

Report to Northern Spirit Regional Council Annual Meeting, 2020

Julie Graham, Regional Minister: Justice and Communications

Our collective refrain for 2020: things didn't go as planned. My process of getting to know the people of the Regional Council beginning January 1 didn't go quite as I thought it would. And the communications half of the job has also taken priority over the "justice" part of the job, at least for a good part of 2020. So please consider this half a 2020 report, and half a dream of what 2021 might be.

In all of my work I'm getting to know the wide range of people, communities of faith, ideas, dreams, and needs that are central to this staff position. Even before COVID, much of my work was online, via the website, social media, and Zoom or United in Learning. I try to divide my time equally between Northern Spirit, Prairie to Pine, and Living Skies, with time set aside for tri-Region program initiatives, and for staff and national commitments. Unfortunately, this means that each Region gets the equivalent of only about one dedicated day per week, but I hope to learn how to best maximize this time.

In mid January 2020 I started my work with the three Regional Councils and joined a three-Region team of staff, led by Jamie McKay, that focused on creating and posting the wide range of essential content to the three new Regional Council websites. The team included Kathy Jackson, Cherry Abad, and Bev Diebert, with help and support from all of the other staff. This took a lot of our collective time and energy through mid-March.

Five days after the sites successfully went live, the COVID shut down had begun. The next three months were focused on updates and tools for keeping the three Regions up to date, supported, and safe. As delegates know, all travel was cancelled, so getting to know the Region and its people moved online. This has had some positive impacts, including many more people become more comfortable with online communications. But it has also shown serious inequities in internet and computer equipment access. Some people have asked how the Regional Council might help address this- a fair question that will become more urgent the longer COVID shapes our public ministry.

By June, a number of long-delayed program pieces were back on track, including:

- * an informal multi-Region intercultural "chai and coffee" focused on racism and Black Lives Matter;
- * three Northern Spirit Cluster meetings of the Being Good Relations Network; and
- * an online learning and conversation workshop on non-binary gender language and its positive impact, offered to help people in the three Regions engage with Remit 1 and wider understanding of gender diversity.

Each of these supported some key wider priorities, such as Affirming work, right relations and Indigenous justice, and Intercultural ministry. Here are a few program priorities:

Connecting communications with **Nominations work**: I've begun talking with Nominations/ Nominating committees in all three Regional Councils and hope to facilitate them in sharing ideas and best practices. All are struggling with the loss of presbytery, and wondering how we use communication tools to find new channels for contacts, outreach, and invitation.

Affirming work will include making contact with all Affirming ministries and ministries in the Affirming process, as well as working alongside the Affirming task group.

For Intercultural ministry and engagement: The Western Intercultural Ministries Network has moved its Calgary event for the West online and opened it to the entire church. Learning how to do this work online across five Regional Councils is now more important than ever, and this Network is offering leadership in innovative ways in difficult circumstances within the new structure. How we practice intercultural ministry on the ground has always been a challenge, and Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter are a call to make this “how” an imminent and permanent commitment.

Being Good Relations: The important work of this network continues, and is shared between Northern Spirit and Chinook Winds. Their report elsewhere in this docket speaks for itself; I would like to express my commitment to trying to offer support and connections in the midst of continued uncertainty in our United Church structures, and of discernment about the hard work of actually living into the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Finally, getting to know **Clusters** and supporting them, especially those that carry forward work such as right relations, Affirming and more, will be a priority through 2021.

I look forward to being in continued community with the people and ministries of Northern Spirit, and hope to keep meeting and greeting you virtually until that happy day when I can meet many more of you in person. Please don't ever hesitate to be in touch: jgraham@united-church.ca and 306-244-2157.

Respectfully submitted,
Julie Graham