

## **Annual Report to the Synod of CNOB - 2022 Regional Minister for Faith Formation - Tori Smit**

### **Introduction**

I want to begin by saying thank you to the Regional Consultative Committee (RCC) and the synod for the opportunity you have given me to serve the church in this ministry of Christian education and faith formation. In particular I want to say thank you for your compassionate care over the course of these last two and a half years as we have all responded as best as we can to the unexpected challenges of church building closures, Sunday school and youth ministry cancellations, and our adult bible studies and mission meetings shifting to new platforms in response to the pandemic.

As we enter into our third church year with this pandemic we find ourselves at a place that is predicted to be the most difficult to date. While we had no choice about our church building closures and pandemic protocols when the pandemic arrived, we seemed to find a certain 'we're in it together' energy in that first year. However, the extensive length of this pandemic has been costly for many of our churches. Many of our ministers and church leaders are beyond exhausted, churches find themselves without children, youth and volunteer leadership, congregations are debating their ability to survive, and there is a growing degree of infighting happening in sessions and committees. While all of this is all an uphill climb, I also appreciate the ministers, leaders and churches that continue to hold fast to the hope God gives us and who are willing to try new things, and work hard in spite of difficulties.

### **Summary of Work for this Past Year**

*Website* - I serve as the webmaster for the synod web site (<http://www.cnob.org>). It continues to be the best platform we have for passing along practical information about faith formation to our churches. It is also quite often the first means of informing our churches about applicable guidelines and protocols for in-person worship and gatherings that they ought to consider as our buildings reopen. Through the blog we have explored alternative options for Sunday schools and bible studies, considered excellent research on steps forward with children and youth, offered all ages bespoke resources for the seasons of the church year, and provided comfort and care for exhausted church leaders. Our website subscriber list continues to grow and we have received numerous emails thanking the synod for providing much needed answers and guidance throughout the pandemic.

As we return to meeting with churches on site, I believe our blog presence will decrease proportionally as I rebalance my work activities to in-person workshops and visits as well as respond over Zoom, email and the phone to numerous calls for assistance. I have not been able to make any new blog postings this fall because of this significant uptick in requests for alternate support.

*Zoom Gatherings* - Most of my workshops and meetings this year happened over Zoom. I have worked with individuals and individual churches on specific topics unique to them, as well as with larger and wider reaching groups who signed up to attend more general get-togethers in response to advertisements I placed on the synod website. The most frequent topics addressed were family faith formation, choosing new curriculum and curriculum adaptation for Covid, protocols for in-person Sunday school and alternative options for Sunday school.

Our synodical continues to gather together over Zoom as they work hard to stay connected to members and support mission and social justice throughout our churches. Our presbyterials

have gathered over Zoom less frequently with some meeting consistently, but most meeting occasionally or not at all.

I believe Zoom will continue to serve us well going forward, even as we increase our in person meetings.

*Google Slides/Classroom and Other Seasonal Resources for Churches* - Over the past two years I have produced Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter interactive Google Slides, devotional booklets, and how-to videos for congregations to upload, download and/or pass on to their congregations for use over the course of these significant seasons. These were done so that already overwhelmed church leaders could offer a broad variety of faith at home options to their congregations without having to invest a great deal of time and energy into the project. I am so grateful for the many leaders from our synod who graciously said 'yes' to videoing themselves reading a children's bible story, offering a craft or activity, and/or leading a short worship moment for this platform. I know people were delighted to see and hear those they have missed during our lock-downs and social distancing.

This past Lent/Easter I saw a significant drop in users as everyone seemed to come to the end of their delight with online platforms. In light of this I will reload updated Google Slides for this coming Advent/Christmas, repost videos on how to make an Advent wreath, a simple nativity scene for children along with a new downloadable devotional booklet for all ages.

*Phone Calls and Emails* - In the midst of this I continued to follow up with congregational leaders through email and by phone. These were often prompted by specific questions which I did my best to answer with fresh ideas, applicable resources and an opportunity to think through things with another person. This spring and fall saw a major increase in phone conversations with church leaders regarding educational choices and specific concerns regarding programming.

*In Person Meeting and Workshops* - This past spring we began to meet with individuals and churches in person once again. We continue to balance the cost of travel, the requirements of specific activity that we are being asked to do, and agreement around safe pandemic protocols as a basis for determining if the request would be best held over a Zoom platform or in person. At this point I meet in person with individuals/groups about two to three times per week with everything else being held over Zoom.

Congregations have been very understanding and supportive of this hybrid approach and we appreciate their flexibility.

*WMS Groups* - Many of our WMS groups have not met over the course of this pandemic. Many groups that were small prior to this pandemic now find themselves depleted to the point of considering closure. This October I will be meeting with the Presbyterial of Barrie for their fall rally. For our first in-person event we hope to lean into this opportunity to celebrate our past while also looking to our future through worship, story telling, drama and hand-on activities.

### **Focus of Ministry Going Forward**

This fall I am deeply aware of churches beginning to ask the question, "Where have all the children gone?"

Our churches are considering and responding to this situation in a variety of ways. Some are surprised that our younger families haven't return en masse. Some are aware that their church may not have connected with this age group as well they did with older folk at the beginning of

the pandemic. Some young families have said they will not be returning until they feel confident that they will not inadvertently pass Covid on to the more vulnerable in their church. Some families are saying that they continue to be exhausted and they've had to make decisions around their free time and that church is being put on the back burner for increased travel, organized sports and family time. Some have simply said they will not be coming back.

There are as many stories as there are young families we connect with.

This fall I began a small project asking 33 church leaders from our synod to share with me their experiences of Covid at their church. I am asking for information on pre-Covid numbers and programmes for children and youth, their mid-Covid experience and activities, their numbers this fall and which programmes they are restarting, revising, re-evaluating and what will be new. With these interviews I am also asking about their greatest concerns and challenges with educational ministry and faith formation right now as well as asking how I can best help.

It is my hope that this project will help us all with a better and more realistic sense of how these past few years have affected educational ministry within our synod and then help us imagine a way forward with hope. I look forward to sharing what I hear and learn with all of our churches through the synod website and over Zoom gatherings and workshops.

### **Other Commitments**

Alongside the work I do with the synod I continue to participate in the activities of the Presbytery of West Toronto and the Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE, previously known as the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators) through the Advocate (their online blog).

This coming January I will begin a three year term with APCE as their President Elect. I am honoured by this nomination and hope my relationship with APCE will continue to benefit the synod and the PCC as I share all I learn along the way.

This fall John-Peter and I were approached by Knox College to teach their Theological Field Education (TFE) course a couple of weeks after the fall term had begun. With the professor needing to step back from the class, we were asked to take it on given our history of already working closely with this class through lectures and field placements. We agreed and are happily working closely with the course TA who has worked with the course for a number of years and who is bringing us to speed with the history and practices of the class.

In January I will teach the Educational Ministry of the Church course at Knox College. I hope to share with the students great theology and theory around faith formation along with a huge bite of practical application as they prepare for their future ministry with our church.

Thank you to each of you for your care, prayers, support and advertising around this very special regional ministry that the synod continues to be passionate about providing to all. It is very much appreciated every day.

Respectively submitted,

Tori Smit