

## Assembly 2018--Identify, Encourage, & Support Congregations at a Crossroads

My father recently passed this book to me, one he found in his grandfather's library. It is unremarkable, with a dull brown cover, it's pages long turned yellow and crisp. The title, embossed in gold, is *Acadia and the Acadians*, written by Rev. Dr. Luther Roth in 1860. Hardly splashy enough to entice a reader. At a garage sale, most every eye would pass over it.

And yet what a colonizing tale it tells about the early missional beginnings of Zion Lutheran Church in Lunenburg Nova Scotia, and the challenges faced by its first clergy, trying to create community.

Let me set the scene for one: Pastor Temme – the Reverend Gentleman, as he is called – is trying to cross the ocean waters of Mahone Bay, from an island called Hobson's Nose, after a parish visit.

This is the author's account of what happened next:

*"He was driving on the ice in one of the covered two-wheeled gigs or sulkies, which at that time had just begun to come into use. The wind freshened and began to blow a gale from the west, which caught his craft, drove it out of its course in spite of all he could do, and was hurrying horse, gig, and man away toward the open ocean. The perilous position of the Reverend Doctor, then far advanced in years, was seen by the people from both shores. Fleet skaters made all possible haste, came to his aid, and rescued him from the certain death and watery grave to which he was being carried (pp. 377-378)."*



*Pictured above: Hobson's Nose 100 years after the Rev Temme's visit.*

Now I know you Toronto clergy take some risks with the traffic in this city, but few of us, I suspect, could manage a lonely journey on a frozen Lake Ontario to get to St. Catherine's – that is essentially what the Reverend Gentlemen was attempting, back in 1782.

But his motivation we can surely understand: a missional pastor, taking risks, looking ahead, thinking of what was needed to build a modern, sustainable church. And of course, as he learned, he was never truly alone – he had God and community to guide him back to safety.

And so this is where we find ourselves: needing to take risks, needing to look ahead, wanting to build a sustainable vision of the Lutheran Church, while holding on to what makes our communities so vibrant – that same care and energy that sent early parishioners out on the ice for a rescue.

But it is not a rescue that the church needs – we cannot wait for someone else to save us – the risks we take must be courageous, but also deliberate.

In my years as a parish pastor, and working with the youth, I learned how often our journey is enabled by this balance – of courageous, but deliberate risk. What our youth leaders teach us – when we listen – is the ability to think and dream of great destinations, where we desire to go, and to imagine the leaps that might be necessary to get there. But what I have also learned, as a parish pastor, is that we must also move forward with a respect for tradition, by learning from the past and stepping intentionally.

So the first part of my new role is to listen: what are the leaps ahead that we imagine, what are the risks that we want to take? That is the daring adventure across the water from Hobson's Nose. But getting there will require some practical business: the provisions we will need, the steps we will take to make the journey efficiently, safely, and yes, cost-effectively, for the sake of the larger Lutheran Church. We have valuable earthly assets as people of God—they are Christ's assets: How will we transform them into that leap forward? We have important pieces of heritage in buildings whose time may be wrapping up: How will we save them? Some of our properties have issues, such as environmental hazards – buried oil tanks, asbestos, UFFI (urea formaldehyde foam insulation)— that we will need to deal with before journeying ahead.

Every community of faith in every Area across the Eastern Synod is unique. I have been listening to some of your stories over the last few months. We have work to do for the journey ahead. But we have a team of people all working for the sake of this journey. Our Bishop, Assistants, Deans, Directors, Executive and Administrative staff people that lovingly help all of us plan out the possible routes available to us. We have an ELFEC team that offers a deliberate way to secure assets for the future of our church. We are lucky to have archival experts to carefully secure our past, and cemetery experts that care for our dead. The Lutheran Homes K-W team helps with redevelopment and amalgamation/joint ventures. The synod can provide real estate and market value expertise. And we have people that can help with buried oil tanks, asbestos, and, if need be, septic tanks. We are ready to help as needed, no matter where you are on the journey. Together, we can help the process of dissolution and disposition of God's property in a pastoral way that is proactive, truthful to the will of the people who have carried their ministry for so many years, and leading towards a future where leaps of risk and the fruits that result will require deliberate steps.

Should the good Reverend Temme have driven out onto the sea that windy day, taking that risk, however urgent God's business? Knowing what I know about old fishermen in Lunenburg, I imagine more than a few lookie-loos were watching from the shoreline wondering: "*Mein Gott. What is dat man do'n?!*"

But what we also learn from the Reverend Gentleman's story is that nobody knows everything. We learn from one another, by listening to one another. By listening, we might hope that Rev Temme learned to read the wind better, while his parishioners learned that we can only ever truly make the gospel journey by taking risks.

Hobson's Nose, by the way, is much changed today. In Rev. Temme's time it was a small community, with houses and grazing sheep. But over time, unprotected from the sea, it eroded away; the grass fell into the ocean. It is now a few rocks in the middle of the ocean.



Pictured left:  
Hobson's Nose 2008

But what mattered on Hobson's Nose was not the dimension of its landmass, or the nature of its structure, but the people who lived upon it. When those people moved, they took their spirit and essence with them. They took a calculated risk, and began a new journey. People have been doing this since the beginning of time.

Christians have been doing this for thousands of years. When we have been most successful, those journeys have been leaps of imagination, carefully conceived.

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