

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA
TRI-REGIONAL COUNCILS IN SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO
Antler River Watershed
Horseshoe Falls
Western Ontario Waterways

EVALUATION OF GOVERNANCE AND STAFFING MODELS
Executive Summary

JUNE 12, 2023 – Bill Allen and Jenny Stephens

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The chaordic pathway is the balance of chaos and order necessary for new life to happen. Too much order is stifling and rigid. Too much chaos leads to high anxiety and the inability to be creative. There has been a fair amount of chaos in the life of the United Church in the last four years as the way we organised our community connection and governance through presbytery and conferences were replaced by regional councils and the Office of Vocation. The reorganising of the denominational structure to free energy to respond anew to God's call, was anticipated and largely, although not unanimously, supported by communities of faith and presbyteries through the remit process. Not surprisingly, what people imagined this reorganising would look and feel like is different from the actual experience.
2. A transition team in Southwestern Ontario brought designs for governance and shared staffing to the previous governance bodies and then in 2019 to the new regional councils. Purpose and commitment statements, governance handbooks, and other resources were prepared to provide some order to the new entities being birthed. Staff scrambled to understand their new roles and responsibilities, as did the elected members, including representatives elected by their communities of faith. New language like 'community of faith', and new ways of doing things, like using technology rather than paper, were constant reminders that there was much to learn, the old had gone, and the new was not fully understood. United Church leaders – who previously knew how to network to respond to community needs, how to get decisions made at presbytery, what ministry personnel were coming and going within and from the community – were floundering. 'Conscious competency' was replaced by 'conscious incompetency' which is not so comfortable. The various emotions associated with grief came to the forefront as those responsible for guiding the transition sought to bring stability and care.
3. Into this understandable and predictable chaotic time of transition, as rules and regulation began to impose order, came the global pandemic in March 2020, less than 15 months into the new structure. Suddenly Sunday worship was totally disrupted, the gathered faith community could not gather, and we couldn't visit in each other's homes. The church which we turn to in uncertainty and existential crisis, didn't seem there for us anymore. Ministry personnel and communities of faith reached out to the wider church which, while dealing with its own grief and sense of incompetence, did its best to respond. Over time excellent resources were prepared through collaborations across the church. Regional councils found they were not irrelevant after all. Clergy gatherings through Zoom, legal advice for risk management around the spread of COVID, flexibility about how decisions were made to include electronically, how to begin and end pastoral relationships, and encouragement to respond to the needs of the poor and homeless became a valued part of what regional councils offered.
4. It is out of this global chaotic time coupled with the United Church transition that this review occurs. It is a dip into the life of the three regional councils and the communities of faith they serve to see how things are going and whether the system is on track towards reaching their aspirations. Prior to this, the governance of presbytery and conference was defined by *The*

Manual. Part of the vision of the new structure was that there would be a different balance between the local context and the denomination. This was reflected in more autonomy for communities of faith and the freedom for regional councils to use a model of governance suited to context. So, for the first time in 94 years the regional level of governance could design itself. Keen to do the thing right, there are lots of rules and regulations for communities of faith to follow. Executives and commissions report that they feel they are more about risk management than furthering God's call. Elected members and staff are unclear at times about their roles and responsibilities. There are commitments for being affirming, anti-racist and engaged in right relations, yet without a clear plan. We find this is understandable given where the church finds itself in year 5 of the denominational transition and coming out of the COVID pandemic.

5. We find that:

- i. The governance structure is not ineffective and could be more effective. It has tended to emphasise efficiencies more than relationship. This emphasis contributes to being less effective. Developing strategic priorities, organisational design, and goal setting are the next steps.
 - ii. The shared staffing model allows for a team of program specialists and administrative staff with a range of skills to serve the three regional councils such that each can learn from the others. It is effective in that regard. What is less effective and not efficient is the lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities for all staff, and of the priority setting aligned with strategic priorities needed to make the work more manageable. This raises the question whether sustainability is about the model or how the model is being lived out. We find it is the latter.
 - iii. We find that some parts of the governance are effective in supporting communities of faith and ineffective in other areas. Ministry personnel, pastoral charge supervisors, pastoral relations liaisons and regional council staff are the faces of the regional council to communities of faith, along with the resources online. This needs to be expanded to include the elected officers of the regional council.
 - iv. We find that the extent to which each regional council is meeting its stated goals is limited. Goals are articulated in various ways and resources. The purpose statements are not universally understood and while they may have provided focus to guide the transition, they do not seem to be serving the communities of faith. Letting go these statements is the recommended option.
- 6.** This review invites the regional councils to take the next steps to develop a strategic plan which addresses the concerns raised. It's time to do the right thing not just the thing right. This calls on regional council executives to become more strategic focused. How do we grow and learn from experiments and taking risks? We offer the following strategic priorities which mirror regional council best intentions to date and address concerns that we have heard: relationship, leadership and social justice.

