As in so much facilitation work, I could see two groups that might inform and enrich each other, yet were held back for some reason we did not yet understand. My students needed a supportive tribe, and one was readily available to them: why were not taking advantage of it? Why were people with disabilities, so frequently living in isolation, not present?

My own introduction to the Unity Church of New Westminster was through my son, who had had a psychotic break that slowly worsened, undiagnosed, over two years while he gathered other labels: oppositional, spoiled, behavioural, etc.. It was not until he, believing himself Jesus, started directing traffic in front our our

house – that way to Hell, this way to Heaven – and neighbours called emergency services that we found some help. A few months later, discharged and stable but exhausted, his team of professionals was sure he should stay away from anything religious because of his tendency to grandiosity. He felt he was connected in a new way to a spiritual life, and we wanted to respect that, and we also wanted to take him somewhere that people would know what he was talking about when he wanted to discuss biblical passages. When we were there, welcomed strangers, I realized how long it had been since we had been welcomed anywhere, and that his mental health crisis had sent us into a spiralling descent into a kind of isolation that we had never experienced. Most of our friends had moved on while we had been so dramatically engaged and simply unable to keep up socially; many in our families were simply afraid. The wide, loving network that had made us such excellent candidates as adoptive parents was simply gone.

The Unity Church

Churches have been sites of important human inquiry ranging from the intellectualism of the enlightenment to the democratic free-thinking explorations of groups seeking refuge and new freedoms of being in North America. Unity, in particular, is the creation of Charles and Mabel Fillmore, free-thinking Christians who were open to new ideas, and believed in remaining curious and reserving the right to change their minds. Fillmore, for example, was fascinated by the “new” science of radio and created a whole body of congregants in Africa by sending his sermons across the world. Similarly, the contemporary Unity of New Westminster is active on social media, and is experimenting with Facebook Live as a way to engage new members.

The Unity of New Westminster Church has been actively engaged for about forty years, during which time membership has gone up and down, but in the last two years the board has found a new Spiritual Leader (the designated Unity title for a Minister still in the process of receiving their degree) and membership has increased. At the point at which I met the congregation it seemed like they were going in many directions at once, some of them doing things they had agreed to do some decades ago, others bringing in new ideas, and I wondered where the energy to sustain all of the projects was going to come from. The Unity Community grant I received, after getting their permission to apply, allowed us to research together about the current state of the congregation and to focus on “future forming” planning about what the “new” church goals might be for congregants.

Research Methods

The project was led by Taos Associate Aaron Johannes, PhD, working with inclusive researchers / facilitators Barb Goode and Liz Etmanski. “Inclusive research” is a term and methodology that comes out the U.K. and has to do with people who have been labelled as having an intellectual / developmental disability as collegial co-researchers and involving them in every aspect of a research project. Barb and Liz are at this point experienced researchers who have worked on different projects with Aaron within a social enterprise consultancy as well as on his dissertation, which gathered information about leadership from about 500 participants with disabilities over several years. Nova, a student from the local college, helped with project planning, organization, facilitation, interviews, documentation and reporting.

This project was an opportunity to use social constructionist methods not least as a way to inform the congregation was of some ideas frequently discussed in social constructionist groups. The research was “future forming,” and involved the members in the creation of questions that mattered to their futures. It was relational, with the intent that at the end of the project we, as researchers, would have deeper connections with the congregation, and that they would know each other and their community better. It was interdisciplinary in that facilitated conversations were synchronously recorded using graphic recording techniques, and these big sheets of paper with images and words, became the body of our data for analysis.

We estimated that the project would take about nine months, and finished it in eleven. We began with the idea of exploration with the congregation to understand what they would find useful. We had four initial objectives:

- Create educative dialogues to foster a conversation about community, inclusion, belonging and the role of the church in the post-modern community of New Westminster, which has particular pressures in terms of urban growth, cost of living, isolation, immigration, etc.;
- Think through with others how the ideology of the Unity Church, which believes that God’s only work is to assist in the manifestation of the highest good through the development of individuals and communities (Fillmore, n.d.) might interweave with social constructionist principles and the idea of “future forming” values based explorations into what the world could be (Gergen, *From mirroring to world-making: Research as future forming*, 2015);
- Introduce the church leadership to the idea of social constructionist research as relational, future forming and the work of daily reflective practice;
- Create an accessible report for the congregation in plain language, graphics and perhaps performance which might be shared with the larger community.

