

**Annual Report, 2023**  
**Regional Minister for Congregational Health,**  
**Synod of Central Northeastern Ontario & Bermuda**  
**John-Peter Smit**

As I write this, my final annual report for the synod, it is with anticipation and sadness. Anticipation in the next chapter of our lives and sadness to be leaving a position and ministry that I love. It is hard to believe that I am in my eighteenth year of ministry as the Synod's Regional Minister. This is the longest I have served in any position and has by far been the most rewarding. I am so grateful for those who went before, for all my co-labourers in this vineyard and for the opportunity to interact with presbyteries, ministers and congregations in the synod and beyond. I have been especially blessed to have wonderful co-workers, particularly Tori and the support and direction of an engaged and caring Regional Consultative Committee.

This past year has been challenging for the entire church. We are able to meet in person again and resume more 'normal' ministry, at the same time we are having to contend with a very different reality. Most of our congregations are facing diminished attendance, diminished finances, the loss of young families and great difficulty finding volunteers for anything. As well, ministers are leaving ministry at unprecedented rates, either to retirement, medical leave or other careers. While all of this was happening before Covid, these past years have greatly accelerated these trends.

In the midst of this there is hope. I have never seen congregations so willing to change and so willing to talk candidly about their situation and their future as they are right now.

Over the past year my ministry has fallen into three broad categories.

1. Helping congregations make decisions about their future. Probably 75% of my work is helping congregations who are on the edge of viability. Their future includes amalgamations, ecumenical shared ministries, new ministry models or even closure. These are challenging times for most of our congregations but I am encouraged by the courage of many leaders to have hard conversation and make hard decisions. I also see the relief that many experience in getting unstuck and doing something. One particular area of ministry has been equipping elders. Elders are taking much greater roles in ministry in their congregations but need training. This includes leading worship, serving the sacraments and conducting funerals. This is particularly true in congregations that will likely never call a minister again.
2. Helping viable congregations navigate a post Covid world. Not every congregation is facing viability issues. There are those who will continue to be viable but need help discerning helpful ways forward. They know they need to change but they aren't always sure how.
3. Everything else. In addition to my direct work with congregations, I regularly act as a support and resource to presbyteries and ministers. This can take the form of advice, or mentoring or brokering information. Likewise, I have been actively involved at Knox College, team teaching a course with Tori Smit (field education) and working with graduating students. I served on the

Ministry & Church Vocations advisory committee and took a particular interest in Interim Ministry.

As I look ahead, it is my prayer that the synod would be able to continue to support regional staff. I believe the need will only increase. As part of this report I was asked to reflect on what I believe will be needed moving forward.

1. Leadership in finding new models and structures for ministry. As mentioned many of our congregations are currently unsustainable. This must be addressed. Sustainability is not just financial but extends to polity and structure. How do you minister in a presbytery with no ministers? How do you address the issue of permanent Interim Moderators and congregations that can no longer call a minister? How do we empower elders to lead and serve? How can we make our polity match our reality?
2. Leadership in finding options for struggling churches and helping all congregations find joy and meaning in a post Covid world? The church is discouraged, how do we bring courage and hope as well as sustainable models of ministry?
3. How do we encourage and support ministers? Many of our ministers are lonely, under supported and discouraged. They have a skill set that no longer meets the needs of the present day church, or, even more alarmingly, they have the skill set but congregations are not interested in the gifts that they bring. We have a tremendous need for Transitional Ministers and need to identify those who would be assets to this ministry as well as finding opportunities for training and support.

These are challenging times for the church. For the past number of years, my guiding scripture verse to understand the church is Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows[a] there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

As the church, many of us do remember Zion, a time when our churches were full and our Sunday Schools vibrant. Our current circumstances really are a foreign land. Our challenge then is to sing the Lord’s song in this new time and place.

As I conclude this final report with gratitude for the synod and thanks for God for all the ways that I have experienced love and care over these past seventeen years, let me finish with the commendation and prayer the Paul shares with the church in Philippi:

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, .... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Verses from Philippians 1)

This is my prayer for the synod and my desire for every blessing for you.

In Christ,

John-Peter Smit