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# STORIES OF HOPE



**CHURCHLINK**

# STORIES OF HOPE

## *Introduction*

Many churches today find themselves facing an uncertain future. Congregations that were once thriving now feel stretched thin, wondering how to sustain ministry in changing times. Others sense that something needs to shift but struggle to imagine a way forward. **Stories of Hope** was created to help churches move beyond uncertainty—to spark imagination, foster meaningful conversations, and encourage courageous steps toward partnerships, merger, or adoption.

**Partnerships** are understood as multiple churches, or a church with a community organization coming together and mutually collaborating in one or more specific ways. **Adoptions and mergers** are similar, however, for the purpose of this resource, mergers are specifically when 2 or 3 congregations merge together under one roof and hold equal 'authority'. Adoption refers to when two churches (often one large and the other smaller) combine, possibly in one building or in a "site" model.

This resource, rather than offering technical solutions or one-size-fits-all strategies, invites churches into a process of discovery and discernment. Through real-life stories of churches that have navigated these decisions, we hope to provide a framework for reflection, encouragement for the journey, and permission to dream again.

## *Who Is This Resource For?*

This resource is for any church—whether in a place of growth, stability, or decline. It is for churches that are interested in exploring how to faithfully respond to changing realities. It is designed for pastors, church leaders, and congregations who want to engage in thoughtful discussions about partnerships, mergers, and creative approaches to ministry. Whether your church is thriving and looking to support others, struggling to find a sustainable future, or simply wondering what possibilities exist, these stories are meant to encourage, challenge, and inspire hope.

## *What is it?*

The stories in this resource come from Canadian Baptist Atlantic Canada churches. These are our stories—offered as a bridge to help churches see that they are not alone, that others have navigated similar challenges, and that new ways of being the church are not only possible but deeply faithful. Some stories capture moments of struggle and resilience, while others highlight churches in stability or growth coming alongside those in need. Each story reminds us that we are part of something larger than our own local church.

These stories are drawn from real experiences within CBAC churches. While some include the names of specific churches, others have been shared more generally to focus on broader themes and insights. We are deeply grateful to the Atlantic pastoral leaders who contributed to this resource. Some leaders have also made themselves available for further conversation—churches interested in connecting with them can find their contact information below.

- Brock Symonds, New Hope Community Church – [newhope.nb@gmail.com](mailto:newhope.nb@gmail.com)
- Colin Cook, Sunny Brae Baptist Church – [colin.cook@rogers.com](mailto:colin.cook@rogers.com)
- Perry Hanley, Oromocto Baptist Church – [leadpastor@obchurch.ca](mailto:leadpastor@obchurch.ca)
- Andy Scott, Cornerstone Baptist Church – [andy.scott@cornerstoneltd.org](mailto:andy.scott@cornerstoneltd.org)
- Kimberly Beers, The Crossing Gander – [pastorkimberly@thecrossingchurch.ca](mailto:pastorkimberly@thecrossingchurch.ca)
- Phil Woodworth, Cornerstone Baptist Church – [pjwoodworth9@gmail.com](mailto:pjwoodworth9@gmail.com)

### *Moving Beyond Fear Toward Imagination and Hope*

Change is hard, especially for churches with deep histories and strong traditions. It can be difficult to think beyond what has always been done, especially when decline or transition feels overwhelming. Yet, hope and imagination grow best in environments where reflection, trust, and openness are encouraged.

Churches struggling to sustain ministry may find it difficult to envision new possibilities, while stable congregations might not feel the urgency to explore change. But throughout history, the Church has adapted, evolved, and responded to shifting realities. Instead of seeing partnerships as a last resort, what if we framed them as an opportunity for faithful collaboration? What if instead of focusing on what might be lost, we reimaged what could be gained?

We know that discussing change can feel uncomfortable. That's why this resource is designed to foster honest, constructive conversations. By providing reflection questions alongside real-life examples, we hope to create space for churches to process both the practical and emotional aspects of transition. Whether your congregation is discerning a path forward or simply considering what might be possible, this resource is a starting point for hopeful dialogue and faithful next steps.

