

FIRST DAWN EASTERN EDGE REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORT

Origin: First Dawn Eastern Edge Regional Council

Vision without Action is merely a dream.

Action without Vision just passes time.

Vision with Action can change the world. (Joel A. Barker)

Who Are We:

We are the most easterly region of The United Church of Canada. The name First Dawn references the place where the sun rises first, and of course, Eastern Edge references this region as being the province with the longest shoreline in Canada, strutting out into the North Atlantic. We see ourselves as being the Eastern Edge.

Land Acknowledgement:

We acknowledge that we are on ancestral homelands of the Beothuk, whose culture has been lost forever and can never be recovered. We also acknowledge the island of Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland) as the unceded, traditional territory of the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq. We acknowledge Labrador as the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Innu of Nitassinan, the Inuit of Nunatsiavut, and the Inuit of NunatuKavut.

What We Are About:

As we look forward to the future, we are very aware that we need to be realistic about what we are experiencing as a church. We are aware that we, collectively, are sharing a sense of grief as we recognize that we are not the church that we used to be. However, as Rev. Dr. Anna Robbins said in a presentation she gave.

"I think we get caught in a place that makes it hard to discern the reality of the past. I think we get stuck in a place of nostalgia, the words nostalgia is formed from the Greek word, nostos – return home - algia – longing. A longing to return home, a longing that comes with a pain to return home. A longing for a home that no longer exists and perhaps never existed. Nostalgia, is an idealization of the past that overlook the flaws and may even capture the negative and anoint them into something good. We change what was to an ideal and forget about the painful parts and about who was in and who was out, we create a nostalgist fiction about the way things were. We remember how things were when really, they were not."

We are hardly the first people to experience this. There are stories shared in scripture that speak to people longing to go back and forgetting that God was leading them to a new reality. Maybe we are doing some of that when we think about the church of the past, and we get tired of God wanting to lead us forward.

As we look at our church realistically in our region, we are aware of the decline that we have all been experiencing. Our pastoral charges, have been reduced from 87 in our last report to now 86 pastoral charges. Most of our pastoral charges are rural, scattered all over the Island of

Newfoundland and the “Big Land” of Labrador. Most of our pastoral charges are multi-point and we still have one that has six points. In the midst of managing change and decline, we have made a commitment to live into our discerned call.

CALL

With joy in our hearts and a song on our lips we, the First Dawn Eastern Edge Regional Council of The United Church of Canada, acknowledge that we are called by God to love and serve all creation as bold disciples of Jesus Christ. We believe that full participation in all aspects of our calling is the right of people of all racial backgrounds, creeds, ages, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender expressions, economic statuses, abilities or any other lived experiences that have led to marginalization and oppression. Through our various shared ministries and paths of deep spirituality, we are called to uphold the varied gifts and skills in one another; to be accepting of change while honouring heritage and traditions; to resist bias as we seek justice. We are all God’s children. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

What’s Happening:

As a regional council we have been asking ourselves the question, “What do you want with us, Jesus?” From our discernment to that question, and through the lens of our call we have made the following commitments.

Regional Council Priorities:

The Regional Council priorities have been developed over the past two years and have now been circulated to all communities of faith, divisions and teams as a way of focusing our work and helping in our future planning.

Priority 1: Sharing our Faith Story: Building Community: Objective: Engage communities of faith in telling the Good News with each other and with the community at large.

Priority 2: Inclusivity: Objective: To become an affirming region and inclusive church.

Priority 3: Nurturing Communities of Faith: Objective: Building trust between the region and congregations by nurturing communities of faith.

Priority 4: Managing Resources: Objective: To be good stewards of our resources.

This is not a document to be put on a shelf but a living working commitment of our region. This is the lens for which we do our ministry and make our decisions. To see the full priorities please go to <https://ucceast.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/FDEE-Executive-Priority-Setting-Goals-Objectives-January-2025.pdf>

Through our vision for the future and a commitment to our action plan, we have been experiencing renewed energy and commitment from our leaders and congregations. Some of the exciting things that are happening are:

- Cooperative and shared Ministries, are emerging in our region.
- Communities of Faith are choosing vitality. Creating their vision and action plans, that are different than “the way we always did it”. They are making the bold commitment to continue to be the church and have a United Church presence in their community.