Our criteria for success was, essentially, to be useful in our service as community based researchers. With initial feedback from the board and minister, we hoped that,

- Unity of New Westminster church will have a better defined role in local and larger community development.
- Congregation members will have a better defined vision of their role in community and the makings of an action plan to address community needs, belonging and isolation.
- Research facilitators will have a better understanding of how religion might be incorporated into social justice research.
- A report would be made available in various forms to the congregation, community and the social constructionist (Taos) community. The report might have or incorporate different forms (video, article, art).

Interestingly, it quickly became evident that while we wanted to be useful, the thing all the congregation members seemed to have in common was that they, too, wanted to be of use to their community.

When, early on, we wanted to compare what was happening in the church to their strategic plan, they spoke of the lack of an updated plan, and the desire to reconsider their mission statement.

Research processes

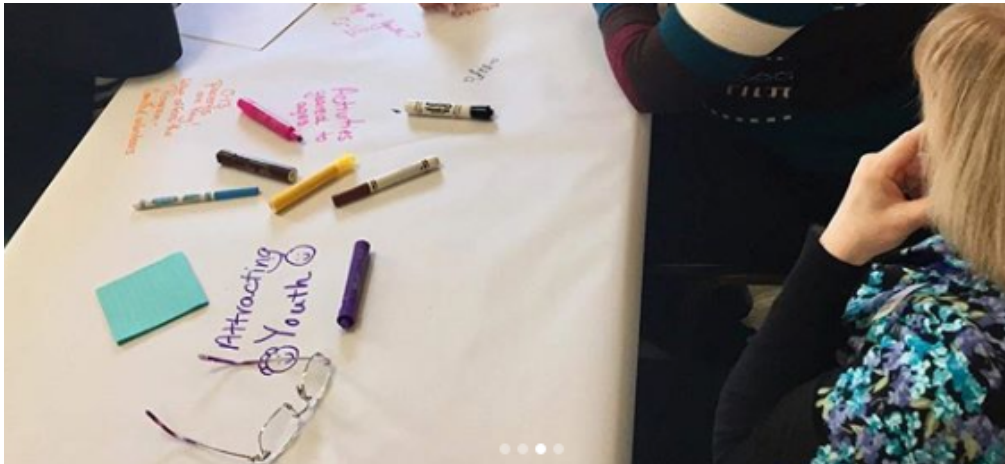
We began with an initial facilitated dialogue with interested congregation members, asking the question, what is the role of the Unity of New Westminster Church in our community? We used a world café format to bring people together and they generated questions, which were grouped together thematically, and then voted on. This very quick process led to them being able to sit down and have conversations about shared interests and ideas with people who might not be known to the congregation, as well as allowing church members to get to know each other in new ways.

Approximately fifty people attended this session on a late Sunday afternoon, sharing pizza and conversation. The process of invitation, and rejection, had already given us a good sense of some issues of the energy and negativity that some community members held the idea of “church” within. The church is used by many groups, who the congregation wanted to consider as also being part of their community, and these were invited and some representatives attended and contributed. They seemed interested to see how the location they knew as a day care or as a meeting place for recovering addicts looked when it was full of church folk, and they also seemed delighted by the welcome they received.