## *How to Use This Resource*

There are 8 stories highlighted. The first three stories highlight a clear adoption, merger and partnership story. These stories can also be found as video stories on the CBAC website under the ChurchLink section ([www.atlanticbaptist.ca/churchlink](http://www.atlanticbaptist.ca/churchlink)). The videos are intended to supplement conversation and team discussion. The remaining 5 stories are additional examples of partnerships, mergers and adoptions and highlight various possibilities to prompt creativity.

Each section contains:

- **A Story of Hope** – A real-life example of a church navigating partnership, merger, or adoption.
- **Reflection Questions** – Designed to help church leaders and congregations process key themes and apply them to their own context.

We invite you to approach this resource with openness and faith. Let these stories be a spark for imagination, a source of encouragement, and a reminder that your church is not alone in this journey.

## *Final Thought*

Change in the church is not a sign of failure—it is a sign of faithfulness. The body of Christ has always adapted, reformed, and found new ways to live out its mission. May these Stories of Hope help you step forward with courage, trusting that God is already at work in the possibilities ahead.

## *A New Chapter: Gander's Journey of Faith (The Crossing Gander, Rev. Kimberly Beers)*

In the heart of Newfoundland, Gander Baptist Church had long been a beacon of faith in its small town of 9,000 people. But by the late 2010s, it had reached a crisis point. Without a full-time pastor for several years, the congregation had dwindled. Lay leaders had faithfully carried the load, but exhaustion was setting in. Something had to change.

That change came through an unexpected connection—one forged not by strategy, but by family. One of Gander's leaders had strong ties to The Crossing Church (previously West End Baptist) in St. John's, one of the largest Baptist churches in Newfoundland. Conversations began, prayers were offered, and by 2018, an adoption process was in motion. The Crossing Church – Gander officially became a campus of the St. John's church, sharing leadership, finances, and governance.

When Pastor Kimberly Beers arrived in 2020, only six people attended regularly. With a focus on local connection, she tailored sermons to the congregation's context, fostering a renewed sense of purpose. The church began to flourish, with nearly 50 people gathering for Christmas, a testament to their resilience and faith.

With this growth came new questions. Was God calling them to embrace this season as a permanent part The Crossing Church or was this adoption a foundation for something more? The congregation had found its rhythm, built strong community ties, and started to dream of its next chapter. Conversations about becoming an autonomous church once again, not out of division, but out of hope. They had been strengthened through partnership, and now they were discerning what God was calling them too next: *What does the future hold?*

This journey highlights the beauty of partnerships that empower rather than absorb. Every church has a unique calling, and sometimes, the greatest success of an adoption is preparing a congregation to stand on its own. Now, they ask with excitement: What is God calling us to do next? Do we stay and grow into our identity as part of a larger church, or do we pursue independence? How has our relationship between churches grown and changed? How do we build on the support we've received and step boldly into the future?

Whether they continue as one church, continue in a redefined partnership or take a step toward independence, the heart of their story remains the same—a small congregation, rekindled by faith, listening closely for where God will lead them next.

## Reflection Questions:

1. What applicable lessons can we learn for OUR story, from the Gander story?
2. Could an adoption like the one in the Gander story be a possible option for our congregation? Can we imagine what it could look like?
3. What challenges would be faced? What fears would arise?
4. Does this option create different emotions in you when you consider it being a long-term solution or a stepping-stone that could result in being independent once again?
5. What role do distance and community context play in shaping a healthy partnership?
6. How do you discern when it's time to continue in partnership or take the next step toward independence?
7. What would be the possible next steps if this option is something to consider?

***Final Thought:** Partnerships can be a bridge to something new. As churches grow and change, the question isn't just where have we been? But where is God leading us next? Hopeful transitions require faith, planning, and a courageous willingness to embrace new possibilities.*



## *Bringing Stability and Renewed Imagination: A Story of Partnership (Oromocto Baptist Church, Rev. Perry Hanley)*

For churches in decline, imagining a different future can feel impossible. When a small rural church in Upper Gagetown, NB reached out for help, they weren't just looking for resources—they needed encouragement, leadership, and hope. With an aging congregation and no formal leadership, they had honoured their mission but didn't know how to move forward.

