



## LESSONS for LIFE

**Sunday, January 6, 2008-7pm**

**Lessons for Life**

**R.S.V.P Series**

**R: Recognizing our Past**

**Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, CM**

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This year is the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our church. How many of you are under 35? Shut up! Enough! For those of you who are under 35 you weren't even born when this church was founded. It was founded on July the 17<sup>th</sup> 1973 when Bob Wolfe came here from Sacramento, California, was invited by a group who had signed a petition wanting an MCC Church and he flew up here with a one-way ticket, no winter clothes and arrived here before July the 17<sup>th</sup> but the first service was held on July the 17<sup>th</sup> and it was held in an office over a bar, an old bar called the 511 on Yonge street near Alexander and it was a rough and tough bar, a street bar, and on the second floor they had an office and someone knew the owners and they let the church use the office for the first few weeks and the church was founded. So this year is our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary year together and we have chosen for the theme of this year, "Celebrating our Past, Securing our Future." And so throughout the month of January we are going to talk to you a bit about some of the things of our past and we are also going to be talking about some of the challenges facing us that will help us to make sure that our future is strong and secure. And so for R.S.V.P month the R stands for recognizing our past and recognizing our potential.

You know, in the early Christian church they had a number of arguments. One of the things I like about the early Christian church is that it was a very argumentative church. It was not the kind of clone-ism style of church that we see in the world today in many, many denominations. The people were disagreeing with each other a lot. It was a new church and I think that someone must have said very early on, "We're going to celebrating differences. This is going to be a different kind of faith community," because they were responding to what was going on in their day and in their day the fundamentalists, the Scribes and the Pharisees, the rule makers, had taken over religion. Now we see this in the world today in Christianity, we see it in the Muslim faith, we see this in the Jewish faith, in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem, how fundamentalists have taken over the faith and they make more and more rules and more and more people therefore reject the faith and give up on it. And so Jesus came, in my opinion, to save the church from the fundamentalists of His day and now that is our job again to do that. But anyway they were responding to that so they decided to have a very open church, a church with lots of differences, lots of opinions. You recall the story of Thomas when Jesus appeared after he was crucified and He died and He rose from the dead and He appeared to the group who were hiding away. They were afraid. Hundreds of people the scripture says were meeting that night. And Jesus appeared but Thomas wasn't there. Can you imagine all of a sudden if someone who you thought was dead and whom you loved came alive, how excited people would be? Well the next time that Thomas was with them they were telling him about it and how excited they were and he said, "I don't believe you" and no one kicked him out. No one said you aren't faithful enough. No one said you don't believe all the doctrines. No one said you are a heretic. They kept him there. He was still a part of the community. And so that's the kind of community the early Christian church was; where people could disagree with each



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other. It was a church for believers and for skeptics and for people all along the journey. So one of the arguments that they were having was this argument about faith and works. Can you be a true follower of Jesus and be a believer and do all the kind of personal stuff and not be involved in good works? Or can your good works alone rescue you? Is it faith, personal belief, personal piety, personal holiness or is it your works or both? James kind of settled it. He said in the second chapter in the book of James, "So faith by itself, if it is has no works, is dead," that yes we are called to be faithful people, to go deeper spiritually and we are called to exercise our faith in the world doing good works. Doing good works. So I want to talk about some of the good works that we've been doing over the last 35 years as a church. And obviously I want to start with the area of spirituality. You know if we had kept clearer attendance records as we might have over the years all the attendance at pride day services and Christmas Eve services and Sunday services, all of the people who have visited our website and read the information on our website. Hundreds of thousands of people have been touched directly or indirectly by the ministry of this church. And for many of those folks they are people who have given up on spirituality. This morning at church there was this woman who came up to me after our service and she said, "This was my first church service that I've been in many, many years. I had totally given up on church." Now, I am not saying that all lesbians work this way but she said, "Yesterday I met somebody who brought me to church." So I went and found the somebody who did it and I said, "Get out there and find some more, bring them in bring them in" but she said, "I had totally given up on church but it is amazing what I felt this morning being a part of this faith community." I believe people's lives can be changed in one single church service. I see it most dramatically week after week with parents; where someone who happens to be gay or lesbian brings their mum or dad to church and they sit in the pew stiff like, okay I am here. I want to be here but I don't want to be here. Then by the end of the service, whoa, they are open. Amazing transformation! So we have seen that over the years with many folks through our worship, through our music, through going onto our website and reading sermons, through a variety of ways reconnecting spiritually. Thirty-five years we have been doing this. Also thirty-five years of pastoral care.

