

## **Regional Minister for Faith Formation - Annual Report September, 2016 - September, 2017**

### **Faith Formation/Christian Education Ministry**

Once again I have been honoured to visit many of the churches and presbyteries of our synod. 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 the synod sharing ideas and information on faith formation and Christian education. Our churches continue to be focused on maintaining and growing the youngest members of their churches. While challenged by the drop in children's numbers, they still are positive and hopeful as they seek out the best ways to pass faith on from one person to another and one generation to the next.

During the past year I have been asked for support and guidance in areas such as Christian parenting and grandparenting, how to work with smaller numbers of children in the Sunday school, how to do intergenerational worship, curriculum selection, Leading with Care training, how to talk to children about death, working with millennials, as well as through seasonal intergenerational gatherings for Advent/Christmas and Easter. I have conducted over 40 workshops and on site consultations over the course of this year on these topics and others. This has brought me into the presbyteries of Kingston, Pickering, East Toronto, West Toronto, Oak Ridges, Brampton, Barrie, and Waterloo-Wellington.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful occasions for me this spring was the opportunity to lead a workshop/discussion for parents of young children within a couple of days of the tragic and unexpected death of a young boy from the church's Sunday school. Our conversation and the presentation focused on how their young children understand death, heaven, and resurrection at different ages, and how they as parents could best talk with their children about the very recent death of their Sunday school and public school friend, as well the death of grandparents etc. It was a privilege to be present and helpful when it was needed most. It was good to see the relief on the face of a one parent who thought that their child was responding inappropriately to this little boy's death, when his daughter was responding exactly as she would be expected to at her age.

It was also wonderful to enter into two churches this past Advent and share a fun afternoon preparing to celebrate the season with their families at home. It was a delight to teach about rituals and practices for faith sharing at home while snipping greens for wreaths and sharing the stories and prayers of Advent with the participants.

Over these past five years there has been a continuing shift in how I support the ministers and congregations of our synod. Churches and presbyteries are asking less and less for formal workshops and are wanting instead to meet with me in small groups or just chat over the phone about particular concerns to get answers to their questions

and discover other ways of sharing their faith with others. This seems to be a result of the shrinking number of formal Christian education leaders in congregations, limitations on the availability of their leaders to spend a Saturday or weekday evening at a workshop, and a desire to get answers to immediate questions on an incident by incident basis. I find myself answering many questions now over the phone or through detailed emails. I'm not sure this is ideal, but it is certainly the result of the changing environment in which we live. One benefit of this is a reduced expenditure of time and money in travel for the synod. Another is offering an answer when one is needed for the pressing concerns at hand, rather than offering a generic workshop that might be applicable to only some.

A new thing that was started this past fall was a all-day gathering of ministers interested in planning for intergenerational worship. There are few good resources for intergenerational worship out there, so this group came together to share their resources and ideas for Advent/Christmas with each other. Everyone arrived with bags of books and papers, laptops and idea samples. It was a great day of swapping, laughing and storytelling. The idea for this gathering came about as a result of a comment made last year by a minister trying hard, but finding little help in planning for this new way of doing worship. Others agreed, especially when as a minister you are already over-loaded with responsibility for so many forms of ministry in your church. We are hoping to expand this group and do it again this fall.

I have struggled this year (once again) making the best use of our synod website. This, I know, is an ideal medium to post articles and ideas for all to make use of and give every church the opportunity to have access to helpful information. Once again I feel like writing for the website is the last thing I seem to get around to after the phone calls, emails and meetings. Unfortunately it rarely happens and for this I am sorry. I especially regret that a crisis in a congregation just prior to Lent meant that my annual Lenten family devotional booklet did not get published this year.

### **Support of Clergy**

I have experienced a significant increase this past year in receiving emergent phone calls from clergy for support. While this is more in the job description of the Regional Minister for Congregational Health, we each receive requests from ministers to help see them through significant crisis occasions, offering a listening ear, pastoral support, and practical answers for positive steps to take as they seek to minister faithfully and well during very trying circumstances. I am grateful that I have become a trusted friend and resource at times when someone is most needed.

### **Women's Missionary Society Ministry**

Working with the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) continues to be a special part of my work. I attend as many presbyterial meetings as possible, particularly if I am asked to offer leadership in their programming. I have been a speaker at, or attended events in Kingston, Brampton, Peterborough, Waterloo-Wellington, Barrie, East Toronto,

West Toronto, and Lindsay Presbyterials over the course of the year. I have been asked to speak on topics such as passing their faith on to their children and grandchildren, mission on their doorstep, and Advent/Christmas, as well as having installed many presbyterial executives, offered bible studies, shared book lists and presented the work of the synodical with many. Each of our presbyterials is unique and enjoys their own focus for their mission activity; all are experts at enjoying one another's company , worshipping our Lord, and caring for the world.