Oromocto Baptist Church is only 20 minutes away. It is a healthy, stable and growing church. They didn't step in uninvited. They recognized the importance of honouring the Upper Gagetown's identity, not turning it into a duplicate of their own church. Their goal was not to take over, but to bring stability so imagination could flourish.

Support came slowly and intentionally. A leader from the larger church provided preaching and pastoral care, while the supporting church offered administrative assistance and grant writing support for summer students. Rather than rushing change, worship styles evolved gradually, making space for local voices. Some families traveled between the two churches, bridging relationships and strengthening connections. Renewed energy started to grow. New people arrived. Baptisms started to be experienced once again.

The turning point came when a key local leader, committed to the small rural church's future, stepped up. This allowed the Oromocto team to step back a bit, empowering local leadership instead of acting as permanent caretakers. With encouragement and stability, the church found renewed confidence to shape its own future. Where there was once uncertainty, there is now movement, hope, and a willingness to dream about what's next. Their future is not without challenges. Upper Gagetown still requires support and partnership, and the connection between these two churches remains, yet it is no longer a lifeline.

### *Reflection Questions:*

1. What can we learn from this story that relates to our story?
2. How can stability create space for struggling churches to regain imagination and hope?
3. What does it look like to support a church without taking over its identity?
4. How can established churches empower local leadership in smaller congregations?
5. What intentional steps can churches take to build healthy, long-term partnerships?
6. How can we recognize when to step in, and when to step back, in church revitalization?

***Final Thought:** True partnership isn't about control—it's about lifting others up. When churches commit to bringing stability and encouragement, they create space for renewal, growth, and a shared future.*

## *Brave Faith: The Journey of a Church Merger* (Cornerstone Community Church, Rev. Andy Scott)

For years, four small churches—Glades Baptist, River Glade Baptist, Middlesex Baptist, and Wheaton Settlement Baptist—faithfully served their communities outside of Salisbury, New Brunswick. Each had its own story, traditions, and ways of worship. But as time passed, resources became stretched, and buildings needed repairs. The question arose: Could we be stronger together?

At first, they started small—joining forces for Vacation Bible School and weekly ministries. These shared experiences planted seeds of trust and possibility.

As conversations deepened, a vision emerged: a new church home, central to all four communities. This was the natural step emerging from their partnership. Instead of choosing one existing building, they decided to purchase new land and start fresh. Merging wasn't just a logistical decision; it was an act of faith. Together, they became Cornerstone Community Church, embracing a shared identity and future. Moving into a new, central gathering place required many to let go of their old building and community identity—a difficult but necessary shift. A new, central gathering place was established, signaling a fresh identity and mission.

By 2017, the merger was complete, but the journey of becoming one church continued. After searching for a lead pastor for over two years, Pastor Andy Scott arrived in 2023, bringing fresh perspective and renewed energy. He quickly recognized the importance of building relationships, navigating tensions with grace, and reinforcing the long-term vision of why they had come together.

The transition wasn't always easy. Each church had deep roots, and merging meant stepping into the unknown. Merging leadership, traditions, and decision-making required patience, trust, and deep reliance on the Holy Spirit. Through prayer, open conversations, and a commitment to unity, they are moving forward. They have learned to move at the speed of trust, allowing unity to grow organically. Through preaching, prayer, and hard conversations, resistance softened. A prayer board became a powerful reminder that they weren't just making structural changes—they were seeking God's guidance in every step.

They continue to navigate the balance of honoring the past while embracing the future, recognizing that for many, leaving behind a familiar space meant grieving what once was. Grief over change remains, but hope grows as they see what God is building. The congregation is slowly becoming more unified, more engaged in their mission, and are experiencing growth not just in numbers but in faith and community impact. They have learned that faithfulness isn't about preserving what was—it's about stepping forward into what could be.

