

Western Ontario Waterways Regional Council

Following Up on the Tri-Regional Evaluation

Background

When the Regional Councils of Antler River Watershed, Horseshoe Falls and Western Ontario Waterways were formed, the three regional councils decided to work together with shared staffing and a common governance model and committed to evaluating that governance and staffing model after three years. Bill Allen and Jenny Stephens conducted that evaluation for us in 2023. In June 2023, Bill and Jenny reported on their findings to the Tri-Regional Council Executives and Staff.

At our Fall 2023 Western Ontario Waterways meeting, we dedicated significant time to going deeper on some of the focus areas identified in the evaluation. Participants in the Fall Regional Meeting were invited to self-select which breakout group they were most interested in to have a more in-depth conversation about that aspect of our life and work together.

Following that meeting, the notes taken in each group were collated into a document called 'Going Deeper Into the Evaluation'. This document was made available to the Executive and Commissions and Staff and any member of the Regional Council who asked for it.

Since then, we have been working away at some of the ideas and concerns noted in that report. What follows below is a status update on where things are at. We have sorted items into three categories:

1. Response in Progress – This names what we have done or are currently working on to address these areas of feedback.
2. Needs a Response Plan – This identifies areas that are within the scope of the Regional Council's work but for which we have not yet developed a plan to respond, and in some case includes ideas we might try.
3. Parking Lot – This acknowledges that some of the ideas, no matter how brilliant, are outside the scope of the Regional Council's work either because they are the work of another part of the church (denomination or communities of faith) or because they are just too large for us to tackle at this time.

Section 1– Connecting Communities of Faith to the Regional Council

Develop a strategy to be more pro-active in engaging with Communities of Faith and to keep them informed of activities and decisions of the Regional Council

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
What is WOW??	Faith communities in WOW were grouped into 17 clusters to meet and share information about themselves with each other. The leaders who agreed to lead these clusters are active members within the Region and will share information about WOW and the wider United Church during these gatherings. A video was created to share at the gatherings and post to website and social media	Gather information from the individual cluster groups as to what went well or what didn't go so well. Continue to encourage and promote these small cluster gatherings to foster relationships with other nearby Faith Communities.	
Not enough Volunteers / Recruitment	Expressions of Interest forms have been revised and reposted A "Get Involved" tab was placed on the wowrcucc.ca website homepage	Small Communities of Faith are more susceptible to this lack of volunteers due to pool of numbers and an ageing population. Consider shorter terms for persons serving in WOWRC roles, so volunteers will not feel they are not trapped into a position that they cannot get out of.	This is an issue across the Church and other Charitable and Community organizations.
		If possible, encourage Volunteers to seek out a younger age "Buddy" to work alongside with them and share the load.	
Reduced Relationship Building time	Currently using breakout rooms/table groups at meetings to build new relationships.	Continue to use open breakout rooms for people to connect.	
		Continue to encourage the new cluster groups to meet and build relationships with each other.	
Limitations of Staff time		Continue to seek ways to communicate the events that are already happening.	This is a budget issue in regards to what the WOW Regional Council can afford.
		Many small Rural Communities of Faith are not computer literate or even have internet so connecting to projects that Staff are promoting will be problematic.	
Intentional Reach out & Communication /Connection	The new development of the 17 Cluster Groups.	Encourage clusters that are within an hour of one another to gather for potluck meal and fellowship.	

Section 2– Communicating with Communities of Faith

Develop a communication strategy to help keep Communities of Faith informed about what is happening in the Region

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
The need for simplicity	Reorganizing of the website for clarity and ease of use is being done by staff with items sent out in emails cross-posted to web-site and Facebook to offer multiple ways to access information All communication being conscious of the request for simplicity of language and length	How to continue educating on use of SharePoint and ChurchHub and help communities of faith access the training that is out there	SharePoint and ChurchHub are necessary for certain pieces of work and will help make things easier if we can get over the learning curve (hopefully?)
Feeling patronized and dismissed	Keeping before us our BRAVE statement: We strive, in this time of co-learning, to be brave by B – bring accountable for the impact of both our words and our silence R – reflecting on and naming our own biases A – actively listening V – vocalizing questions that arise from our learning E – encountering new ideas with curiosity and wonder		
Thinking about the website from the perspective of the end user	Staff continue to work daily to strengthen the website and continue to keep it up to date Who to contact if you have questions that you can't find answers to has been added under staff descriptions	Is it possible to have volunteers from a variety of perspectives who could spend some time using the website and finding places where it can be strengthened to help users—and directing the staff who can then make changes?	Since we can't program the search engine for the website there are just some problems we can't correct
How can on-going feedback about communication be built in?			

