



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Pulling Together

Hebrews 12: 1-3, 12-14, and 13: 20-21

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Look closely at the painting on the front of the bulletin (see below). What do you see? I see a house in a barren landscape. I also see a fence - or, I so I thought the first time I looked at the scene. But it's not a fence; it's people, and the title of the painting is "Pulling Together," which is what these people are doing.



In the late 1950s, the provincial government of Newfoundland, in an effort to provide more efficient services and promote industrialization, made a concerted effort to move people from small, isolated towns, mostly along the coast, into bigger communities.<sup>1</sup> My friend, Kevin George, who grew up in Newfoundland, says that the government sponsored relocation is one of the most painful periods in provincial history. It divided families and tore apart communities. It forced people to leave behind beloved "churches, cemeteries, and centuries of memory."<sup>2</sup>

Such forced relocations are painful moments for communities. We are witnessing some of that pain now, in forced relocations of a different sort.

- It is not the wealth of George Soros that is fueling the migrant caravan that is making its way through Mexico toward the southern border of the U.S. It is death threats, government ineptitude, economic turmoil, and hopes for a life of safety and security that drive people to make that dangerous trek. These folks are not relocating because it is a grand adventure to do so; they are relocating because they have no better alternative. We witness similar relocations all over the world: the forced removal of the Rohingya, the mistreatment of the Uighurs in China, the flight of Syrians. There are more people on

<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.mun.ca/mha/resettlement/rs\\_intro.php](http://www.mun.ca/mha/resettlement/rs_intro.php)

<sup>2</sup> Private communication.

the move today than any other time in recorded history. Much of that movement is forced upon people.

- Dislocation can occur for people who stay in place, too. The people of Pittsburgh and its Squirrel Hill neighborhood are in the midst of a forced, emotional relocation, as violence and death re-order their community and compel them to re-examine their assumptions and practices. The memory of this last week, and the memories it kindles, will forever alter their reality.
- Families and communities in Chicago undergo similar forced relocations with every gunshot, every shooting death, every episode of gang related violence, every abuse of police and governmental power.

In a much less public way, every family that sustains a death is forced to relocate itself emotionally, too. When we lose people we love, there are shifts in our tectonic plates, upheavals, a realignment of relationships.

One of the ways that people endure and reorient themselves is with the help of other people, the support of their community. That's what the picture on the front of our bulletin represents. It is a picture of a house pulling. Apparently, this is one way that Newfoundlanders helped each other manage the relocation: they pulled each other's houses across the ice. This particular picture documents people pulling the artist's own home when he was a boy, in the 1940s. They are pulling it about 4 km, from a closed town called Wild Cove to a place called Smith's Look-Out. Here, he says,

they are crossing the ice off Batrick's Island. The house had gone through the ice and was there, stalled, for a couple of days. It took five hundred local men to eventually free the house and haul it to its final destination, high on the hill overlooking Twillingate, where it still stands today. The town's women cooked large meals in outdoor pots and fed the workers in the Orange Hall. Dad had stored lots of homebrew in the cellar.<sup>3</sup>

There are few more isolating experiences than losing someone we love, or being forcibly moved or threatened, or experiencing real upheavals in our everyday existence. Those experiences make us feel so alone, so vulnerable. And yet, paradoxically, there is no way we make it through except with each other. The simple kindness of friends and neighbors pulling together helps us get from here to there, wherever here to there is - it may be 4km, or adjusting to a world marked by domestic terrorism, or learning to live without a dear one's daily presence. We help each other, simply by being here together and pulling together.

Today, we gather to remember the saints who have filled our lives with love, and joy, and goodness. We gather, too, to help and support each other recall and honor those dear ones. Finally, we gather to remind ourselves that God moves behind and in and through all this. God pulls us together into a community of saints, knit together with divine love and forgiveness and grace. For the grace of God, known to us in human community, family, and love, let us give thanks. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://tedstuckless.com/product/pulling-together>