Though change hasn't been without challenges, Cornerstone is growing—not just in numbers, but in faith and mission. A beautiful new building has been constructed as a new church home on a large piece of land. The congregation is celebrating the courageous steps that were taken between the three congregations. This journey required faith without fear—a willingness to trust, to risk, and to say yes when the Spirit called. The new space isn't just for them; it is a resource for the whole community, reflecting a commitment to mission, not just survival.



## Reflection Questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from the Cornerstone story?
2. What possibilities does it foster in you?
3. Are there ways that our church can honour its past and embrace a new future?
4. What small steps toward partnership (and with whom) could help build trust before a larger commitment?
5. How can prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit guide major transitions?
6. What fears might be holding our congregation back from deeper collaboration? How can we address some of those fears?
7. How can our church ensure change is both structural and spiritual?
8. Is there a next step to take?

***Final Thought:** Merging churches isn't just about efficiency—it's about faith. Trusting that God is leading, even when the path is uncertain, requires courage. Saying yes to the Holy Spirit may not be easy, but it is always worth it.*

## *Reimagining Church: A Story of Partnership and the Future*

It started the way so many important things do—with a conversation over coffee. Leaders from three neighbouring churches had spent years walking alongside each other in ministry. Their churches were 10 minutes apart, and while they had long supported one another as friends, they remained separate in most of their ministry work. But as they talked, a familiar question kept surfacing: Could we do more together?

In the years following COVID-19, many churches were still finding their footing. Some larger congregations had the resources to adjust, but smaller churches faced growing challenges. Leadership was stretched, volunteers were harder to find, and for some, the question of sustainability was becoming more pressing. The numbers told one story—but the real issue wasn't just size. It was the reality that many churches were operating in isolation, even when they shared the same neighborhoods, the same people, and the same calling.

They had been thinking about these questions for years, but with a church closing in their area, there was a sense of urgency. Would churches only consider partnership when they had no other choice? Or could they start the conversation now—before it became an act of desperation?

As they sat together, they started imagining: What if partnership wasn't just a last resort? What if churches could collaborate not to survive, but to increase their collective impact? The possibilities stretched out in front of them. What if, instead of pushing through on their own, they could train leaders together, making it easier to develop and sustain new leadership? What if they could gather for joint services, deepening relationships between congregations? Could they even hire a shared staff position, allowing them to pool their resources in a way that benefited everyone?

They knew this wasn't an easy conversation. Change always comes with risk, and for churches that were still holding steady, the idea of shifting direction could feel unnecessary—why change when things are still working? If partnership was going to work, it needed to come not from fear, but from a clear sense of purpose and belief. Missional thinking—prioritizing shared vision over institutional survival—became key to reimagining what church could be.

This initial discussion has led to many more, and while this journey is still ongoing, the recognition that patience, trust, and a willingness to explore unfamiliar paths is necessary for their churches to not simply survive but thrive in the future. The fact that they're talking at all feels like something significant. Because change doesn't always start with a big decision—it starts with a few people willing to ask, "What if?"

### Reflection Questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from this partnership story?
2. What possibilities does it foster in you?
3. How can churches in our area collaborate rather than compete?
4. What assumptions about church growth need to change?
5. Where is our church siloed? What steps or partnerships could build connection?
6. What would it take to shift from survival mode to sustainable mission?
7. Is there a next step to take?

***Final Thought:** Reimagining church requires openness, connection, and trust. It is not just about responding to crisis, but about shaping a shared future together.*

## *Overcoming Fear: A Merger Story* *(New Hope Community Church, Rev. Brock Symonds)*

Steeves Mountain and Berrys Mills Baptist Churches had always been close—just three kilometers apart. Their members knew each other well through shared events, friendships, and community ties. But now, both congregations were shrinking. Berrys Mills Church decline was more rapid and was now facing the reality: if nothing changed, they would not survive.

The first conversations about merging weren't formal meetings. They were quiet, simple conversations over coffee between leaders who saw what was coming. "We knew we were in trouble," one elder admitted, "we knew it was inevitable." The idea of joining together wasn't a grand strategy—it was common sense. The question wasn't if change was necessary, but when they would acknowledge it.