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Providing alternatives to using the website	Wherever possible providing printed copies of website materials when requested	Is there a way we can connect Communities of Faith to a “technology liaison” who can help navigate areas that must be done on computer?	Cost of providing alternative formats can be prohibitive - there are also environmental concerns?
How can on-going feedback about communication be built in?			
Person to person information sharing	Zoom meeting of WOWRC regional reps was held, monthly zoom gatherings of ministry personnel within WOWRC are hosted by Kevin Steeper Cluster gatherings that have been organized help support this person to person information sharing	Organizing future zoom gatherings that can help communication	
ChurchHub is very frustrating and it is difficult to get people to do the work of maintaining it.	ChurchHub videos link is included in information given with search team training. Training videos link has been added to the website. Work is also in process to help pastoral charge supervisors and liaisons to know where training videos are located.	We could offer a training session to help communities of faith navigate ChurchHub.	ChurchHub is a responsibility of the National Church
Meeting Staff helps	Staff are always in attendance at the Tri-Regional Council Meetings		Given the new structure, opportunities for in person meetings where introductions can be made are few

Section 3– Support to Communities of Faith Searching for a New Minister

Exploring ways to use our resources as a Regional Council to support communities in the search process

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Navigating ChurchHub is very challenging	ChurchHub videos link is information given with search team training. Training videos link has been added to the website. Work is also in process to help pastoral charge supervisors and liaisons to know where training videos are located.	Can we offer Webinars to watch the training videos together and answer questions as they arise?	ChurchHub itself is a responsibility of the National Church
Challenges with paperwork	A summary page of search process created fall 2022.	Continuing to look at what information is available on the website, for example templates and examples.	
	Website was revised to be more user friendly.		
	Template for position description has been revised.		
	Work began last year to connect liaisons as soon a change of pastoral relationship is approved instead of when the search team is formed.		
Challenges with Liaisons	Liaison training in the Spring of 2023 brought on new liaisons. However, there is still a shortage. The last two years have seen a higher number of churches undergoing search.	Creating liaison gatherings to better equip liaisons.	
Length of Training Videos	Search Team Training is not a video but done by liaisons or monthly by the Pastoral Relations Minister. Video offered to members who were not able to be present. There is a lot of information that must be included in the training.	Encouraging and equipping the liaisons to do the training regularly again for a more personalized training.	ChurchHub videos are produced by the National Church
More user-friendly website	Revisions have happened with focus being on organizing information from the community of faith's perspective.		

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Finding Supply	Pulpit supply list now done through ChurchHub (so ministers can update) with copy available through PRM. Short-term supply done through search process.	Working towards giving lists for pulpit supply to liaisons and pastoral charge supervisors. Also looking at password protected website.	
		Put information on Short-term supply on website.	
Recruiting lay people as liaisons and pastoral charge supervisors	At search team training, people are encouraged to consider serving as liaisons.		
	Educational time at Regional council meetings has happened to let people know that lay people can serve in these roles and what's involved.		
Education about alternatives	Connections made to the Office of Vocation Minister about Supervised Ministry Education sites to help with discernment.	Information could be added to the website and education of liaisons.	

Section 4 – Facilitate networking among area communities of faith

Explore more deeply what the communities of faith believe they are missing under the regional council system and endeavour to address.