A few weeks ago in the social hall you saw the AIDS quilts and during the height of the AIDS deaths we operated a home hospice program called the AIDS Care Community Care Home Hospice Program. Our volunteers in the church were caring for 90 to 100 people every year in their homes. We were doing 50 to 60 funerals a year for people that were dying. Over the years the number of counseling appointments. The deacons of our church are the main folks who do the pastoral care in our church. The deacons here tonight are Sandra and Jane. They are available on Sunday's after service to meet with people to connect; they are available by appointment if you call the office. For years we have been blessed with a very large number of deacons who have been available to care for people and do the pastoral care of our church; available for people in crisis, available for people experiencing bereavement and we have also had programs to deal with bereavement and to deal with addiction issues, depression issues etcetera down through the years. Thirty-five years of social justice. Some folks heard about our church by some sort of demonstration we were involved in or protest or court case. We are becoming kind of sedate in our older years or maybe its because we have won most of those battles I'm not sure but down through the years we have been involved in many, many social justice issues and often I am asked by my friends from the United States in particular, "Why is it that Canada has made so much progress on the issue of human rights for gay and lesbian people compared to the United States?" and its an interesting fact. I am not sure if I have ever mentioned this interesting fact that for marriage, the first four countries that gay marriage was legalized, same sex marriage was legalized, all four were constitutional monarchies. All four of them: Canada, Spain, Belgium, and Holland. All four are constitutional monarchies. However, I think if we just take a look and



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just compare Canada and the U.S, one of the significant reasons why Canada has been advanced in human rights more than the United States has been the role that this church has played to undercut that argument of God versus gays. And the religious right always wants to put it down to God versus gays and whenever they make that argument and are successful we lose. And so we have been there to undercut that argument. We say there are lots of people of faith who believe in human rights, who believe in equality for all people. And because we have been there in very, very up-front ways we have helped with that battle and that is why we are being called upon now to help with that issue internationally, and I'm going to talk about that more in a minute.

The fourth area where recognizing our past is the contribution we have made to our city and you know it's not a coincidence that many politicians come here. On Christmas Eve there are quite a number, on Pride Day there are quite a number, on special occasions and around election time there are quite a number of politicians who come. And it's not a coincidence because they recognize the contribution that this church has made. We have received many awards and many recognitions of the great work that you the congregation have done down through the years. Part of that had been through our community outreach partner grants. We give money away, between 15 and 20 thousand dollars a year away to other organizations, we just give it to them for doing the good work that they do. The triangle program, the high school which is right below you, the high school that now hundreds of students over the years have come back into the education system again – one of them over there - through the safe space that is created here at our church. But there are other areas that you may not be as aware of, things that we have been involved in more quietly behind the scenes. After the attack on the World Trade Centre there was quite a bit of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim sentiment in North America and it was getting really scary for people of Arab descent and Muslim decent. Our church was the first Christian church in the city to speak out publicly on television and to call for understanding and tolerance. We were the first ones to speak up. After the attacks on three synagogues in the north part of Toronto we called the United Jewish Appeal and we said to them, "We would like for you to come and put your signs on our property. We want to show solidarity and support for you in the midst of this." We didn't want for it just to be the message of how some right wing groups were attacking Jewish synagogues, we wanted the message also to be that there are groups reaching out for and embrace in friendship and solidarity together.