Steeves Mountain Church felt the weight of desperation. Families with children had moved to larger churches in the city, leaving behind an aging congregation. "I wish churches didn't have to reach a point of desperation before realizing the need for change," their pastor reflected. "We have a history of reimagining ministry. Why do we resist it now?" Despite the growing sense of inevitability, resistance remained. "What if we lose our identity?" "What if people leave?" These fears were real, but the core question was deeper: Who is this really about? The answer came through a theological conviction that became their rallying call: "It's not about us. It's about the people we need to reach."

Key leaders engaged in personal, one-on-one conversations with those holding influence—not just within the church, but in the broader community. Slowly, perspectives shifted. The two churches merged into one and for a period of time worshipped together at the Steeves Mountain Church building. They blended traditions while embracing a shared mission. It was difficult at times, and the journey is far from perfect. Challenges continue to arise, but having champions—leaders willing to guide and encourage the process—has been essential in moving forward. Their commitment to a "kingdom mentality" continues to sustain them through the ups and downs.

Today, the church is thriving. They purchased a large piece of land not far from either original site and constructed a beautiful new multi-purpose church facility, that houses the congregation and an active daycare. It was a journey of trust and patience. It has taken time for people to fully embrace the new reality, and challenges continue to emerge. Yet, they are seeing signs of renewal and shared purpose.

### Reflection Questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from this merger story?
2. How does the story speak into our current reality?
3. Are there churches near you facing similar challenges? Could simple conversations be the first step?
4. What signs of decline might our church be ignoring? What might change look like before a crisis arrives?
5. What fears might be preventing your church from considering collaboration?
6. How can our church embrace a "kingdom mentality" rather than a survival mindset?
7. Who in our congregation could start the conversation about partnership or merger?

***Final Thought:** Church mergers aren't about losing history—they're about reimagining the future. What legacy is your church being called to continue?*

## Congregational Partnership: A Story of Hope and Collaboration (Sunny Brae Baptist Church, Rev. Colin Cook)

For years, Sunny Brae Baptist Church had shared its building with another congregation, but it always felt more like a rental than a partnership. When that congregation moved out, a new opportunity emerged—one that felt different from the start. It was a partnership with a small, neighbouring Francophone congregation.

This time, both churches were willing to collaborate, not just coexist. They shared meals, joined midweek programs, and started a joint initiative called Conversation Café, helping newcomers build relationships. Instead of separate ministries, they were creating something together. Friendships and shared ministry started to grow.

Sunny Brae's leadership had learned from past experiences. A nearby church once invited them into a merger, but it felt more like an acquisition. "They had a plan, and we were just supposed to come along," one leader reflected. This time, they listened more, made space for shared leadership, and let the partnership develop naturally.

The road ahead isn't without challenges, but the churches are committed to ongoing discernment—seeking God's will for their future, not just preserving what has been. They recognize that faithfulness requires a willingness to adapt, to listen, and to step forward in trust. As one member put it, "Is it God's will for the church to stay as it is, or is it my will? This is the question we must continually ask as we seek to be obedient to where God is leading us." They're learning that true partnership takes time, trust, and faithfulness.

### Reflection Questions:

1. What lessons can we learn from this partnership story?
2. How does our church view partnerships? Are they truly collaborative, or more like rental agreements?
3. What opportunities exist in our community for deeper collaboration with other congregations?
4. How can our church create shared ministries rather than just shared spaces?
5. What fears might be preventing our church from considering partnership or merger?
6. Is our church willing to listen and make space for shared leadership in partnership conversations?

***Final Thought:** Partnership isn't about losing identity—it's about discovering what faithfulness looks like together. What step could your church take toward collaboration today?*



## *Partnering Well: The Cost and Call of Church Adoption (Cornerstone Baptist Church, Rev. Phil Woodworth)*

Montague Baptist Church was in decline; recognizing its limitations, leaders reached out to Cornerstone Baptist Church, over 50 km away. The congregation was tired but deeply committed—they didn't want to lose their presence in the community, yet they couldn't sustain ministry on their own. They were ready for something new but weren't sure what it could look like.