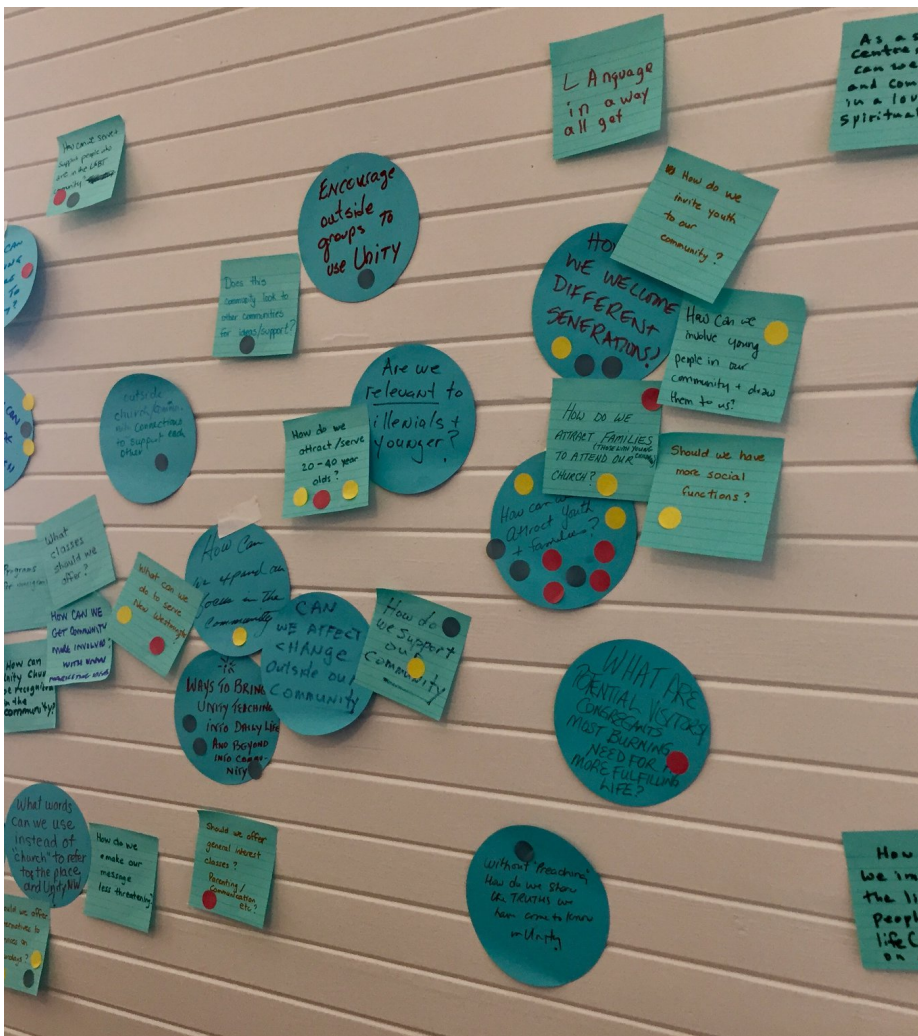


Our event is tracked on instagram...



