

How it Began & What We've Done (Val Welsh)

On January 21st, a Tuesday, I was here, at BUC, at a book club gathering. Beth said, very innocently, "Do you have a minute?" Well sure, I have a minute.

Beth's request was, could I join a small group of people who would be working, until the spring, to articulate the core purpose of Bedford United Church. And once the purpose statement was developed, ensure that we don't lose sight of that purpose as we start to consider how BUC might shift and adapt over the next 2 to 5 years.

We called ourselves the Operation Prism Core Team which includes 7 people: Beth and I, Nic Fieldsend who you will hear from in a minute, Andrea McQuillin, Mary Belliveau, Janice Reid and Jeremy McHattie. Suffice to say it is a pleasure working with this wonderfully talented and committed group.

The first question we asked ourselves was "What is it about BUC that keeps us vibrant, alive and successful?" Honestly, my first thought was, how hard can this be? It seems like such an easy and obvious question. I was wrong.

We wanted to hear from as many members of the congregation as possible, to make sure we were gathering opinions and perspectives from different points of view. So, we met with several of the standing committees/ministry teams. We held a facilitated Saturday morning session with council members and team leaders and a meeting after service that all were welcome to attend three weeks ago. We have met with other groups within the church, including the choir, the Tuesday morning Seniors coffee group, and others. The real question we wanted to ask is, "What is the essence of BUC?" And that is not an easy question to answer.

We have found the best way to invite people into the conversation is to ask a slightly different question, that goes something like this:

Tell us about a time that you felt the tangible presence of Spirit through this community.

Phrased that way, the floodgates opened as people shared wonderful, personal and collective stories that get at the heart, or the essence of our community. We have realized that the essence of BUC is hard to put into words because it is not a "thing" you can look at and hold in your hand - it is a feeling.

- Just like the story Heather (& Dennis) just shared with us this morning about how held and supported they feel as Harrison finds her way,
- We heard stories about young people, nurtured by the community, who knew they had adults who cared for them.
- We heard from single parents who so appreciated the values-based, faith environment that allowed them to relax (just a little) and their children to flourish.
- We heard stories about how the people of BUC, both staff and all of us, have helped each other thru health challenges, difficult circumstances and deaths in our families.
- We heard about the sense of peace people have felt, knowing they are not alone.
- We heard so much appreciation from people from many different faith traditions, ages and different segments of society who feel genuinely welcome and at home in this community.

- We heard stories of how much care and support happens in the many small groups that are the heart of BUC. The choir, the ministry teams, the UCW units and many others wrap their members in love and care when times are difficult.

I could go on and on, telling you about the wonderful stories, but you get the idea. The essence of BUC is not the building, it is not the structure of the organization with committees and teams, and it is not the pattern of our Sunday services.

The essence of BUC is in our relationships and interactions with each, the grace that is shown to each of us and that we share with others, and our connection with the divine.

With that introduction and explanation of where we started and what we have done so far, Nic is going to continue the story, share our draft purpose statement and how it will be used to inform the next steps.

Context, Purpose, Where we are Heading (Nic Fieldsend)

So having gathered all of these wonderful insights from so many passionate and engaged members of our community, our Operation Prism team was left with somewhat of a dilemma.

How do we distill all of this rich and wonderful material into a short, succinct purpose statement that will give us clarity and alignment about the unique essence of BUC in a way that everyone can rally around and help guide our decisions, whilst at the same time being open and expansive enough to allow space for all the vibrancy and diversity of what happens in and because of BUC?

And what about all the exciting, unexplored paths that we have yet to discover but we will walk together in the future as a community of faith?

It was no small task, yet inspired by everything we had seen and heard, we eagerly tackled the challenge.

During our facilitated session, our wise host - BUC's own Jane Hustins - offered us some guidelines to work with. Try to find a statement that identifies 'what matters most', and 'what is it for the sake of'.

So essentially, BLANK BLANK for BLANK BLANK BLANK....

The wordsmithing stakes were getting even higher....!

But as Winston Churchill, once said "Perfection is the enemy of progress", so we dove in, reviewing all of the findings we have captured, looking for similarities, connections, clusters of sentiments that would help us shine a light on the core elements that are the fundamental parts of BUC's DNA - what in my day job in the world of marketing we call an organization's brand essence.

Over the last two weeks, we have continued this work of trying to refine a statement that best describes our purpose, but before I move into sharing where we have landed, permit me a quick detour for a little 'Branding 101' to provide some context about what we are crafting.

Imagine a house and at the top, you have a roof.

This is your essence - the single-minded reason you exist, the promise we offer to the world. The other way to think about it is what would our community... what would the world miss if we were not here tomorrow.

Using this lens - or in our case, a prism - helps organisations to identify what is at their heart and it shapes and guides everything they do.

Supporting that essence are the walls - or brand pillars. These are the things we do that demonstrate how we deliver on our purpose. They are the proof points that we are living out our promise to those who engage with us.

Take one of those pillars away, and everything falls down.

Now as you continue to build out the architecture of your brand, you get into the benefits that we offer - the things that we all love about BUC - and our tone and personality - the way we speak and behave, with each other and the wider community - but today, we want to share where we have landed in terms of a purpose statement - our essence - and pillars that support that.