*Comment from the group discussing this section: “We need to take responsibility for this and figure out ways in our own areas and share names. This should be at the grass roots level.” * May it be so.*

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Historical relationships and cooperation were disrupted due to structural change and COVID	17 clusters were organized for a one-time gathering that would introduce neighbouring communities of faith to each other and WOWRC and give them an opportunity to feedback to the Executive. Two gatherings had to be cancelled due to limited response despite the facilitator's efforts. A significant challenge is that there are so many churches without ministers.	Our committees and commissions need access to better contact information to connect and support ministers and communities of faith. The Recruitment Committee is considering compiling a directory for the WOWRC.	
Clusters of ministry personnel across WOWRC meet regularly but churches without ministers are not included.		Discern whether these are gatherings to connect and support ministry personnel or to connect communities of faith. Clusters could be asked to consider including lay reps from congregations without ministers if the latter is the case.	
		Lay regional reps could be encouraged to create their own clusters.	

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People no longer know each other	Break out rooms/table groups at meetings are helping to build new relationships.	At online meetings we could keep open breakout rooms for people to connect at lunch, after meeting. A volunteer host could be responsible for ending the meeting instead of taking up staff time	
Shared activities – Are there ways to include smaller churches in areas surrounding urban centres? Are there possibilities for shared confirmation classes? bible studies?	WOWRC Staff offer webinars on topics such as pastoral care, affirming ministries, children/youth ministry and more. These webinars give people opportunities to meet and share ideas with communities of faith with similar interests. Webinar information is shared via the newsletter and Facebook.	Continue to seek ways to communicate the events that are already happening, keeping in mind that some people don't use Facebook.	Communities of faith may wish to connect and organize shared confirmation, Bible Study etc.
		Continue Michele Petick's (Admin. Assistant for Social Media and Website Management) good work on the website to help people connect.	
		Perhaps a volunteer could edit Kathy Douglas' (Minister Faith Formation) pastoral care workshops and others to lift out highlights that could be posted on WOWRC YouTube to inspire others.	
How can we learn about upcoming events in nearby churches?	Inviting the posting of events and special worships to Facebook	We could have a volunteer group gather and prioritize/curate announcements to work with administrative staff to use staff time effectively.	
Perception many small churches with no connection to technology		If we have no email contact with a church (ie. minister, church email, regional rep), we could partner them with a neighbouring community of faith to receive information.	
		We could offer a training session to help communities of faith navigate Church Hub.	
Compile a database?		- A group of clergy has drawn together a number of pastoral charges to compile what strengths each has and is hoping to build a database with this information. -The Recruitment Team is working on the feasibility of creating some kind of WOWRC Directory	Some folk are doing this and it works great! This would take a huge amount of time and energy and be out of date before it was completed on a Regional level.

Section 5 – Enhancing “health, joy, excellence in ministry practice”

How can the Region support and enhance ministry practice?

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Gathering clergy for mutual support	Kevin Steeper (Pastoral Support Minister) organizes regular Zoom meetings for paid accountable ministers for mutual support. These are advertised regularly in the WOW newsletter, on social media and via email. They are open to all people serving in paid accountable ministry.	Are there further ways in which we could help clergy know who is near them and encourage the formation of supportive clergy clusters?	It is not within the scope of the Regional Council to organize new clergy clusters but the continued development of these opportunities for connection is encouraged.
	An annual in-person luncheon has been organized for ministry personnel for the past two years.		
	There are other clergy groups meeting in person or online in various parts of our Region. Where possible, Micol Cottrell (Pastoral Relations Minister) has been letting neighbouring ministers know when new ministry personnel arrive in an area		
Pastoral Care for Clergy who are going through rough moments in ministry	Kevin Steeper is available for support to ministry personnel for a wide variety of needs.		Concern was expressed about the changes to the role cost-of-living increases would be determined in the future (which had just been announced when the WOW Regional Council met). This is a denominational issue and outside the scope of the Region Council’s work.
	A recent feature in the WOW newsletter highlighted places where support is available for clergy both through the denomination, through the region and through our benefits plan.		
Spiritual Practices		More encouragement to congregations to be supportive of sabbaticals- Could we print some sabbatical stories in the newsletter? Could a toolkit be prepared for congregations and ministers about the steps to take when planning a sabbatical?	Much of this is a personal responsibility for clergy to ensure they are taking their own spiritual care seriously.
Hospitality and Connection	Some folks found it difficult to navigate the Unifor site so a hospitality committee has been organized for the up-coming Tri-Region meeting in May.	Is it possible for the Region to have a list of who is serving where that can be distributed at the Spring meeting?	