- Communities of Faith are discerning their life cycle and making the faithful decision to end well with dignity and purpose, rather than fading away.
- Communities of Faith are looking outside the box to try something new with both success and failing forward. Learning and trying again.

We have been piloting a new initiative called **Pastoral Units**; a gathering of congregations in a geographical area for connection, training, support, outreach, pastoral care, and worship, as well as the sharing of resources and ministry; and who knows what else will emerge. We have had five groups agree to be part of the pilot, and we look forward to seeing the reports and results that will come from these initiatives.

Health Joy and Excellence Institute:

Providing a place for Ministry Personnel to return to their *why* and be nurtured in their vocation. The regions wish to undertake this initiative for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it is a responsibility of regions to operationalize the goal of this Institute which is:

“to provide leaders and communities with opportunities for learning and environments of sharing to improve their skills, focus their energies and celebrate their practice”.

Beyond this, these regions are also very aware of the stresses Pastoral charges are facing and the responsibilities that fall on lay leaders and their ministry personnel. Therefore, we want to target developmental opportunities that will help ministry personnel and communities of faith better manage these challenges.

In addition, good management practice recognizes that providing supports and developing skills are important to improving performance. Ministers, and other leaders, come into their roles with a range of education and experiences which equip them with many of the **skills** required to do the work. However, professional development is important to continuous improvement and to addressing the new challenges which arise. To this end, General Council plays a role through its Office of Vocation in providing some professional development opportunities. Similarly, there are a number of **supports** provided from all levels of the organization. However, in both the development of skills and the provision of supports, there is room to focus on issues specific to these regions and deliver them in formats best suited to the local environments.

It is significant to note that every time ministry personnel develop their skills or receive support, it benefits their personal development, but it also creates the possibility for them to play a leadership role in applying their skills in their pastoral charge and bringing information back to other leaders to help in their development.

The exploration of this joint initiative recognizes that each of the three eastern regions may have different strategic priorities, however there will be areas where their cooperative efforts will help maximize the benefits that can be gained from their individual resources, expertise and diversity.

Subject Area 1: Living Faith Application

The Living Faith Categories are the cornerstones of our ministry and are the basis for many ministerial position descriptions. While most ministry personnel have skills/knowledge in these categories, the changing environment requires we revisit these and look for creative ways to approach achieving our goals in each category. By way of example, using peer groups could be a useful mechanism for learning and sharing differing approaches to each of the Living Faith Categories which might open up new and creative ways of proceeding with this work. For the purposes of this document the Living Faith Categories are defined as:

Discipleship - Providing opportunity for faith exploration, dialogue and formation in discipleship (e.g. Sunday School, youth programs, UCW, and other adult groups, spreading the gospel).

Justice and Outreach - Reaching out to the vulnerable and marginalized, striving for equity and justice as well as living in good relationships (e.g. community gardens and food banks, advocating for the poor, sponsoring refugees).

Leadership - Identifying, developing, empowering and supporting lay leadership (e.g. training for lay leaders, life-long learning, and sharing faith stories).

Ministry Partnerships - Connecting with other levels of our own church, connecting with other churches and community organizations (e.g. learning from/working with them).

Pastoral Care - Compassionately supporting people and transforming lives (e.g. responding to the spiritual needs of those with addictions, in hospital, bereaved, with serious health or relationship issues).

Stewardship - Faithful living through use of time, talent and resources as well as care of creation (e.g. current revenue and its uses, initiatives compared to need).

Worship - Communal expression of our faith in public ritual which is fulfilling, reflects the United Church of Canada values and is welcoming and accessible (e.g. different forms of worship).

Subject Area 2: Management Theory

There are a number of key management practices that are extremely transferrable across professions. These areas lend themselves to “course” structure or a speaker series and could be made available to individuals at their own pace or in group offerings. By way of example:

Planning - includes understanding strategic and operational planning, time management as well as project management. Ministry personnel will gain skills to provide leadership in supporting this work within the pastoral charge, as well as in managing their own responsibilities.

Human Resource Management - includes such areas as team building, conflict resolution, communication, facilitation, motivating creativity, inclusion; all of which will enable ministry personnel to resolve issues and maximize results in their community of faith.

Evaluation - applying the problem-solving approach, understanding process evaluation and design, as well as the principles of change management can assist ministry personnel in moving forward on their own mission/goals as well as providing leadership to assist their communities of faith in these areas.

