

BERMUDA-NOVA SCOTIA REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORT

Origin: Bermuda Nova-Scotia Regional Council

Who Are We:

Inspired by God, we are Christ's people in Bermuda and Nova Scotia, loving each other, following Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Land Acknowledgement:

We acknowledge that we are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People, and we acknowledge them as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Mi'kmaq Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet), and Passamaquoddy Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations. We are all Treaty people.

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 collectively, we 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, 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. We cannot imagine another way to be the church, and we are weary. Seeing where God is leading us is difficult.

As we look at our church realistically in our region, we are aware of the decline that we have all been experiencing. We have 139 Pastoral Charges, most of our pastoral charges are rural, scattered throughout the province of Nova Scotia. Most of our pastoral charges are multi-point, in the midst of experiencing change and decline. We have made a commitment to live into our discerned call.

CALL

To become a transformed, courageous, Spirit-filled community, risking discipleship based on the radical love of Jesus that welcomes all people, including but not limited to people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, skin colour, race, creed, age, cultural background, economic status, language, and ability, to fully participate in all aspects of our life and work.

What's Happening:

As a regional council we are excited to share that since our last report, we have become an affirming region. As part of our commitment to our call, we understand ourselves as a people always striving to become affirming. It is a continued journey in which we have all made a commitment to learn and grow; to know better and to be better. Our Core Values that we hold to are:

Connecting and strengthening communities of faith by:

- Living into expansive and inclusive belonging
- Growing compassionate leadership
- Nurturing creative ways of Christian vitality
- Uniting by effective communication
- Sharing and living the Good News
- Modelling Christ's humility and justice
- Moving forward in hope and generosity

Regional Council Priorities

The regional council priorities have been developed from our Strategic Plan and our three-pillar approach:

Pillar 1: Bold Discipleship

Objective: Promote the importance of discipleship as core to the strengthening, vitality and sustainability of Christian community.

Actions • Help congregations understand the expectations of being a Christian and the implications of bold discipleship. • Promote a culture of spiritual learning in our communities of faith through gatherings, learning opportunities and sharing spiritual journeys. • Offer programming that invites members to deepen their connection to God in their local community of faith and mission. • Create a Bible Study for our communities of faith focusing on discipleship.

Pillar 2: Clear Mission

Objective: Engage communities of faith and other ministries in defining their part in God's mission.

Actions • Create or share educational materials and present seminars that help communities of faith define and live out their mission beyond mere survival. • Assess and resource communities of faith's organizational health based on best practices and help provide the tools for their next steps. • Gather and provide examples of imaginative cooperative possibilities or

renewal. • Research, review and analyze what viable opportunities may exist for creating mission and spirit filled communities, (e.g., church planting, alternative ministry focus) and animate examples where this is already happening. • Establish and provide leadership for a hospice (ending well) team and for clergy, equipping them with the skillset to accompany dying/grieving communities of faith through a process of closure. • Explore and share new models of congregational governance to ensure they are serving communities of faith in achieving their mission.

Pillar 3: Daring Leadership

Objective: Develop curious, faithful, brave leaders

Actions • Offer leadership training and resources for ministry and laity to decrease exclusive dependence on staff (e.g. Fresh Start, United for Learning, Tatamagouche Centre, Atlantic School of Theology). • Create a template for faith communities' leadership succession and directly encourage them to reflect on their future needs and professional and lay skill development. • Explore and research new models of ministries in other jurisdictions and denominations and share with communities of faith. • Create and conduct leadership cohorts focused on organizational excellence and leadership development. • Create and share resources for lay people to assume some traditional clerical responsibilities (e.g. funerals, worship planning, pastoral care) in communities of faith (especially partially-funded ministries). • Ensure that questions are answered and resources are provided in a timely manner.

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.

Associate Relationship:

In September of 2022, we officially entered into an associate relationship with the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda and The United Church of Canada:

"We believe that The United Church of Canada and The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda are called "to be God's church" in the world, singing of God's love and care for all of creation and promoting the Gospel." And so, we covenant to be together in mission and ministry".

At our annual meeting held in 2023, we were happy to have had our covenanting service, with representatives from Bermuda and our General Secretary, Rev. Michael Blair present. As we continue to live into our new relationship building on our long history together, we pray for God's continued presence.

Cluster Gatherings:

As part of our strategic plan, and understanding the need to have communities of faith reconnect with each other and the region, the regional council through a proposal, made the decision to create a part-time cluster animator position. The role of Cluster Animator is to work with communities of faith in Bermuda-Nova Scotia Region for the specific purpose of establishing basic regional clusters. These clusters will provide a structure for lay persons and ministry personnel to meet and provide support to each other on a consistent basis. Robyn Brown-Hewitt began in this work in October and will continue with us until December of this year. We look forward to hearing more about her learning and the suggested cluster areas.

Health Joy and Excellence Institute:

Providing a place for Ministry Personnel to return to their *why* and be nurtured in their vocation. The eastern 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.

Association of Ministers:

The Association of Ministers started as a committee of the regional council and are now registered with joint stocks and are launched as a separate membership run organization. Membership in the Association is open to: Diaconal, Designated Lay, and Ordained ministers (active, retired and retained on the roll) and candidates currently serving in appointments. The organization works within the framework of four key pillars: CARE - Community; Advocacy; Renewal; and Education.

Educational Webinars/Events:

The Affirm and Faith Formation and Leadership Development committees, as well as staff have made a commitment to provide learning events for our region. Some have been offered through zoom webinars and there have been some in person events. These learning opportunities have been open to both ministry personnel and lay leadership. We hope to continue with these initiatives and provide more into the future.

Reparation:

As part of our commitment to the Calls to the Church coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, our region, through my office, the Property Committee and the Tatamagouche Board have been engaged in a conversation with the Women of First Light about the Tatamagouche Centre itself as a possible rematriation (return of the land) to the Indigenous people whose ancestors were the caretakers of the land on which Tatamagouche Center is located. This place has been the place of Peace and Friendship and is considered a place of healing for all people who gather there. We are in the process of creating an MOU that will determine the way we will move forward together. More information is forthcoming on this matter.

A proposal approved at the 2024 AGM was entitled *Steps on the Reconciliation Journey*. As the Property Committee, with its chair being part of the task group noted above, I made the decision that this proposal should best be situated with the Property Committee as a continuation of the work that they are already doing. The Property Committee has agreed to this work and we have begun the process of looking at a way forward from the recommended actions noted in the proposal, in which we consider gifting surplus property, some or all of its proceeds to local Indigenous Communities or the Indigenous Church of the United Church of Canada.

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 divisions, committees, 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.

We also welcome to the staff team, Robyn Brown–Hewitt, our Cluster Animator. I am sure some of you have been meeting with Robyn and have been discerning the best way to create our cluster gatherings for our region and how to help them be sustainable.

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.