Section 6 – Connecting with Retired Ministry Personnel

How can the Region continue to support and celebrate our Retired ministers?

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Connecting with the church	Kevin Steeper (Pastoral Support Minister) invited retired clergy to attend the regional clergy gatherings. (Feb 7 th in Mount Forest)	A review of the Pulpit supply list shows some retired clergy on the list. Perhaps an invitation to others to have their name added. (who should issue this invitation? supply list is responsibility of HR commission)	
	Retired Clergy are invited to join the monthly online clergy gatherings		
Honouring/Valuing	A policy change to permit retired DLMs (Designated Lay Ministers) to be VAMs (Voluntary Associate Ministers) passed at fall WOWRC meeting.	Ensure retired DLMs have access to the opportunity for commissioning or ordination by permitting short term appointments (perhaps supply appointments)	Do we have the budget to hold a retirement dinner for retiring clergy and perhaps their spouses. (this used to happen in Toronto Conference)
	Retirees are recognized at a Regional meeting and this has been moved to the Spring In-Person meeting now that we are back in person. Some chose not to respond to invitation to be recognized.	Some presbyteries used to have a retired clergy who would take responsibility for connecting with other retirees. Could Volunteer Recruitment seek such a volunteer?	
Pragmatics – re-develop closed church properties for retired UC clergy			This is outside the scope of the Regional Council

Section 7 – Supporting Justice Work in Communities of Faith

How might we best communicate opportunities for Communities of Faith to connect with, support, and be transformed by local justice initiatives throughout our region?

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<p>Communities of Faith are unfamiliar with the various justice networks that exist across our region, and reliant on regional staff to help them connect.</p>	<p>The Remit 1 “Reach-Out” work orchestrated by the Discipleship and Justice Commission (D&J) was very successful in communicating the importance of an urgent and actionable initiative. D&J is discerning what wisdom from this initiative is applicable in other situations. Individualized communication seems effective, but requires a lot of time, coordination, and energy.</p>	<p>Explore how to better utilize WOWRC communications (website, newsletter, social media, etc.) to inform communities of faith about justice networks within and around the UCC.</p>		
	<p>D&J Commission members are learning about the various partners in our region. D&J has begun inviting a different guest- (from various justice networks, discipleship partners, and M&S Fund recipients) to report at each monthly meeting. The sheer number of groups to connect with is a challenge, but D&J is trying to make those connections.</p>	<p>D&J needs to determine (alongside regional staff) how to keep this ever-changing information current and up-to-date.</p>		<p>D&J needs to determine how wide an array of justice partners to promote/amplify. Only UCC affiliated? Ecumenical? Multifaith? Secular? Without some prioritizing and narrowing of scope, regional communication becomes ineffective.</p>
		<p>Communities of faith are unfamiliar with the justice work being done at neighbouring communities of faith. Knowing what other UCCs are doing is valuable in terms of inspiration and facilitating possible partnerships.</p>		
<p>Cluster groups are a helpful tool for information sharing. Communities of faith are encouraged to connect with these groupings for the purposes of information sharing.</p>	<p>It may be unfeasible to maintain a comprehensive and up-to-date list of each Community of Faith’s initiatives, but D&J and/or regional staff should be able to highlight select/varied projects with consistency and regularity.</p>			