I especially enjoy working with the synodical executive, attending both planning and quarterly executive meetings, and attending and reporting to their annual synodical meeting. This wonderful group of dedicated women have become 'family' to me over these five years. I have heard a growing focus this past year on the Truth and Reconciliation Tours and have enjoyed being a part of their thirst for understanding and healing. This will be the upcoming focus of the 2018 Synodical Annual meeting in Kingston and is being enthusiastically supported by the members of the synodical. I would like to thank Joy Randall for her three years of dedicated service as synodical president and say thank you to Mary Veale-Parker who has recently begun her term as the new synodical president. These two ladies, and all of the executive members, serve so faithfully and endlessly as they seek to share their passion for learning and service in Christian mission. I am always in awe of these women of faith.

This past spring saw the culmination of three years of planning in the third National Women's Gathering, held in Toronto. 600 women gathered to praise, pray and hear about the amazing work being done throughout our world. Many of the women of our synod were key leaders in seeing this dream come to fruition. At this energizing event our own Joy Randall received the Woman of Faith award, honouring her faithful service in nursing leadership in Taiwan and through the WMS and serving her congregation at home in Canada. I enjoyed being a part of the Women's Gathering planning committee, serving on the worship planning team and also serving as the host of the four day event. I was privileged to work with and meet so many dedicated women from our denomination and sister denominations.

Apart from the WMS I have also led a couple of women's retreats this year, as the speaker for the Crieff Hill's women's weekend (A Weekend to Wonder), and with a congregational women's retreat held at Crieff with a similar theme. I have also spoken at a couple of women's meetings in congregations.

### **Synod and Synod Executive**

As regional staff I participate in the synod executive meetings throughout the year and am a member of the Synod of CNOB Annual Meeting planning team. Each year we invite a keynote speaker to our meeting, as well as offer practical workshops and inspiring corporate worship as a significant part of our coming together. This year it was a pleasure to have Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence as our keynote speaker and host her for her time with us in Toronto. I am thankful to have worked with Rev. Bethany McCaffrey in the leading of a synod workshop on Intergenerational Worship.

## **Regional Consultative Committee**

I am always thankful for the support and care of the RCC. It is so wonderful to know that there are such compassionate people overseeing and advocating for this specialized ministry. Thank you for your prayers and guidance throughout the year. I am truly blessed in this regard.

## **Additional Ministry**

In addition to these primary responsibilities of ministry I have preached 10 times over the course of the year on the focus of my ministry, or for church anniversaries.

In light of the research connected with my recent dissertation I have also led workshops and keynoted at a number of events outside of the bounds of the synod. It was an honour to share this work as well as the experiences of the churches of our synod with the Synod of Southwestern Ontario, the Rural Symposium held in Kingston, a class studying Ministry in the Small Church at Knox College, and at an international and ecumenical conference entitled Intergenerate held in Lipscomb University in Nashville at which I presented an academic paper. I also led workshops on the faith formation of children, attracting millennials, and preached at Grace PC, Calgary, led a presbytery workshop on passing your faith on to your children and grandchildren in Brandon, led a workshop on intergenerational children's ministry in Chicago, and spoke on the theme of 'Roots and Wings' at the Annual Meeting of the Synodical of Southwestern Ontario during the past year. I have recently completed a chapter to be included in a book coming out of the Intergenerate conference to be published next year.

I have not taken continuing education this year, but have read the following books as I continue to seek new knowledge and spiritual growth so that I remain fresh and faithful:

Holly Inglis, *Sticky Learning: How Neuroscience Supports Teaching That's Remembered* (Nashville: Fortress, 2014)

Barbara Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain: Integrating Brain Research and Faith Development* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002)

Holly Catterton Allen, *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008)

Charles R. Foster, *From Generation to Generation: The Adaptive Challenge of Mainline Protestant Education in Forming Faith* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010)

Tammy Tolman, *Collide: Exploring INTERGenerational Ministry* (Australia: Creative Visions Print and Design, 2013) (I cannot recommend this one)

William P. Brown, *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015)

Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007)

As I look forward towards a continuing education experience I am contemplating the possibility of an intermission so that I can focus on a less practical experience and set apart some extended time for a more spiritually renewing activity, particularly in a new context. John and I are considering the possibility of completing our pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, and I would like to experience worship and faith formation activities in either Great Britain or Australia as they seek to grow in faith in this post-modern era. I would like to live into my questions about a growing faith in this challenging post-modern world.

Meanwhile, 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 our middle schoolers. I attended General Assembly in Kingston this past June.

With you in Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Victoria A." with a stylized flourish at the end.

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