

**Annual Meeting Report to Northern Spirit Regional Council
April 2021**

Julie Graham, Regional Minister, Justice and Communications

Rebuilding and reconnecting are the theme of the year so far. It's often hard to know whether COVID or restructuring are at the root of the disconnect and isolation some are feeling. And yet, there are exciting new connections and ministry pathways emerging even in the midst of very difficult times.

Communications work continues in partnership with Kathy Jackson, and includes the newsletter, regular website posting and upgrading, Facebook, Nominations-related communications, and contact list development. List development in particular is proving both important and difficult, and makes me miss presbyteries, and the immense amount of often unrecognized connecting and relationship they offered the church. My newsletter and social media content try to include some emphasis on the wider church and its resources and learning spaces.

Clusters and Networks remain both vital to how we do ministry, and a source of struggle. It's hard to track groups that are often very new and are not considered part of governance. Assembling even a small list has taken time and multiple staff. And in turn, many Clusters in particular are struggling to hold together through COVID, and may feel cut off from the wider church. A contact list, web page, and occasional communications are small steps towards supporting local and network efforts alongside Kathy and Earl, and it's all a work in progress.

Being Good Relations Network: This cross-Regional network is finding its way forward in a very changed landscape. This spring, as last, some will hold Cluster meetings to check in about right relations work and to offer support space in the midst of isolation. Many members remain very concerned about COVID and its impacts on Indigenous communities, and everyone is feeling cut off from the visits, face-to-face meetings, powwows and more that are a usual part of the right relations journey. We have worked at getting a big contact list ready to go in the hopes of creating more connection, and will start sending more regular updates. June, Indigenous History Month, is always one of the key learning and commitment moments in the year, and the Network will encourage all Communities of Faith to engage.

COVID has also created an enormous wealth of excellent Indigenous-led online learning spaces, offered by Indigenous church members and beyond, and I've prioritized promoting these gifts to the church through the newsletter and social media. Our common commitments to the TRC Calls to Action I was also glad to be part of a planning committee for a KAIROS Prairies North public event focused on diverse First Nations and Metis perspectives on the Bill to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. For a long time, Albertans have been the primary leadership for Prairies North, but some long-time leaders have stepped back, and efforts are being made to revive and reshape this ecumenical/ interfaith network.

Finally, as you will see elsewhere in these Annual Meeting documents: following Indigenous leadership, the Network has put forward a proposal asking its two Regional Councils to take a firm stand against the proposed Alberta curriculum, especially for social studies. The Network also wants to encourage communities of faith and individuals to express concern to the AB government, in keeping with our TRC and Apology commitments.

Affirming: I am grateful for the chance to connect with the Affirming Task Group: Chair Linda McLaren, Cathy Kinsman, Wilson MacLennan, Louise Rogers, Monica Rosborough, and resource lead Shylo Rosborough. In February Shylo and I collaborated on an Affirming check in for the whole Regional

Council that drew people from as far as away as Prince George. The group felt it should meet again, and there will be another open call for mid-May, with a focus on encouraging ministries to connect with Pride celebrations and the church-wide Pride Sunday. In April I worked with Pam Rocker (Pacific Mountain and Chinook Winds) to hold a five-Region Affirming task group check in. All of the Western Regions are Affirming (Prairie to Pine) or in the process to become Affirming, and feel ongoing connection could help them in the sometimes-difficult task of imagining what an Affirming Regional Council might look like, and how to get there.

Intercultural: The Western Intercultural Network continues its work, which includes Chelsea Masterman and Kurt Katzmar as Northern Spirit representatives on the executive. More NS people are always welcome! The Network will not hold a fall 2021 event, instead taking a break from big online events. However, it will continue with at least quarterly open, 90-minute intercultural “coffee/chai” learning and conversation events. I maintain the Network list and send out occasional updates, and I feel privileged to be part of this vibrant and diverse group of leaders.

Emerging Network connections include Guaranteed Livable Income, and action and learning related to this; the beginnings of some climate justice connection through For the Love of Creation; and possible racial justice connections. These are all experimental works in progress that use local, regional, and national connections to identify areas of common concern and interest and build local capacity that draws on wider resources and connections.

A question about holding justice in our structures: We are two and a half years into this restructuring, and I’m wondering about the place of what we might call (non-youth and young adult) program and justice work within it.

I’ve been speaking with people involved in Networks and Clusters who are feeling a bit cast adrift in the new structure, especially related to justice and right relations broadly speaking. Some want a seat on the Executive. Others think this would be ineffective, but want a formal space where ideas and concerns can be brought. Others just want to know that the Regional Council still cares about justice and right relations.

Some have also asked how the Regional Council addresses emerging justice concerns, whether anti-racism, negative and positive impacts from government decisions, and more long-term engagement on concerns like climate justice, the TRC Calls to Action, poverty, and more.

I wonder how we can open this conversation and begin to think about it with intention and prayer, as we live into different ways of being church.

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.