So those are just some quick general things about our past and there are lots and lots of stories. I could keep you here for quite awhile telling you stories about our past but I also want to talk a bit tonight about not only talking about our past but also about recognizing our potential. In terms of spirituality it's true that the Christian church in North America is dying. The attendance is declining while at the same time people are searching for spirituality. They are searching for a progressive, vibrant experience of faith. They can find progressive experiences of faith. There are many churches and synagogues, mosques and temples that are very progressive and in some places they can find vibrant expressions of faith. But the reality is that there aren't many that are progressive and vibrant. I don't know why progressive and boring seems to go together but there aren't many that are progressive and vibrant and we have an opportunity to be one of those places. Jamie Wah (? Inaudible) has said that MCC Toronto is on the verge of being the church of choice for progressive people in the city of Toronto because of the progressive nature and because of the vibrant nature of our church. So that potential is there. The difficulty is that most people don't know about us. They may have heard my name or the church's name but they don't really know what we're about. They might think we are a bunch of Bible thumpers or they might think that we are a church for gays only of they might think that we are a typical church, none of which are true so we have to get the word out. So tonight I am going to be announcing



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four initiatives that the Board of Directors of our church have included in our draft budget that they will give a final approval to this month at their Board retreat. And part of that process will be hearing back from you in terms of these four initiatives. The first one is the Board has included in the budget \$10,000 for us to being to do some promotion of our church out in the community. Other than Christmas Eve and Pride Day we don't spend one penny on advertising and one of the church growth experts has said that if the church really cares about people it would be spending ten percent of its budget on reaching out through advertising to people, to let them know that the church exists. Other than Christmas Eve and Pride, and probably those two together we might spend around \$2,000 total and our budget is about \$1 Million. So this year the board has put in \$10,000 for us to begin to reach out and let folks know that we exist. Secondly, we have been asked by our denomination to help churches in Canada. There is no Metropolitan Community Church west of Ontario. In all of western Canada there is none and in the rest of Canada, of all of the MCC's there is none that is bigger than like 40 to 50, probably 25 but I think 40 to 50 at the most in all of the rest of Canada. So we have got to do more to help those churches either by starting churches or helping to grow churches. We have a responsibility to help and so the Board of Directors has approved taking 2 percent of all of our offerings and giving it to help support churches in Canada. That is in addition to the 10 percent we give our denomination. So from now on, beginning tonight, 2 cents of every dollar that you give will go towards helping other churches in Canada. Also recognizing our potential around pastoral care. You know people think that the AIDS crisis is over. The height of the deaths has declined, absolutely no question, but more and more people are diagnosed and are dealing with HIV and AIDS. Breast cancer is on a radical incline in terms of the number of women dealing with breast cancer. So we have responsibilities to be there. Addictions in our communities, dealing with depression. There are many issues that we need to be around and helpful for, caring for people through our deacons and through the programs of our church. The potential for our church in social justice. I met recently with the Reverend Diane Fisher who is our elder for this church and she was telling me about her trips to Eastern Europe, to Poland and to Romania, Hungary, Russia and those various countries and how there is a huge increase of interest in those countries to have an MCC there. But there is also a huge increase in the violence in those countries towards LGBT people and it is being funded by the religious right in North America. So Jim Wallis, in his book God's Politics said, "A religious attack requires a religious response." And so we have been asked to be more involved. First of all, we, MCC Toronto, have been asked to establish a new church in Poland. So as the third initiative our Board has set aside an addition 2 percent of our offerings to help with establishing a church in Poland. So again, 2 cents of every dollar you give from now on will go towards establishing a church in Poland. And I want to thank folks who donate their AirMiles to also make this possible. In October there is a conference in Poland and I have been asked to go to that conference and to meet with the leaders there from Warsaw and Krakow etcetera, to talk about which city will be the first city that an MCC will be established in. The denomination has also asked me to be their point person for human rights in Poland, to be a resource to the leaders there around how they can counteract the religious attack in Poland.

Finally, the potential we have around service to our city, to become a visible leading church. I personally would like to challenge all the other churches in the city to set up a community outreach partner program. It's one of the most wonderful things that we've done. That program allows people to pledge \$10.00 a month over and above their offerings, 100 percent of it we give away to other organizations. And I would love to send a mailing to all the other churches in Toronto and ask them to be apart of this movement. I would love faith communities to be seen to be generous, not just raising money for themselves but raising money to give away and I think it would be great if another 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 churches joined us in establishing this kind of program, to be that kind of model. I believe that



