



**The United Church
of Canada
General Council**

GC45 East Central Ontario Regional Council Report for Summer 2025

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Executive Summary

Inspired by the General Council's strategic plan, the East Central Ontario Regional Council created its own strategic plan to navigate the challenging context in which it finds itself. The focus on equity, justice and innovation continues to be at the heart of its work. Like so many others, we face challenges finding sufficient ministry personnel, assisting congregations through transitions and anxiety, and navigating a future that is not yet clear. We continue to be a hopeful, engaged regional council with a desire to build the world that God calls us to co-create.

Formation, Nurture and Justice

Our Formation, Nurture and Justice Leadership Team has helped to provide a network of people throughout the region who are actively seeking connection and space to strengthen our approach to existing and emerging issues. Regular region-wide conferences and activities are held to broaden our perspectives and deepen our commitment. We have also chosen to focus our efforts in each quarter of the year on a particular justice issue so that we can go deep rather than spread ourselves too thinly.

Climate Change

Our Regional Council has begun to track our carbon footprint for meetings. We've established a baseline year and are seeking to reduce our emissions year over year. Encouraging carpooling and transit, holding meetings in places that are convenient for these purposes, and continuing to offer online participation in the most engaging and integrated way possible. Further, we've set a goal to increase congregational involvement in programs like Faithful Footprints that help them lower their costs and reduce their carbon output.

Ministry in Changing Times

We recognize that one of the key challenges for our communities of faith is their ability to imagine an innovative or creative alternative to how things are currently done. As a result, we have established a team that tours the region to inspire and offer alternatives to communities of faith that are suffering from fatigue and an inability to picture how things could be different. Whether its reimagining models of leadership (shared or cooperative ministry) or governance, how to do ministry (worship, pastoral care, Christian education), or new ways to strengthen invitation to those who have not yet found a spiritual home, this team has been offering a buffet of options to help communities innovate.

Our Growth Animator has also offered excellent workshops on evangelism and growth. We have also offered a variety of governance models and ways to simplify the "church work" so that we can focus on what really matters: ministry.

We have also been developing pathways for those communities where disbanding or amalgamating is their ultimate decision – giving them ways to "wind up well" despite the grief that comes with such a decision.

Loss of Connection

During the post-pandemic lockdown period, it was frequently expressed that people were feeling a loss of connection with the lack of Presbytery meetings. This was not about missing decision-making processes as much as it was about the loss of regular community. The Regional Council has established a Health Connections Forum, a group of people who reach out to congregations on a regular basis to check-in and see if there are any needs and to just get a feel of how things are going. We've also hired a Community of Faith Support Minister as a way to build connection and strengthen our congregations. Weekly check-ins (online) for

ministry personnel have also been happening.

Areas of Specialization

Once we have a better relationship with our communities of faith, we will know which communities have strength in particular types and aspects of ministry. We hope to work to establish “Centres of Excellence” geographically across the region so that we can direct people who have particular spiritual needs or desires to places that excel in that kind of ministry. Not all communities of faith can be excellent at everything, but if we can nurture communities to become strong at delivering a particular ministry, we could become a beautiful region-wide “buffet” that meets the needs of those who are seeking, curious or looking for a spiritual home. This is particularly true as younger generations are looking for places that meet their needs rather than seeking to invest their time and effort in institutional survival.

Media Relations

We acknowledge that one of the church’s challenges is that we face a media environment where the word ‘church’ is associated with fundamentalist and narrow theological expressions. Further, a growing number of Canadians are ‘unchurched’ or don’t classify themselves as people of faith and would have no idea what goes on behind our church doors. We decided to build some media relations skills through training so that our communities of faith can build confidence in their ability to find creative ways to be seen in the media and strengthening relationships with journalists.

We have also been finding ways to make our regional meetings a time when the communities where we gather would know that we had been there. In the Fall of 2024, the Regional Council held an inclusive hymn sing on the rainbow steps of the church in Brighton where we gathered. We invited the media and members of the community to join us. This had been the site of an act of hate-filled vandalism – to which we decided to respond with a public expression of inclusion and love.