7. Relationship:

- i. We wonder what people mean when they say they miss presbytery. Most of the presbyteries which make up our three regions met either monthly or every other month. Two regional meetings a year, especially on Zoom, leaves a loss of connection.
 - a. Is it that people need an easy way to come together and check in?
 - b. Is it that the spiritual richness of worshipping together and theological, ecclesiastical and political engagement is missing?
 - c. Is it that people relied on presbytery for information like which ministry personnel now belong here, or what our congregations are excited about?
 - d. Is it that people miss networking to engage a new project around discipleship or community outreach together?
 - e. Is it that connecting congregations happens when lay representatives build relationships one with another and seed possibility in their own communities of faith?
 - f. Is it that when people are part of decisions, they feel their gifts and skills are valued, their voices heard and they can happily share the decisions in their places of leadership and service?

We recommend that the regional councils provide ways to probe these questions and respond to the needs expressed. Grief is strong from the losses through the pandemic, the sense of loss of the old presbytery and conference is part of that grief. The church knows how to provide comfort and hope amidst grief. How might the members of the regional council offer it to one another now?

- ii. Another aspect of relationship is that the Human Resource Commission and the Congregational Support Commission 'will meet with representatives of a community of faith before acting on requests from a community of faith'. This is not the practice as it is considered not practical in many situations – meaning that it is not efficient. We find that to do so would build a sense of partnership, understanding and accompaniment. When that expectation is in the Governance Handbook and doesn't happen a breakdown of trust can ensue. Combine this with all commissions not reporting regularly to the constituency, (beyond accountability to the regional council executive through representatives) then there appears to be a lack of transparency.

8. Leadership: There are a cluster of findings related to this strategic priority.

- a. Elected leaders of the regional councils are growing into their roles and responsibilities.
- b. Staff are over functioning in some areas, under functioning in others. Staff are working extremely hard yet are perceived by some as unavailable or inaccessible. It's hard to function effectively when priorities have not been set and the strategic priorities and outcomes aren't clear.
- c. A large number of ministry personnel, especially retirees, are not engaging the regional council maybe to focus their attention or energy on serving or participating in communities of faith.
- d. "Health, joy and excellence in ministry practice" (*The Manual 2023 C.2.11.*) is about relationship and leadership. We find that there needs to be cohesive strategies

related to this for both active and retired ministry personnel. It does not serve the communities of faith to have up to 40% of ministry personnel not feeling positive about the regional council when they are members of that body and contributors to the vitality of communities of faith.

- e. Some communities of faith have not named lay representatives to the regional council and we observe that the expectations aren't clear for that role, in particular how they might build up the body of Christ through networking and connecting.
- f. We recommend a focus on organisational design which meets the strategic priorities where the skills of elected members are fully utilised, and where there is clear leadership development for staff and elected members.

9. Social justice:

We find the strategic commitments which are to be affirming, anti-racist and about Indigenous-settler right relations, need cohesive strategy, not just reflected in staff job descriptions and titles. How might the gifts and skills of the Discipleship and Justice Commissions be harnessed? How do networks and clusters fit? What governance is needed in these areas versus people actually doing the work? We heard 'first third ministry' (youth and young adults) are passionate about issues of homelessness for example. How might camps or other networks be full partners in this work? How do the calls of individuals and communities to respond to other needs in the world like fresh drinking water or housing or the opioid crisis get addressed when the region focuses on other priorities? How will the executives monitor and measure progress? For example, is the affirming commitment measured by the number of affirming communities of faith, or the stated experience of all people around equity and inclusion.

- 10. In conclusion,** there are amazing people, communities of faith, realised and potential leaders who are part of these regional councils. Letting go of control, engaged in relationship, and focusing energy, the chaotic pathway in this moment can lead us into creativity and responding to God's call with renewed vision, relationship, leadership and meeting Christ in the challenges of the world God so loves.