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MCC Toronto has the potential to ignite a real fire in enthusiasm in the United Church of Canada and in Anglican churches in our city, to say, “Yes, you can be progressive and you can be vibrant and you can grow.” I think we have that opportunity to be that kind of a model church. The difficulty is, and this is where I expressed this morning my frustration. I have been the pastor here for over thirty years now and for the last five years we have been stuck on a plateau. We haven’t been growing for the last five years. And I believe the significant reason why that has happened is the church has outgrown my ability to be the CEO of the church, the senior administrative person of the church. Frankly I am really bad at it. I am not beating myself up. I am telling you the truth. I am really bad at it and some of you know better than others that I am really bad at it. And so the Board wants me to be doing other things and they are right. They want me out in the community more. They want me to spend more time on sermons and sermon series. They want me to do more fundraising. They want me to do more around future property and building issues, all of those kinds of things and they are right. But I can’t do that if I am tied too much to the day-to-day operations of our church. So I went to our Board in the fall and said, “I can’t do this anymore.” And I came this close to quitting. I really know that this is where God has called me to be. So there was no question. I know where I am supposed to be but I was totally frustrated not being able to do what I know they want me to do and I was absolutely overwhelmed with everything. And so I said, “we have got to do this differently” and I asked them to study us hiring an executive director to run the church so they asked Anne Braley and John Vespa, two senior HR people on the Board to do a study. They did. They did a report to the executive. The executive wrestled with the report, came up with recommendations and sent them to the Board in November. The Board approved them in principle until we looked at the funding. We looked at the funding in December and in December the Board approved us hiring an executive director. And I am so thankful and so later this week the posting will go out and we will be having a deadline in asking for applications for hiring an executive director to run the church and to free me up to be doing the things that I am supposed to be doing an yet at the same time, we have a great staff in our church and it’s not that any one of the staff has done anything wrong. They have been trying as hard as they can to do all of their different pieces but the reality is that it’s so overwhelming, the amount of work, that we need to bring in an additional person with other skills and to change the structure and free the staff up and provide support for the staff. So I am very, very thankful that the Board is doing this but it does mean a big stretch for us. When you take the four initiatives, the promotion money, the advertising money, the 2 percent for Canada, the 2 percent for Poland and an executive director all of those together means that it’s a big stretch for us this year. We have had two years in a row of surplus budgets and now it’s a stretch year for us. And so we are calling this month R.S.V.P month. We need you to respond to us. We are giving you the invitation to be involved in a very exciting endeavor, reaching out to our community, to Canada, to Poland and to be church in a whole new way. But we need to hear from you. So in your order of service tonight there are two forms. One is a volunteer form and if we are going to begin to reach more of our potential we need your help and the second form is a financial commitment form that we ask you to think about your financial commitment to the church to see if you want to be a part of helping to make happen those four proposals that I have mentioned to you. This form gives you two opportunities, two ways to give: one is through regular offerings on a regular deduction. I do that. I am a tither. I was raised a Baptist. I believe that 10 percent of every penny, dollar goes to God and so I tithe through the church and mine is on a regular deduction through my credit card because I want those AirMiles. And so you can do it that way, you can do automatic withdrawal through your bank account, however. The second option is not quite as clear but it is an option to make a pledge even if you don’t want to do it through an automatic withdrawal system but to make a weekly pledge. The pledges are weekly pledges but they are deducted monthly if you can’t do that every week they are deducted monthly. If you pledge



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\$25 a week we multiple it by 52 and divide by 12 to get your monthly figure and then that's how it will be handled if you don't want to do the automatic withdrawal system.

You know, Jesus went into the synagogue and in the Gospel of Luke records this, and I am going to take some liberties to reword this a bit. *When Jesus came to Toronto he went to MCC Toronto on a Sunday as was His custom and he was given the Bible and he opened the scroll to the prophet Isaiah and in it He found these words: The spirit of God is upon you because God has anointed you to bring good news to those who are hurting, to those who have given up on spirituality, to those who have given up on church. And God has called you to bring good news to the poor and God has sent you to proclaim release to those who are held captive and the recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim this year is the year of God's favour.* And Jesus closed the Bible, he rolled up the scroll and he gave it back to the attendant and he said to them, *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.* When Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah the needs that he recalled there were the same needs in His day, were the same needs 35 years ago when this church was founded and are the same needs today and we have been anointed and called to meet those needs. We invite you into this endeavor, building this bridge called MCC Toronto but we need your R.S.V.P.

Amen.