



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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SURVEYING OUR FUTURE

I've always been lucky in finding a place to live. For those of you with even a passing curiosity about Astrology, I'm a Taurus, and Taureans are supposed to be lucky about homes. Now, I don't take that as *the* reason; people who believe in the power of positive thinking, or even the woo-woo New Age Law of Attraction might think that just by believing that I'm lucky, I bring about good results. I might even just make sensible automatic choices, but the evidence of luck does add up.

For example, when I moved to Montreal for my internship, I wanted to live in the middle of big city life; on my one afternoon looking for an apartment, I found a great flat in an old stone house, exposed brick, hardwood floors, high old shuttered windows. It felt so sophisticated. Only after I lived there a couple of weeks did I realize that I was living on... how do I describe this in church... let's just say that if I was interested in running into fellow gay men of an evening, I only had to sit on my front steps! Not that I did that mind you! But it was a home that had rather extraordinary recreational opportunities very close at hand, none of which were evident during daytime hours.

Then, while living in Toronto, four times in a row I had a casual thought that it might be great to live in this or that building or apartment – and four times in a row what I'd imagined came to me almost effortlessly. The last one was the condo I bought. I'd looked at a number of apartments in buildings where I thought I wanted to be, but none of them felt right. Then I remembered a striking building that I'd seen once from a restaurant in a neighbourhood I didn't frequent; the unit they showed me was exactly what I was looking for in size, space and view, and I lived there for 13 years.

Soon I'll be thinking about a more permanent home in this area, and I believe that I'll just know when it's time to make that decision. For now I have no inner draw towards any one municipality, let alone neighbourhood or building. But I've finally learned a crucial lesson. My life is not happy or fulfilling based on where I *live*. I loved my home in Toronto, but for many years there I was so unhappy, so lost and out of touch with myself. As an intern in Dallas, though my life wasn't everything I wanted it to be, I was excited, generally fulfilled and fully engaged with church life, but I lived in an edgy neighbourhood in a tiny apartment smaller than this chancel. My furniture was all borrowed. My view was of the back of a

cheap gas station, and I loved that little place because I loved what I was doing *outside* that tiny apartment and I loved where my life was going a lot more than I had anywhere else for a long time.

I'm telling you all this for a reason. We are looking for a new *home* for our congregation. After those examples of how lucky I've been, I wouldn't be surprised if the New Building Task Force tied me to the hood of a car and drove all over the North Shore using me as a human dowsing stick. As soon as I break into convulsions, they'll know that's the place! But we don't just need to find the right *place*. We need to concentrate on the invisible church that we're going to move into that place – the church made of our bonds, made of our friendship and love, made of our learning and worshipping together and most of all made by the work that we do *from* there. We must in some ways continue and in others to become the *contents* of that better location.

This is crucial today because this morning you're going to be asked to tell us some of the most important general ideas that you have about what our new place needs to be. These are practical questions that the Task Force will use to help guide its first and most direction-setting decisions. The questionnaire seeks your opinion on a number of fundamental issues by approaching each one from different directions. It's only two pages long because it's only the first one. There will be more finely-tuned decisions to make as we go on and more surveys later about more detailed matters.

To the best of its ability, the Task Force with my input has designed this questionnaire in an open-ended way; we don't think it arbitrarily limits your choices, although of course in reality our choices will be limited. If you feel it does direct you too much, please fill it in anyway and let the Task Force know how to do better the next time. You can start doing that right after this service by asking questions of some of the members.

We've decided that it's spiritually correct to invite any of you who feel this church is important to you in some way to answer these questions, whether you are a member or not. It's not as though there are dozens of you who will skew the results. Rather, if something significant draws you here, let us know your thinking about what would make a new site a good place for us to be. You represent all those people that we want to be able to find us.

So that's about the questionnaire.

Now back to what I was saying before. What is far more important than *where* we are in what *type* of building is what we are as a church when we're in it. What are we *here* as a church? What do you *want* us to be as a congregation? I entreat you to imagine your new *building* as a reflection of what you see this church as being, or what you want it to be. Start with the function, with the

purpose that you see as best for us, and then imagine the best possibilities of where we could do that.

And then don't think you get off scot-free with just imagining it. While the people on the Task Force, with regular input from you, look into sites and designs and details, your leaders – your Board members, committee chairs, your staff and I, your minister – will be calling you to start constructing the church that goes *inside* that new building. There is no putting that off.

Let's not be yearning consumers attracted by the physical aspects of a new home – an exciting street corner, great views, granite counters, an on-site gym – and then imagine that with that comes happiness, a trim figure and a great social life. All you have to do is move your old furniture in and spend the rest of your life paying for it. That's not us.

We will continue and develop our beloved community; we will grow together; we will deepen this congregation's impact on our hearts, minds and spirits; we will extend our reach out to where it is needed. Then we'll take our vibrant community and put ourselves where we need to be. Today, we simply start deciding what fundamental aspects of location are most important for us to continue to grow and work as a vibrant community.