Subject Area 3: Self-Care

Having a range of supports available to assist ministry personnel in self-care: mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually is important. Keeping ministry personnel healthy and joyful helps them better fulfil their roles and also provides them with a deeper understanding in providing similar support to others. Using retreats, reading exercises and mentorship approaches may be useful in this area. By way of example topics could include: Dealing with Stress; Mindfulness; Work – Life Balance and Staying Healthy; and Spiritual Renewal.

Subject Area 4: Basic Orientation

While there are some standardized processes and each region and pastoral charge may have different approaches, it is worth exploring what is the “must have” information we want ministry personnel to have when first employed in a new pastoral charge regarding personnel issues, administrative requirements, strategic plans, living faith priorities, etc.

Subject Area 5: Just-in-Time Training or Supports

This would focus on critical issues which arise suddenly, such as the pandemic, but would also be mindful of areas requiring new ways of thinking, such as inclusiveness or youth ministry. Those who are working within the system are certainly aware of the types of issues with which ministry personnel and pastoral charges are struggling. As part of a comprehensive approach to Health, Joy and Excellence in Leadership we will want to have a structured way of gathering information on priorities in this area and delivering skills training or supports in a timely fashion or as part of an annual “Just-in-Time” event.

Subject Area 6: Individual Development Plans

While some ministry personnel are continuing their professional development on an individual basis, a structured approach to establishing a “learning plan” for ministry personnel individually may be useful for regions and pastoral charges.

We were able to launch our first initiative, with two rotations of *Practicing Our Calling in a Time of Planetary Crisis*, offered by Janice Maclean Prayer Bench, and *Rest and Resurrection: Silent Retreat* on the beautiful site of Tatamagouche Centre, offered by Rev. Dr. Catherine Smith. We continue to explore offerings and find funding resources to keep the cost minimal to our participants.

Clergy Zooming:

The clergy in our region continue to meet with one another on a regular basis through Zoom. It may involve topics of interest like learning how to read your pay stub; to times of support and conversation.

Educational Webinars/Events:

The Affirm Committee, Faith Formation Christian Education and Leadership Development Team, as well as staff have made a commitment to provide learning events for our region. This year the focus has been on the “Lunch and Learns” as well as educational webinars. The Affirm

Committee has developed a study guide for our divisions and team as well as our congregations, about being an inclusive, affirming, radically welcoming church.

Cross Regional Check-In:

We continue to have cross-regional check-ins that are topic lead and a great way to connect our congregation with one another and to discuss matters that are close to our heart.

Evaluation of Regional Structure:

As you remember, we are in the process of evaluation of the regional structure. The key to the evaluation is the relationship between the regional council and the communities of faith, and whether the governance structure supports this relationship. The focus of the evaluation lines up with the priorities of the region. We wish to thank everyone, our division, teams, our ministry personnel and our community of faith governing bodies for taking the time to complete the surveys. Thank you to the Executive for their contribution to the process. The data gathering phase of the project is nearing completion. Surveys were sent out from the regional council office mid January. The collating and writing of the report is now underway and we hope to have a report with any necessary recommendations prior to our regional annual meeting so we can have discussion on the way forward. A special thank you to Jenny Stephens, our consultant, and Seyi Adeyemo, administrative support for this project.

Staff Updates:

We were happy to have been able to increase the Communications and Office Administration position for the Sackville office to full-time. Oluwaseyi (Seyi) Adeyemo, started with us on October 7, 2024. Seyi is learning about the United Church and its organizational structures, while at the same time taking on many new projects, including supporting Rev. Jenny Stephens in the evaluation process. He has just completed his first six months and we welcome him to our staff team.

As all of you are now aware, the sudden loss of our colleague and friend, Rev. Kendall Harrison, has shaken our three regions and the church as a whole. Thank you to all who continue to keep his family, our staff and the Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters Regional Council in your thoughts and prayers.

All of our staff have worked hard over this past year to support our communities of faith, our committees, our ministry personnel, and our laity. I take this opportunity to thank each one of them for their continuous support, faithfulness, and professionalism. There is never an ask that is too big or a task that is too small for our staff.

Thank you to our members:

The vibrancy of our communities of faith and our region is realized through the interconnected actions we take to support one another. None of this work is done by one person, it takes all of us. Your discipleship has helped to weave God's love through our region and connect us in the community, we call church. May we continue to live in this covenantal relationship.