The leadership of Cornerstone saw an opportunity—not to take over a struggling congregation, but to impact the growing town of Montague with a vibrant new ministry presence by launching another church site. They knew that true partnership required more than logistical support; it required a commitment to shared vision, trust, and time. The process wasn't about preservation—it was about transformation.

What could a church adoption look like, especially given the distance between them? One of the biggest challenges was ensuring that this wasn't just a technical solution. Streaming services wouldn't work here. Atlantic Canada is deeply relational, and for a church to thrive, people needed to see and know their pastor. An embodied pastoral presence was essential for building trust and leading change.

The cost of adoption was high—financially, emotionally, and in terms of leadership investment. The adopting church had to be committed for the long road ahead, ensuring the congregation saw that a new future was possible. It wasn't about quick fixes, but about fostering a new culture together. Likewise, the congregation being adopted would need to demonstrate a high level of trust as new leadership gave direction, the building and finances were released, and new approaches to ministry began to take shape. People needed to buy into the vision, understanding that this wasn't merely a name change or structural shift, but a genuine opportunity to create something new.

Through patient leadership and deep relationships, the congregations began to integrate. People worshiped together, learned the culture, and saw firsthand what it meant to belong. Yet, leadership recognized that partnerships must be adaptable—what works now may not be forever.

Healthy partnerships require responsiveness and discernment. Power struggles and territorial attitudes can derail even the best-intended efforts. But when churches embrace the call to partner well—with openness, trust, and a shared mission—they create lasting impact.

### *Reflection Questions:*

1. Are there lessons that we can learn from this story for our church?
2. How can our church approach partnership as transformation rather than preservation?
3. What role does an embodied pastoral presence play in fostering strong relationships?
4. What sacrifices—financial, emotional, or structural—might be required for a healthy partnership?
5. How can our church balance pragmatic needs with the emotional weight of change?

## Beginning the Journey: Rocky Road to Partnership

*Note: Names of churches and pastoral leaders used are fictional*

When Sarah arrived at Mosaic Baptist in rural Nova Scotia, she quickly noticed a challenge—while her church had a strong community, they lacked resources to build a thriving youth and family ministry. Down the road, Riverbend Baptist reached out to Sarah. They had space and people, but not programming, especially for young families.

A simple idea emerged: what if they ran a joint Vacation Bible School? One event. One chance to see if collaboration could work. The results were encouraging—new families connected, and relationships formed. But when Sarah suggested ongoing collaboration, she faced hesitation.

Michael, from Maplewood Baptist, located just 15 minutes away, had seen past partnerships struggle. "People are busy," he said. "We tried before, and it didn't work." All the churches were around the same size, except for one experiencing some growth, which was located just 20 minutes from Sarah and 7 minutes from Michael. Leaders in her church were hesitant about partnering with other churches as one leader admitted feared "losing what makes us unique."

Sarah knew the key was a mindset shift. "This isn't about which church is bigger or better—it's about the Kingdom. We each bring something to the table." Slowly, they continue to test small collaborations—joint youth events, shared spaces, and complementary ministries.

It wasn't and continued to not be easy. Leaders are stretched thin, and old habits of independence remained. "We finally have momentum," said a leader from the slightly larger, growing church, "stepping outside of it feels risky." Still, Sarah remained hopeful. She saw what was possible when mission and partnership took priority over individual plans.

### Reflection Questions:

1. What small partnerships could your church initiate with a neighboring congregation?
2. What fears or barriers might be preventing collaboration in your church? How could they be addressed?
3. How can your church cultivate a "kingdom mentality" rather than an "our church first" mindset?
4. Who in your church could build connections with other congregations?
5. What would faithfulness look like in terms of **partnership and mission** rather than **survival and competition**?

*Final Thought: Partnerships don't start with grand plans; they start with small steps. What small step could your church take today?*

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit [atlanticbaptist.ca/churchlink](https://atlanticbaptist.ca/churchlink) for additional information and examples, including written and video stories from other churches in Atlantic Canada.

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