

Regional Minister for Faith Formation - Annual Report September, 2015 - September, 2016

“I am so sorry to bother you. You see we only have six children in our church, and I’m sure you have far more important things to do today, but could you please recommend a curriculum that would work for a Sunday school with just a handful of children.”

This is the most consistent question I am asked as the Regional Minister for Faith Formation for the Synod of Central Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda (CNOB) in the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). When I pick up the phone, the caller, a minister, Sunday school teacher, superintendent or Christian education committee chairperson, always begins by apologetically accounting for their lack of children. They tell me that their Sunday school used to be overflowing. “We ran out of classrooms to put them in,” is the recurrent description of those memorable days gone by. Since their heyday years before, their children have grown up and moved on, families have drifted away to other places and “more exciting” activities, and very few new, young families have come into the church to replace the significant number of children they once had. Through our phone conversation I hear about the disheartening, irregular attendance of a small handful of children who are typically spread over a wide range of ages and grade levels.

I also hear about the few, hardworking, highly committed teachers who are becoming increasingly despondent as they prepare for Sunday school lessons that are, more often than not, tossed unused in the recycling bin when no child shows up for their class. A persistent experience of burned out leadership combined with a self-imposed obligation to just keep on teaching because no one else will “step up and take their turn in the Sunday school” is common with each of the congregations.

Finally, it is often revealed that the support and encouragement of the wider church is felt to be just as lacking, leaving teachers and Christian education committees feeling abandoned and overwhelmed with the belief that they bear sole responsibility for the passing on of their faith to the next generation. In essence, I regularly hear a consistent tale of deeply embedded despair and hopelessness as caring and passionate children’s leaders watch their Sunday school numbers dwindle and their church give up believing there will ever be another generation of children actively participating in their congregation again.

As the Regional Minister for Faith Formation within the synod, I am charged with “providing training opportunities, resource recommendations, support and empowering leadership in the area of faith formation for children, youth, adults and families for all of the congregations of the synod.”¹ Concern for the faith formation of the few remaining children in our congregations is one of the most critical issues the synod is wrestling with today. It is the conversation at every synod executive meeting, the subject of every

¹ *Regional Minister For Faith Formation: Job Description*, The Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda, last updated September 2014

presentation I do for presbyteries, and the greatest concern of many of the phone calls I receive from churches of every size. I find myself regularly reflecting on the helpfulness of my simply responding to their request for assistance in their curriculum selection; I am not convinced that simply passing on a recommendation for an undated, broadly-graded Church school curriculum that requires little preparation and a minimal outlay of money will help the caller address the deeper question of what the best is that they could be doing for the faith formation of their children given their present circumstances.

Over the past number of years I have been able to work closely with a number of highly committed congregations as we seek to meet the life-long faith formation needs of these children and their families. I am delighted when we work together, exploring this questions and discover renewing practices of intergenerational worship and congregational ministry, and commit to supporting our parents in their primary practice of passing their faith on to their children.

Thank you to the Regional Consultative Committee (RCC) for your continued support, encouragement, permission giving and prayers during this past season. As I come to the end of my fourth year in working in this position I am continually thankful for the privilege it is to serve the synod/synodical in this place with such caring, faithful and concerned congregations and leaders.

Faith Formation/Christian Education Ministry

During this year I have continued to enjoy the privilege of leading and being involved in a broad variety of workshops, congregational visits, consultations and conversations throughout the bounds of the synod with regard to faith formation and Christian education. Many of our churches continue to be greatly concerned about their provision of high quality and meaningful ministry for spiritual formation and education with all ages in their congregations, and particularly in their ministry with children. I am always happy to be called upon to assist them in this regard.

As I look at the statistics of our synod there are some churches who have grown in numbers in their ministry with children during this past year. These churches often have more than 50 children among them, and with this critical mass, along with intentional plans for ministry with their children, they are thriving in their ministry. Overall, the synod saw a slight increase in numbers of children in our congregations this past year - this is good news for us all! Unfortunately though, many of our churches continue to struggle to keep a handful of children and want to know what to do when Sunday school is an ongoing challenge and doesn't appear to be working. At this time we have just shy of 50% of our churches declaring 10 or fewer children in their midst. This number continues to grow, but is doing so at a slower pace than it was four years ago. I am more often called into these situations and we are working with great intentionality to together understand and address this trend.