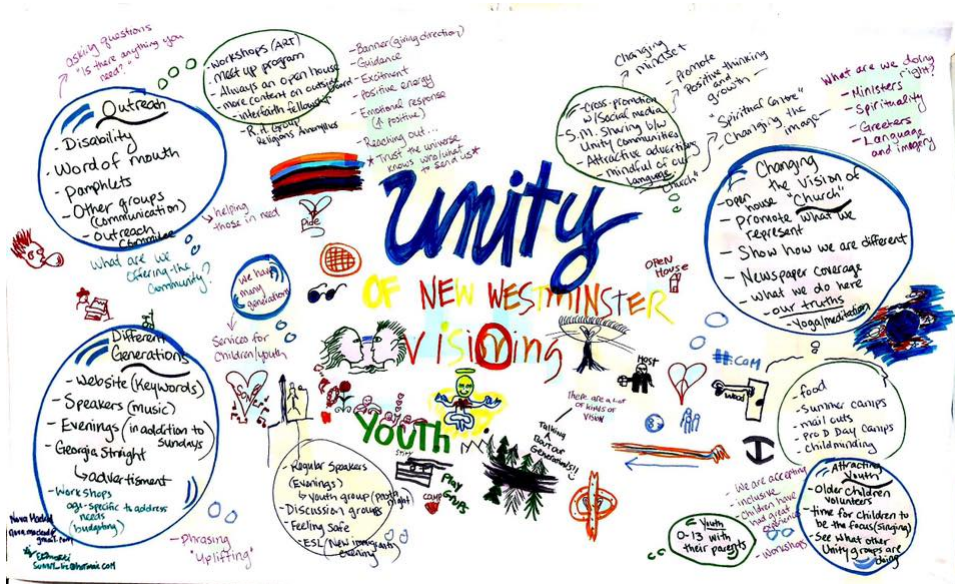


Congregation members come together to generate ideas.



May 1, 2019

Ideas are transferred to post-it notes, grouped thematically and then voted on for further discussion.



Graphic recording by Liz and Nova of our initial discussions; after two rounds of a world café discussion of the most popular questions, we asked if anyone had other questions they wanted to discuss in a third round, thus making room for outliers and for those who wanted a deeper dive into a question.



The board of Unity of New Westminster, with the research group, post-event.

Data analysis

Using the graphics, created by Liz with Nova's assistance, we were able to examine images as data and themes became more clearly explicated. It was apparent from the graphics, notes and conversations that there were a variety of "missions" held by the congregation, and that central to these was the idea of growing and deepening relationships by welcoming new and diverse members, focusing less on the idea of "church" and more on the idea of "community." "What happens on Sunday could only be part of what we do here," said the Spiritual Leader. "Other events on other days will welcome all kinds of people to share their gifts and be part of our community."

At this point we met with the church board again to discuss next steps: did they want to meet with more community members or was there a viable sense of saturation in the data and should we proceed in some other direction. Board members brought to this meeting a strategic plan from several years previous, and a rather dusty copy of their mission statement. It was apparent that it would be useful to engage in planning with board members. Barb and Liz suggested a planning method called PATH in which one, or a group, envision the future of one's dreams, and then from these images select things that would be doable within a certain time frame, and then the group works backwards to "now" and proceeds to fill in the gaps between now and the point of time in the future, with steps to successful implementation (Johannes, 2016). Aaron has expertise in this process, Barb has experienced it in several ways, and Liz is a trained PATH facilitator. Interestingly, this process began as a planning method for people with intellectual disabilities, so it was natural that they should suggest it, although they may not have ever witnessed this process being used for an organizational plan before.

Future forming: planning

We met with the board to facilitate the PATH planning and begin discussion of a new mission statement.

- b. we are prepared for children, elders, diversity and difference:
everyone is welcome here
- 3. We have a consistent approach to money and energy that incorporates abundance and raised consciousness
 - a. Create abundance committee
 - b. Show appreciation for all those who make our community what it is
 - c. Plan with clarity for the best outcomes
- 4. We stay in touch through various in person and online methods
 - a. Create communications committee
 - b. our events incorporate getting to know each other activities
 - c. we use social media
 - d. we have a printed newsletter and a blog
 - e. we work with local media
- 5. We love our musicians and making music of all kinds as an expression of spiritual creativity
 - a. Committee?
- 6. We have regularly scheduled events that everyone knows about in which small welcoming groups of people with shared interests get together to connect; whether they attend our church or not, they are also part of our community and we are part of theirs
 - a. Create welcoming and celebrations committee
 - b. we regularly host events and celebrations that reflect our community beliefs
- 7. Our space is also available to share in various ways and those who share it are also our community
 - a. Church managers
 - b. We have an online site to show people what our space looks like and how they can rent it out

Each of these goals is illustrated with a graphic done during our community conversations or planning session (PATH):



As we went through the graphics and notes, thinking about a new mission statement, the suggestion was that we take something the minister says every week, “All are welcomed here,” and make it more vital and focused: “All are celebrated here.”

These plans were presented to the congregation with positive results. One congregation member suggested the change to the mission statement: “All are welcome here; all are celebrated here.”