As Val mentioned earlier, this has been informed by what we have heard from all of you through conversations with many different groups and our efforts to distill that down to a purpose statement that we feel captures the essence of who we are and why we exist.

Now it's important to say that this is not set in stone. Over the coming weeks, we will continue to have more community conversations and we look forward to hearing your feedback, but for now, we invite you to consider two things:

- how do you see yourself in this statement
- and in what ways do you see BUC living out this statement

So with those thoughts in your mind, we would like to share where our team has landed with our statement of BUC' s purpose:

We connect to thrive and uplift

And this is supported by the pillars of Spirit, Community & Integrity

Just take a moment to reflect on these and remember the two questions I asked you to consider:

- how do you see yourself in this statement
- and in what ways do you see BUC living out this statement

If I reflect on where I see myself in these words, I have made deep and lasting friendships through the connections I have made here, and these relationships have nourished me and my family during hard times.

The opportunities that I have been offered here - whether through singing, providing leadership, or participating in small group ministries - all bring richness to my life and certainly give a feeling of thriving.

I feel a strong sense of commitment and integrity in the actions we take as a community, and if I consider the other meaning of that word, also an unwavering desire to ensure the long term integrity and health of BUC.

And I definitely resonate with being uplifted here. I feel the awakening of the Spirit that we seek and can uniquely experience in a religious community, and I love our

commitment to holding up each other and those in our wider community through our fundraising and outreach efforts.

Over the coming weeks, our work with Operation Prism will be to continue to seek input in our upcoming conversations so we can validate this purpose and these pillars, then build out the other elements - our benefits, tone and personality - and from there, the messages about BUC that we want to put into our wider community to reinforce who we are and show how we live out our purpose every day.

We will also be using this lens to ask some tough questions. What do we do that is a beautiful expression of our Christian **Spirit** and that we need to do more of? What opportunities do we want to embrace as further evidence of the value of this **Community**? And what things are we holding on to that we can have the grace and **Integrity** to let go?

Our commitment is to identify those tension points that we have heard - whether that be around governance or communications, volunteer engagement or staffing - and ask the necessary questions that will enable us to chart a path forward to be the best expression of our purpose... where we connect in richer and deeper ways, find more opportunities to thrive together - both inside these walls and among our wider community - and uplift everyone that touches Bedford United Church.

We will develop an action plan to present to Council - in draft in May and for approval in June - that seeks to address the areas we feel need to be prioritized over the months ahead.

Another golden rule from the marketing world is that insights drive meaning, and the way you present or express that meaning is how you create impact. We have all found our way here to BUC to seek meaning and we all find it in different ways.

Now I'm going to pass things over to Beth who will share a little more about where we are going and why it should be meaningful for all of us.

What it Means... (Beth Hayward)

The reason I stopped Val in the hallway, and tapped these others on the shoulder is because there is something about this place, something that resonates with the longing of the soul. You've experienced it, even if words can't quite capture it. It's evidenced in stories like those Val shared a few moments ago. It's glimpsed in words like nurture, flourish, care, love, community, genuine welcome, support.

I've invited us into the work of naming this essence because I know in my heart that if we can name it and root all we do in, not only will we be changed and opened in ways we could never imagine, but countless others who are spiritually hungry, longing to find a place of belonging, a place they can bring their true selves, their hopes, fears, heartbreaks and joys - countless others will find those things here.

There is so much these days that can divide and pit us against one another. What if Spirit is calling us to double down on things like love and compassion, forgiveness, grace, beauty. What might it look like to live from our essence, to deepen our capacity to show up in all those places that tempt us to live from fear, and instead to

radiate the light that comes from being steeped in a spiritual community that practices something different.

I think the most shocking thing to people who don't know there is a place like this might be that it exists in a church!!

We're a church,

- That's why we sing hymns, and say prayers, and share bread and cup, and splash water on foreheads and say you are beloved.
- But it's also why we insist that love means love for all,
- why we speak of love as an action that holds the power to utterly transform hearts, minds and worlds.
- It's why we will never demand that you identify as Christian,
- why we will never say that we have all the answers,
- never say that Jesus is the only way to the heart of God.
- it's why we must call ourselves back to our core, especially when shortcuts look appealing and fear twists things up in our minds.

The essence of this community, whether you first experienced it decades ago or just this morning, is valuable and worthy. It is something that countless others seek and long to experience. We have an opportunity to deepen our impact. Now more than ever, people are hungry for what we co-create here.

One more thing. I'm aware that we fall short, we cause harm to each other. You've told me about the wounds you carry, some acquired in this place. We are not perfect, by any stretch. My deep hope is that the work we're engaging will equip us to be relentless in calling forth the best in ourselves and one another, it will support us in making wise choices, and help us trust that no matter the wilderness we are not alone, fear will never save us but the holiness stirred up in this place just might.

The devil gave up on Jesus saying he'd wait for an opportune time to get his way. What he didn't seem to know is that for Jesus, the opportune time to live from what truly matters is always here and now.

Now is our opportune time. May we step into it with grace.