

Annual Report to the Synod of CNOB - 2023
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 of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda (CNOB) for the opportunity you have given me to serve and support the church through a ministry of Christian education and faith formation for the last eleven years. When I was called to this position in September of 2012 the RCC members were anxious that the monies funding the position might only last a year or two at most, yet were so passionate about educational ministry that they stepped out in faith to begin our journey together. It has been one of the most significant and rewarding experiences of my time serving the church and one I treasure and am so very thankful for.

When we started the journey many years ago we may have had an inkling of where it might take us, but we certainly did not predict the many opportunities and challenges that have happened along the way. Some occasions have been wonderful reasons for celebration, while others have been unexpected, demanding immediate revisioning and changes of course as things were transpiring in quick time. In all of this I have always known and experienced the support of the RCC and the synod as we journeyed together.

Thank you to everyone for your love, care, encouragement and challenge. Thank you!

Summary of Work for this Past Year

In-Person Workshops and Church Visits - This year was the first full year since Covid began that I have been primarily out in the field bringing workshops to church locations and meeting with church leaders for discussions on what they might do next now that they are fully reopened and wish to consider their next steps having lost a significant number of children, youth, and adult leadership.

Most of our churches were not ready to re-open Sunday schools or youth programming last year, given the extreme loss of their younger members (for some a complete loss of children in their midst). Combined with few children present, churches also expressed that they were unable to find adults who were willing to teach once again. Extreme exhaustion among leaders understandably caused churches to delay getting things up and running again. In these cases I have consistently recommended that they place their limited energy and emphasis on rebuilding relationships with families. I encouraged them to call all their families and simply ask how they are, what their Covid experience was like, to apologize for the times the church was experienced as absent from their lives, and to ask how the church can best come alongside them in the weeks and months ahead. These calls were not to be platforms for asking them to come back and definitely not to ask if they'll take on leadership positions they are desperate to fill. These calls were instead crucial conversations designed to learn and rebuild relationships that had fallen apart unintentionally over the course of Covid.

Some churches experienced Covid differently and have celebrated a growing number of children and young people in their midst. They leapt in enthusiastically and relaunched their Sunday schools and other children's, youth and family based programming last year. It was wonderful to celebrate with them in this and offer fresh ideas and resource recommendations for their moving ahead with these ministries.

This fall there has been a resurgence of energy and renewed commitment to children's programming among many of our churches. I have received numerous calls for guidance and workshops on rebuilding the Sunday school, curriculum options, and teacher training as they welcome children back and restart with returning and new teachers and leaders. This is good news and a wonderful opportunity to consider goals and priorities for the year ahead. Most recognize that this will be a slow learning process and are committed to rebuilding and celebrating the milestones along the way.

I want to encourage churches with very few children to keep all ages in mind as they move forward. If you are not ready to rebuild the Sunday school or ever have a Sunday school again, know that the most important thing you can do to engage and share your faith with children and youth is through your commitment to long-term, trusted relationships. Take time to consider worship from the perspective of each of the ages present (and not present) in your worship services. How might all ages better feel included and active in all of the parts of worship. Talk to children and youth regularly. Ask how they are doing, and what's going on at school and with their hobbies. Tell them stories of your faith and experiences with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Ask them about their experiences of the Holy. Have fun together and be the person they look forward to seeing when the church gathers. You may never know the impact of these conversations, but these are transformative and how children and youth grow in faith.

Website - I serve as the webmaster for the synod web site (<http://www.cnob.org>). It continues to be a strong platform for passing along practical information about faith formation to our churches. Through the blog we have explored new 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.

Zoom Gatherings - Most of my workshops and meetings last 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 and through Facebook. The most frequent topics addressed were family faith formation, choosing new curriculum, steps for restarting Sunday schools and alternative options for Sunday school when Sunday morning just doesn't work anymore.

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

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.

WMS Groups - Many of our WMS groups have folded over the course of the pandemic. Presbyterials have also made the difficult decision to close, while others are considering their options. As the organization and its members age, it has become harder and harder to continue meeting physically, and to undertake study, education and mission. This is a time of grief in the body and we must come alongside our WMS women with love, compassion and understanding.

This coming year the WMS will gather for an expanded Council meeting and smaller National Women's Gathering. This will be such a celebration after numerous cancellations over the past four years. It promises to be an incredible gathering with gifted and challenging leaders and participants who have longed to gather these last years.

Other Commitments

Alongside the work I do with the synod I participate actively in the Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE, previously known as the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators). Much of my continuing education time and money has been spent attending wonderful APCE events which have challenged and shaped my approach and practice of Christian education and faith formation. This coming January I will begin serving as the President of APCE.

This fall I am teaching the 'Human Growth and Spiritual Journey' course at Knox College. I hope to share with the students great theory around faith formation and pastoral care with all ages along with a huge bite of practical application as they prepare for their future ministries.

In Conclusion

At the end of 2023, John-Peter and I will be concluding our time working as regional staff with the synod. We are so grateful for our time in these positions, the people we have encountered and worked with along the way, and the deep passion everyone has for building the Kingdom of God here on earth. 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.

Respectively submitted,

Tori Smit