Considerations

World café dialogues

The methods used in this research seem useful in situations where a relatively large number of people are brought together to think about the mission of their affiliation, as they not only get to add to the conversation, but also to know each other better. As one attendee said, “We were motivated by pizza, and then we were motivated by the idea that someone would draw our conversations as that sounded interesting, but we were really motivated by the idea that we would talk about what was important to each of us – I would drive a long way to do that.”

In December, shortly before our community conversation with congregation and their guests, we happened to meet Eric Carter, a long time hero in my own

research studies around disability, at a conference where he was presenting with Jennifer Bumble on using world café styled “community dialogues” to create better conditions for conversations that involved all participants. I had somehow missed an article Carter had been an author on, “Community Conversations on Faith and Disability: Identifying New Practices, Postures, and Partners for Congregations” (Carter, Bumble, Griffin, & Curcio, 2017). It was great to compare notes for a few minutes and felt validated in our approach. We think we were the only other people they had met who were using this approach as well. While the Carter et al paper examines the differences in welcoming or othering people with disabilities into congregations, our experience was that Liz and Barb were much valued for their contributions as research leaders during this process.

Graphic recording

Graphic recording, in which a graphic recorder listens to the conversations and records them as images and words, has been a hallmark of our research and events and we continue to be amazed at how it increases the interest and excitement of groups of people. Graphic recording has a built-in “member-checking” function in that participants can look at the images and know immediately if what they said was recorded, however it also increases engagement because people do not need to keep saying things or trying to catch up to others – the whole picture presents what has been discussed and then people can build on this in generative ways.

The Venn diagram of research as science and spirituality

The intersection between the church/religion and best practices in research has not been well explored or documented. An interesting aspect of the research was the incorporation of the spiritual into the research processes. For example, one evening with not much time I stopped to become part of a board meeting in which I was giving an update on process for some members who had missed an event. When I walked into the room I was hushed and directed to sit in a waiting chair, and I said something, and was hushed again, and then realized that they were praying for guidance at the beginning of their meeting. The board president read a passage from a Unity text, and the members sat quietly in contemplation, and then we proceeded. I enjoyed these new factors to our research processes very much. In the next research project that I was part of, I found myself working to slow things down, and suggesting to participants that they stop and sit with the gathered information before proceeding. The Toni Morrison quote, “As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think” (McCarthy, 2016), became a favourite and I had new business cards printed that included it. For the researcher it was an unexpected exploration that resonated with personal growth in several personal, social and pedagogical roles.

Unity believes that many great teachers have shown us paths to "a way of life that leads to health, prosperity, happiness, and peace of mind," that Christianity is one of those paths through the collecting of stories and lessons understood metaphysically, and that these paths are to be negotiated by each of us through critical thinking, co-creation of community and optimistic faith, but never dogma.

As the research began I introduced them to Gergen's paper, "From mirroring to world-making: Research as future forming," and it was easy to see how these ideas interwove with those of Charles Fillmore, one of the Unity founders, who wrote,

When man gets his ingenious mind into action he always meets every emergency with something better. These many examples of the power of man's mind should make us pause when we are tempted to consider any situation disastrous or nearly so. Every adverse situation can be used as a spur to urge one to greater exertion and the ultimate attainment of some ideal that has lain dormant in the subconsciousness. The pessimist moans, "I could make a better world than this." The optimist sings, "Go to it; that's what God put you here for." People everywhere on earth are now realizing as never before that the well-being of this world rests with its inhabitants. It is no longer a religious dogma or a philosophical theory that the destiny of the race is in the hands of man. God has given all things to us to use as we shall determine. (Fillmore, n.d., pp. loc. 5666-5674)

"Determine" in this usage does not mean the heavy-handed colonising approaches we often think of in relation to religion, but to be discerning, appreciative, open, logical and thoughtful in minds and actions. In Unity practices congregation members visualise this stance and process, and my own image is always simply that of people connecting to each other, a kind of social constructionist visualisation.

