

Report of the President and Executive Secretary of the Fall 2010 visits to Presbyteries to the Executive, February 9, 2011

During the fall of 2010, the president and executive secretary of Toronto Conference visited the four Presbyteries.

We presented the mission of Toronto Conference “**to strengthen Congregations, Pastoral Charges, Outreach Ministries, and Missions to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ**” and asked the question:

"What are some of the barriers to strengthening those bodies named in the mission statement?" *or*

"What barriers prevent the church from strengthening those bodies?"

The responses gathered were extensive – about 325 comments and this report attempts to gather issues together.

Future

A variety of emotions about change were expressed which ranged from fear, lamenting and acceptance. There is a need to acknowledge loss, but how can we be inclusive and work with those who do not have a new vision for the future or those who try to block new initiatives?

Volunteers are dedicated and experience overload and burnout. They need training and sometimes a chance to have a rest.

What are we doing and what can we do to attract young people who do not seem to be interested in the traditional church structure and rituals. Do we encourage diversity in worship and the structure? How can we attract, encourage and listen to others?

Relationship among Congregations, Presbyteries, Conference and The United Church of Canada

There is a disconnect and distrust of the higher courts at every level. Congregations believe that Presbytery becomes involved too late or when things have gone wrong and there is continuing concern that the relationship between Congregations and Presbytery is not always two-way. Involvement of Presbytery in oversight visits and in JNAC and JSC processes is not always appreciated or understood as support for Congregations.

For many members of our Congregations, Presbytery is invisible and there is little knowledge or recognition of Conference and General Council. There is no sense of connection or allegiance to the denomination or a sense of where the local Congregation fits in the mission of the United Church and we are not doing a good job of encouraging / enhancing the connections.

Communication

Lack of communication was a theme. When information is not shared in a timely manner, there is a lack of trust. Timely communication could encourage sharing resources, programs and events.

It was noted that video-conferencing, telephone conference calls, and Skype could be used when a face-to-face meeting is not an option. Communication technology is not available in all areas.

For some, the Conference website is not 'new-user friendly' and it can be difficult to find information. With so much information available, is there a protocol to help prioritize all of the information?

Conference

Four responses suggested that the mission statement of Conference should be more explicit.

There are different needs in the Conference – rural, town & cities.

Conference staff in the Presbyteries is appreciated and position descriptions continue to need to be reviewed.

Having identified the barriers, there is a need to look at ways to adapt to the new realities and have the power to enact change.

Presbytery

Members of Presbyteries are looking for meaningful work, nourishment and encouragement as they learn to work with Commissions. When there are questions, it is important that there is not contradictory or incorrect information offered.

Particularly in the northern Presbyteries, distance and time required to attend meetings impacts on the participation of lay and ministry representatives at Presbytery and on Commissions. Lack of participation, particularly by Clergy, is a barrier to completing the work of the Presbyteries and not all Congregations support their staff or the lay volunteers in this important work.

Congregations

Congregations are insular. Some are in survival mode and try to pull their ministers into their insularity. It is hard to put fear aside and take a risk. Change is frightening and there is resistance.

Some of the concerns identified include transient Congregations; declining membership; age of members; work being done by older, retired people; busy lives; need to attract youth / young people; apathy; cultural changes; finances (many comments); always fund-raising; accessibility of the buildings; can't afford a full-time minister; too many vacancies; rural needs are different; technology; need help in setting priorities.

There is little connection or interest in working together with neighbouring United Churches. What could we do with clustering? How can we share our stories? Community ministries and outreach activities are pushed aside and there may not be meaningful connections with the surrounding community.

There is a strong focus on buildings which often diverts money and energy away from the mission and ministry of the church. Because of restrictions, funds cannot always be used to support the needs of the Congregation. Funding / grants are not readily available to support staff and programs for church development or redevelopment

Ministry Personnel

The admissions process does not provide sufficient flexibility and there is a need to simplify the paperwork around candidacy. There is not support for those who are called to ministry. Retired Ministry Personnel can be a valuable resource. Part-time positions are a concern.

Faith

How can we make our churches inviting and welcoming spiritual homes?

Comments about faith ranged from ‘too much God and Jesus talk’ to ‘we are conforming to the world and not asking enough of our members’ and we need an ‘accurate missiology’.

There is a need for education and training to help people of all ages in their faith journeys. How can we share our faith with those who have lost faith? As we transition to an intercultural church, there is a need to understand intercultural issues. Many new Canadians do not know about the United Church.

Ministry and Mission

“If you took the church out of the community would anyone notice?”

We have too many rules – Jesus knew when to break them. Jesus wouldn’t understand what we’re saying anymore. He might refuse to attend church

Where is our focus?