In contrast to our church's focus on formal children's programming, there is a growing movement within the congregations of our synod towards consideration of all things intergenerational and the support of parents in their role as the primary faith formers of their children. Some of our churches are beginning to move away from a traditional Sunday school model in response to their decreased numbers of children and leadership, and are putting their energy into the development of high quality, intergenerational worship for their congregations. On a personal note, two of the churches I have been consistently working with have seen an increase in numbers of children in attendance on a Sunday morning with intergenerational worship, crediting this to their new approach to worship and ministry with their children.

Over the course of this past year I have led 22 workshops, and 27 consultations with congregations, presbyteries and the synod. Most of those workshops have focused on specifics in teacher training, curriculum selection, a broader church approach to ministry with children, how to lead intergenerational worship, how to pass faith on to our children and grandchildren, how to make the bible interesting and relevant to children and youth, understanding and working with millennials, and evangelism with children. Consultations have often focused on intergenerational worship and how to work in alternative ways with children in churches with few children.

As my job has developed over the years I find myself meeting regularly with church leadership in a more consultative capacity as their lay leadership numbers dwindle and they see greater benefit in getting together over coffee and talking about their options conversationally. These consultations are then followed up with emailed resource lists and continued discussion as things are experimented with and evaluated over time.

As a item of note, the recent closure of Augsburg - Fortress in Kitchener has caused our churches some distress this past spring and summer. Many of our churches use Spark House materials and the transition to David C. Cook as the distributor has been challenging for many. Some of our churches were not made aware of the change, were unable to place orders with an unprepared new distributor, and found their standing order lost during the transition. Some of our churches are even now finding themselves scrambling to get back into the system, while some churches have chosen to switch curricula in light of the change. I have been working with as many churches as I can to help them continue to choose a curriculum for their church that is consistent both theologically and educationally with their ministry and our denomination.

Women's Missionary Society Ministry

Working with the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) continues to be a joyful part of my work. I attend as many presbyterial meetings as possible, generally working with Peterborough, Lindsay, Kingston, Barrie, West Toronto, East Toronto, Brampton and Waterloo-Wellington presbyterials. If I am not providing leadership at a presbyterial gathering I often report on the work of the synodical, provide book reviews, and install

officers. This year I was the theme speaker for 3 of our presbyterial meetings as well as preacher for 2 Mission Awareness Sundays and for The World Day of Prayer.

I also enjoy the opportunity I have to work with the synodical executive, attending both planning and quarterly executive meetings, and attending and reporting to their annual synodical meeting. This wonderful group of women work hard to not only offer leadership in mission education throughout the synod, but also support and care deeply for all of the women involved in each of the WMS groups throughout the synodical. I am always amazed at the loving relationships between the women and groups of this synodical - if only I could remember names as well as they do!

I also continue to be involved in the planning towards the Women's Gathering in spring of 2017, serving on the worship planning committee and preparing to be the host for the event.

In addition to work with the WMS I have also been plenary speaker for 2 women's retreats this past year and am preparing for an extended women's retreat this coming November. With the 2 retreats already completed the focus was on spiritual practices for devotion and meditation, while the upcoming retreat will be "*A Weekend to Wonder*" enabling us to reclaim wonder and awe as an approach to our faithfulness as we "go marvelling" together.

Additional Ministry

In addition to these two primary focus' of this ministry I have also preached 12 times over the course of the year on the focus of my ministry. I also spoke at the World Council of Churches North American Conference on Evangelism on "*Faith and the Generations: Catechetical Practice as Evangelism*"

As a part of my ongoing continuing education I completed my dissertation for my D.Ed.Min degree and defended it through a Peer Review process this past winter leading to my graduation this past May, I was certified for CPR and AED this spring, and took one week of continuing education time this August for dedicated reading in preparation for the 'Wonder' retreat this fall.

I continue to serve as the clerk of the Presbytery of West Toronto, sit on the Christian Education Committee of my home congregation, and teach Sunday school to middle schoolers at my home church.

For recreation, I am thrilled to say, my summer project was to install a sewing room in the recently vacated bedroom of our daughter. I am excited to be back sewing again without the bother of hauling everything out to get at it.

Finally I want to say a very grateful thank you to the synod and the synodical in their ongoing support of my studies at Columbia Theological Seminary and for their very generous gift of money towards the purchase of a doctoral gown in celebration of my

graduation. It has been a delight to participate in these studies, but it was only possible because of the constant and permission-giving encouragement of the RCC, synod and synodical. I am also grateful to the four churches who invited me in, and allowed me to work with them as I conducted research in my topic for my dissertation. Thank you for your care and kindness.

With you in Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tori Smit". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent initial "T".

Tori Smit, Regional Minister for Faith Formation, Synod of CNOB.