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<p>Communities of Faith need collaborative initiatives that highlight justice and discipleship for youth. Previous youth programs at Conference or Presbytery level no longer exists.</p>	<p>D&J has granted M&S (Mission and Service) funds to “The HUB” youth and young adult network in recent years. Linked with Trinity United (Kitchener-Waterloo), the HUB offers regional and collaborative youth programs that focus on Jesus, Justice and Inclusion, all across southern Ontario. Find out more at https://www.trinityunitedkw.ca/about-the-hub</p> <p>D&J operates WOWRC’s “Ministry with Children, Youth, and Young Adults Fund” with applications due Apr. 1 and Oct. 1 each year. This is a sizeable fund and we encourage applications to create, develop, or attend programs of value. Apply via the regional website.</p> <p>WOW/ARW/HF are contributing substantial funds to offset the registration costs for Audacious Hope 2024 this summer.</p> <p>Kathy Douglas (Faith Formation Minister) gathers youth leaders periodically for support and information sharing. Reach out to Kathy to link with this network.</p>	<p>How can we best utilize WOWRC communications (website, newsletter, social media, etc.) to inform Communities of Faith about learning opportunities? Again, the challenge is in keeping the info timely, accurate, and up-to-date. And determining the scope of which opportunities to amplify is important.</p>	<p>There is little scope for the region to initiate programming for youth and/or young adults. If, however, Communities of Faith or partners or networks wish to create programming, there is significant scope for the region to come alongside as a partner. Providing funds and amplifying narratives are the most tangible gifts we have to offer.</p>
<p>Communities of Faith seek quality educational opportunities to engage issues of social justice.</p>	<p>Regional staff provide learning opportunities that gather people from various Communities of Faith. United-in-Learning offers similar opportunities on a national scale. Retreat centres, university chaplaincies, and local networks (like the Guelph Seminar) offer learning opportunities quite frequently. There are lots of opportunities, but the challenge is knowing about them.</p>	<p>D&J needs to determine how to advise and equip regional staff with the information necessary for good communication. Streamlining the flow of information so as to avoid bottlenecks and increase efficiency is important. How can regional staff and D&J work collaboratively and efficiently to provide our region with the most comprehensive and timely information possible?</p>	

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<p>Communities of Faith are unsure of the role of the D&J Commission. So far in WOWRC’s life, it has been seen primarily as a granting body, extending out grant money, especially for Mission Support. Is there capacity for it to also take on the work of communicating and connecting?</p>	<p>It is increasingly clear that information and funding are two of the most important resources Communities of Faith need in order to do the work of discipleship and justice. In many ways, funding is easier to provide because there are deadlines and structures and deliverables. The flow of information is more nebulous and challenging. But it feels like a challenge the D&J Commission is ready for. Thanks to regional staff, many of the tools for effective communication already exist (website, social media, newsletter, etc.). With some input from D&J it is hoped we can begin optimizing how those tools are used.</p>		

Section 8 - What is our purpose and how will we know we are living it out?

Perhaps a wider conversation specifically about our purpose and how we will know we are living it out would benefit the Regional Council. Is there a way to honour the General Council “Deep Spirituality, Daring Justice, Bold Discipleship” and strengthen our purpose “Connecting, Supporting, Transforming”? Can we create a simple review that asks Communities of Faith if and where they have felt connected, supported, transformed through the Regional Council? Perhaps this could lead to a sharing of stories that would inspire us all and show us more clearly where we are missing the mark.

Section 9 - Equipping the church for "such a time as this"

Identified Need	Response in Progress	Needs a Response Plan	Parking Lot
Encouraging Risk-taking	Does our Growth Animator have a role here?	Are there webinars/workshops we can create/promote	
Grief		Acknowledging this in the worship and work of the WOWRC would be valuable	
Reaching out to Younger People	Hosting Children and Youth at Regional Council, and youth and child events tri-regionally this past year Supporting the work of "The Hub"	Possibilities for Internet ministry?	Let's go even wider and plug into youth work happening nationally
Ministry with Older People		Honour the ministry with older people we are doing	
Responding to hate	A resource was created to help congregations stay safe in the face of hate for PIE Day	Still need to look into whether the region would be eligible for an Ontario Anti-Hate Security and Prevention Grant	
Sharing Gifts	Collaborative Ministry conversations have been hosted across the regional council Cluster gatherings to inspire sharing too		
Funding that goes beyond "new" things		Will the growth animator be able to help with this?	
Other Outreach	Discipleship and Justice continues to network and support outreach and daring justice	Are there partnerships we can strengthen within our regional council?	There are ways we can connect to the wider church and help promote the outreach work that is happening there.