Equity

One of the charisms of our regional council is its dedication to equity. Always seeking to strengthen our approach, we've developed training and expertise as well as establishing best practices in the approaches we take to our work together. We model what we hope to see in our congregations. An equity support team or person is appointed at every meeting who will give an oral report at the close of a meeting on how the meeting went. They also prepare an equity checklist following the meeting and submit it electronically to the Equity Team so that we can assess our progress. We attempt to ensure that people introduce themselves so that newcomers are not left out, we work to ensure that pronouns are properly used and that our affirming status is always at the forefront of our thinking. Meeting spaces are assessed for accessibility as is our technology. We use ASL interpreters at all Celebration of Ministries services and do regular book studies to explore the leading edges of diversity, equity and inclusion. In a time such as this, we feel that this responsibility is more important than ever before.

Transitions

Over the last triennium, our Regional Council has mourned the loss of Rev. David Timpson who was serving as our Pastoral Relations Minister. Rev. Darren Liepold came into David's role and has been shifting into the Community of Faith Support Minister role. We welcomed Tori Mullin as our Growth Animator in early 2024. Rev. Debbie Roi joined us in 2024 as the Pastoral Relations Minister. Following the retirement of our first Regional Executive Minister, Rev. Rosemary Lambie, Rev. Éric Hébert-Daly, began serving ECORC in this role in January 2023. We are also very grateful for the Speakers of the Council of Elders who served since 2023: Rev. Paul Reed and Rev. Wanda Stride.

We are grateful for the staff team that serves our Regional Council so ably:

- Rev. Tim Hackborn, Office of Vocation Minister, Indigenous Ministries
- Rev. Éric Hébert-Daly, Regional Executive Minister
- Sharon Hull, Minister for Spiritual Nurture, Respectful Relationships and Justice with All Ages
Brian James, Treasurer
- Roger Janes, Community of Faith Stewardship Support and Philanthropy
- Rev. Darren Liepold, Community of Faith Support Minister
- Joel Miller, Executive Assistant
- Rev. Tori Mullin, Growth Animator

- Martha Pedoniquotte, Community Capacity Development Coordinator, Indigenous Ministries
- Rev. Caroline Penhale, Office of Vocation Minister
- Rev. Rodney Smith-Merkley, Minister for Respectful Relationship and Indigenous Justice
- Karen Wilson, Communications and Administrative Assistant

Collaboration

In much of the work, we collaborate and share resources, ideas and documents with our two sister Regional Councils: Eastern Ontario Outaouais and Nakonha:ka. We are grateful for the many ways that staff and volunteers exchange and support one another in Eastern Ontario and Quebec. The staff teams of all three regional councils gather annually to review plans and share experience. Within similar job descriptions, there are regular online meetings and shared group discussions. Staff from one region will often cover holidays for someone in another region.

Strategic Plan

Here are the activity streams from our strategic plan adopted in 2023 and will evolve through the discussions regarding Towards 2035:

Growth

Activity Stream #1 – Community of Faith Self-Assessment Tool

Activity Stream #2 – Collaborative/Shared/New Ministries Resources

Activity Stream #3 – Amalgamating and Disbanding Resources

Activity Stream #4 – Alternative Worship links on Regional Website

Justice

Activity Stream #5 – Justice Feature

Activity Stream #6 – Media Strategy

Climate

Activity Stream #7 – Faithful Footprints and Greening Sacred Spaces

Activity Stream #8 – Carbon Footprint Reduction

Activity Stream #9 – Climate Forum

Leadership

Activity Stream #10 – Lay Mentoring Network

Activity Stream #11 – Association of Ministers

Activity Stream #12 – Governance Models Toolkit

Activity Stream #13 – M&P Refresher

Common Good

Activity Stream #14 – Healthy Connections Forum

Activity Stream #15 – Covenant Renewal

Activity Stream #16 – Centres of Excellence

Looking Forward

We will be integrating what we are learning from the Towards 2035 work at all levels of the regional council and with our communities of faith in the coming year. We continue to believe that God has a plan for our church. It will take some prayer, some change in our culture, and it will require us to consider what it means to be church in this context. But we have this hope in the one who offers us a ministry and model that is at the core of what we have been returning to for 2000 years. It sustains us, even in times of challenge when the road ahead is unclear.

Submitted by Steve Coles, Speaker, Council of Elders

East Central Ontario Regional Council

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