

RCC Report, 2021-2022

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Most of the committee will, I am sure, remember the movie Ground Hog Day where weatherman Phil (Bill Murray) repeats the same day over and over until he gets it right. I can't help but feel that many of us understand Phil a whole lot better after two and a half years of Covid.

As I look at last year's report many of the themes are the same with the added nuance of trying to comprehend whether we are truly past the pandemic or not and what will stay and what will go.

Like last year the majority of my work is helping ministers and congregations find their way forward.

1. Congregations.

The single most frequent workshop and conversation I am having in my ministry is my 'options for struggling congregations' workshop. Many congregations are struggling with finances and attendance. Now they are also coming to the realization that they aren't having the numbers returning that they thought they would. This reality is somewhat nuanced in that there are congregations where numbers are at or near post pandemic levels. Unfortunately, this is most often the case in congregations where number were low already. (In other words if there was a congregation of 14 before the pandemic, there is a good chance there is 12 or 13 now – If there was 100 before the pandemic there might be 50 now.) This has left considerable uncertainty about congregations' futures.

Congregational uncertainty is further compounded by a lack of clarity about what they should be doing. Some feel as though they should be doing everything they were doing pre pandemic and more. In many cases, while the louder voices are demanding 'full service' churches, it is extremely difficult to find volunteers for anything. Likewise, people are not clear about worship and whether it should be only in person, streamed or hybrid. (Most are streaming live worship)

All of this is complicated by a great yearning to be what we once were. While there is more openness to alternative models of ministry, there is still a great deal of what a friend calls 'magical thinking'.

2. Ministers.

There are many tired and discouraged ministers out there. In last year's report, I identified conflict as an emerging issue within our churches. This conflict has continued and while most congregations have found a stasis around worship protocols there is still a simmering tension in many congregations. Ministers regularly feel as though they are being blamed for not doing enough to recover the ministries of the church and they are tired and burnt out. There are currently more ministers on medical and stress leave than at any time in the church. I have spent a lot of time providing pastoral care and have also been regularly involved in helping work out transitional allowances as ministries cease. It is also worth noting that Janet Ryu-Chan, the minister at our own church has been off with long Covid almost all of this year and as such I

have been Interim Moderator and filling in there. An added challenge for ministers is that it is almost impossible to get pulpit supply for vacant churches, further increasing stress.

3. What next?

I continue to work with presbyteries strategizing new ways of being in this new set of circumstances. By way of an example, my own presbytery, the Presbytery of West Toronto has 21 congregations, 9 vacancies with one more on the way. This is the reality for almost every presbytery in the synod. Much of my work with presbyteries has come in the form of workshops, sitting on various planning committees and helping them imagine new ways of meeting the needs of their churches. This past week I also had the pleasure of training 5 elders in serving communion. They have all been commissioned by the presbytery of Temiskaming to be able to serve the sacraments.

4. Other service.

Over the past year in addition to serving as the Interim Moderator pro tem of Morningside High Park Presbyterian Church, I continue to serve as Interim Moderator to three congregations in the Presbytery of Temiskaming where I am also an assessor minister. Fortunately, the Temiskaming responsibilities are minimal being largely confined to attending presbytery meetings by zoom. I completed my term on the Assembly Council this past June. I am a member of the Ministry and Church Vocations Advisory Committee as well as a working group looking at Interim Ministry. I continue to assist at Knox College as a resource person, especially in Sexual Abuse and Harassment awareness training and working with the Field Education program. I am also the clerk of West Toronto Presbytery.

5. I continue to be grateful to the RCC for their support and for the freedom I have in finding the best ways to serve the church. The granting of an extra week off in December allowed us to have a protracted time of rest. As well our own holidays and continuing education periods throughout the year were helpful for our own mental health and energy. You have been a true blessing.