

## Pastoral Relations Report to Northern Spirit Regional Council May 4, 2021

Northern Spirit Regional Council has a pastoral relations structure that is intended to suit the character and needs of the Regional Council, and attend to the responsibilities a Regional Council has to establish and support pastoral relationships.

The structure we are using is made up of one Commission and three committees:

- The Pastoral Relations Commission
- The Lay Leadership Support Committee
- The Communities of Faith Support Committee
- The Ministry Personnel Support Committee

All of these groups receive staff support from the Regional Council Pastoral Relations Minister, Earl Reaburn, and the Regional Council Administrative Support person, Kathy Jackson.

The focus of the Pastoral Relations Commission is to establish and end pastoral relationships between Pastoral Charges and ministry personnel, and to provide support to Communities of Faith that are between pastoral relationships or are without ministry leadership.

The focus of the committees is to support established pastoral relationships. Each committee provides this support from a particular vantage point as reflected by their name.

**The Pastoral Relations Commission** is authorized by the Regional Council Commission to take responsibility for all pastoral relations matters and to make decisions on those matters on behalf of the Regional Council. The six members of the Pastoral Relations Commission are: Lois Belanger, Gaie Goin, Blaine Gregg, Kimberly Roy, Arlene Henitiuk and Stephen Sparks. Lloyd Henderson remained a member of the Commission until the September 2020 meeting, and we are grateful for his contribution to the Commission during its start up.

The Pastoral Relations Commission meets monthly, on the first Thursday morning, using Zoom meeting technology. This regular monthly meeting allows the Commission to keep the flow of pastoral relations work moving without undue delay. The Pastoral Relations Commission routinely approves requests for changes in pastoral relations, appoints pastoral charge supervisors, tracks sabbatical, parental and medical leaves. They recruit and train Pastoral Relations Liaisons team members, and appoint them to assist community of faith governing bodies with the creation of Profiles and the search process when seeking new ministry leadership.

They also establish policies to support and guide pastoral relations in the Region. Policies are recommended to the Regional Council Executive and once approved, the policies are posted to the Regional Council website: <https://northernspiritrc.ca/documents-forms/policies-guidelines/>

Of particular note are the guidelines developed by the Pastoral Relations Commission regarding Part-Time Ministry – a tool to be used by Communities of Faith that have or are considering part-time ministry positions to develop reasonable expectations for limited hours of ministry leadership.

The Pastoral Relations Commission also receives reports from Communities of Faith Reviews, and takes action as necessary on any recommendations in the reports. This takes the form of ongoing guidance and support to enhance the well being of the community of faith. The Commission is currently working with two communities of faith in this way.

**The Lay Leadership Support Committee** members are Tazvi Nyarota, Linda Roberts and Leslie Verdin. The purpose of this committee includes supporting the variety of lay leadership that communities of faith rely upon to enhance their mission and ministry. This includes training for Ministry and Personnel Committees, supporting Congregational Designated Ministry, overseeing the Licensed Lay Worship Leader program and making recommendations about appointment of Sacrament Elders.

This committee developed the Licensed Lay Worship Leadership recruitment, application interviewing and approval process, and recommended 13 individuals for licensing. The committee is currently in the process of renewing those and other licenses for the upcoming pastoral year.

The committee has also developed Standards of Practice for Licensed Lay Worship Leaders in Northern Spirit Regional Council. This is being recommended to the Regional Council Executive for approval, and will be posted on the Regional Council website.

In the fall, the Lay Leadership Support Committee responded to a request for an online Ministry and Personnel Committee workshop, and arranged for that to happen in November 2020.

**The Community of Faith Support Committee** members are Vera Engel, Wendy Galloway, Steven Johann Chang Lee and Helen Reed. The purpose of this committee is to oversee and coordinate the Regional responsibility to support communities of faith in their life and work. This committee has developed a process to establish new communities of faith, and has had the pleasure of guiding the people of Living Spirit United Church in Drayton Valley through that process. They are also the committee that guides congregations through the steps of disbanding or amalgamation, which is unfortunately becoming a more frequent occurrence.

Early in 2021, the Communities of Faith Support Committee held an online consultation with Pastoral Charges in the western area of the Region. The purpose of the consultation was to discuss how the communities of faith in that area might share resources to meet the ministry leadership needs of the many small, rural congregations. The result was a strong desire from many congregations to maintain the status-quo, which is often described as “we will stay open as long as we can.”

This consultation raised awareness that, as a whole, the Regional Council needs to have deep conversation about what the mission and ministry of The United Church of Canada in this Region will look like in 10 to 15 years time. If communities of faith are going to choose disbanding rather than seeking partnership, the face of the Regional Council will be very different. What does the Regional Council need to do to prepare for this change or to alter this direction?

**The Ministry Personnel Support Committee's** focus is to encourage and support Ministry Personnel toward health, joy and excellence in the practice of ministry. The committee members are Debbie Brill, Dirk Jessen, Ray Olsen and they were joined by Phyllis Greenslade in early 2021.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a large part of this committee's work has been providing weekly online Gatherings of active (in Call or appointment) ministry personnel. This happens in the early afternoon every Tuesday. It is an opportunity for ministry personnel to connect and check in with colleagues, to receive information and from time to time to hear presentations from guest speakers. Guest speakers have included: Monique Methot from the Today Family Violence Help Centre speaking on pastoral response to domestic violence; Dr. Greg Pickering, member of St. Paul's United Church, Edmonton and psychologist speaking on Attachment Theory and Resilience; the Rev. Diane Strickland, a United Church minister and trauma therapist speaking on trauma-informed ministry; and Dr. Amy Kaler, member of St. Paul's United Church, Edmonton and a sociology Professor at the University of Alberta speaking on COVID and its Aftermaths.

Early in 2021, the committee also contacted a number of retired ministry personnel, from whom the committee had not heard, to connect and check in. Through these calls retired ministry personnel received an expression of care from the Regional Council.

The committee also circulated a Clergy Well-Being survey to active ministry personnel in March 2021. The survey asked about feelings and stressor, sources of personal and professional support, changes in work expectations and resources that would be helpful to enhance the well being of ministry personnel during pandemic. The results indicate there are serious signs of anxiety and stress among our ministry personnel as the pandemic continues and that encouragement and appreciation for their efforts from communities of faith is a key source of support. Thankfully most of our ministry personnel are feeling hopeful and continue to feel a strong sense of vocation in ministry, despite the weariness. Ministry personnel realize that their experience is not unique at all, but acknowledge the toll the pandemic is taking on the communities of faith.

**In Summary,** The Pastoral Relations Commission and Committees continue to learn how best to provide the Regional Council's encouragement and resources to our Communities of Faith. There are big challenges and serious questions for the Regional Council to consider in contemplating the next 15 years. The pandemic has taxed the resources of our ministry leaders, and at the same time remarkable resourcefulness is evident in our lay leaders, ministry personnel and communities of faith.

We are thankful for the journey we have made together so far, and rely on the guidance of God's Spirit as we continue on.