Conclusion

The congregation was excited about the research process as it gathered momentum and made explicit some current issues, concerns and goals, and then helped them prioritise these and plan for the future. They were interested in the similarities and convergences of social constructionist theory and the beliefs of the Unity Church. They used images from the events, both photographs and drawings, on social media and used Liz's graphics as the cover image on their Facebook page. Feedback was positive and the findings arrived just as a new board was elected, so they were able to immediately begin planning for the future.

Many interesting questions were raised by the congregation's leaders and our processes allowed for exploration of these. How can the church have a meaningful role in a post-modern community? Given that the congregation is growing by several people each month, this indicates that the church does have a

meaningful role. How can a congregation include marginalised people? The congregation is now more diverse than it was and has a solid plan on how to include others. How might young people, who need connection so much, be brought into the church community and supported there. Some young people have come and the intergenerational relationships forming are very interesting. What strengths does Unity Church have to share? How does the church alert people to their presence without proselytising, invite them in, make them feel comfortable? A new process for board members, greeters and ushers is in place so that these are now designated tasks. How does the congregation address the Truth and Reconciliation movement which creates pathways to understanding between indigenous people and colonisers, while remaining true to Unity teachings and addressing the history of Christianity as the colonising site of abusive, manipulative and genocidal past? The church has begun to address this through education and planning for speakers.

I thought often of a passage from Margaret Wheatley's book, , as I met with the congregation in various groupings and ways to talk about their aspirations:

Most cultures identify this as a dark time, an age of destruction, the end of a cycle or the end of times. And most cultures have the tradition of warriors, an elite class entrusted with defending the faith, the culture, or the kingdom. Warriors undergo rigorous training and display great courage; their valiant acts live on in stories that inspire people to maintain the faith and strive to be courageous.

For many years now, I have been inspired, motivated, and comforted by a prophecy that comes from Tibetan Buddhism of impending darkness and the summoning of the warriors. Although this word warrior has heavy connotations of force and aggression, it means something very different in Tibetan culture. The Tibetan word for warrior, pawo, means one who is brave, one who vows never to use aggression. I practice for this kind of warriorship in a lineage based on the prophecy of the Shambhala warriors. My personal vow is to refrain, as best I can, from adding to the aggression and fear of this time. Shambhala was an ancient kingdom of wise and conscious people, ruled by enlightened kings. (My Tibetan teacher places it in current-day Afghanistan. Others believe it is not a physical place but a description of our awakened minds.) The people of Shambhala were unusual in that they had no anxiety. Free from fear, they were able to create an enlightened society.

The prophecy of the Shambhala warriors comes from an ancient time, speaking across a vast distance to our present one: "There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Great barbarian powers have arisen. Although these powers spend their wealth in preparations to annihilate one another, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable destructive power, and technologies that lay waste our world. In this era, when the future of sentient life hangs by the frailest of threads, the kingdom of Shambhala emerges."

You cannot tell who these warriors are by their appearance; they look like normal people doing regular jobs. They are, however, extremely well armed. Their “weapons” are powerful: compassion and insight. Well trained in their use, they go into the corridors of power to dismantle the beliefs and behaviors that are destroying life. (Wheatley, 2012, pp. loc. 84-2484)

In this sense, we have enjoyed working with a small group of neighbours in a small congregation, intend on doing good works, in hopes of supporting them to be “warriors”.

This small research project provided opportunities to create local dialogues which generated, clarified and led to conversations about these issues which were “future forming” in the neighbourhood. While the intersection between the church/religion and best practices in research has not been well explored or documented, good connections with other researchers, such as Eric W. Carter and Duane Bidwell, were exciting as they happened. It moved me from a position in which I was studying people with disabilities, with people with disabilities in partnership, to a more open framework of studying an aspect of the general population, with colleagues with disabilities who offered valuable and respected input at every juncture. This kind of apparent leadership is inclusion as people with disabilities are not merely present, but are necessary in their facilitation roles.



Liz Etmanski, a visual commentary on the planning process of the Unity Church of New Westminster, “The Yellow Brick Road: Off To See The Wizard.”

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