

Common-unity Consulting
Helping to develop healthy and vibrant communities
Ivy Thomas, Consultant

REPORT ON: Facilitated Conversations with St. Martin of Tours and Gabriola United Church regarding the Ecumenical Shared Ministry (ESM) - September 24, 2014.

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to facilitate this conversation. It was a joy meeting everyone and hearing your celebrations, challenges and learning opportunities over the past two years of sharing both a building and a clergy.

I have reviewed all of the notes that were taken on September 24 and wish to share both your thoughts and ideas as well as some recommendations for how to move forward.

BACKGROUND

CELEBRATIONS

Both congregations celebrate the new relationships that are developing within the parish and the sharing of outreach opportunities. They note that the increased numbers in joint worship bring a new energy and richer singing to the services. In addition, many are appreciative of the learnings through diverse voices in the shared study groups. Financially, the ESM has enabled the call of a full-time Ministry Personnel and lightened the load of building expenses for Gabriola United Church, while providing a wonderful building for St. Martin's of Tour. Personally, people noted, positively, that the ESM has required them to stretch their thinking "beyond the familiar" and be open to new ways of seeing and doing things.

CHALLENGES

Many people noted "change" as a major challenge - the need for change; not wanting to change; taking too long to change; and changing too quickly. A second concern that was noted frequently is communication and understanding in various areas, including: denominational differences; differences in traditions; and building usage - timing and schedule changes. Both congregations noted that the few people who don't want to move toward more shared worship services or becoming a single congregation are holding back the majority or people who are eager to take next steps. The shared worship services are a challenge for some, noting that some people do not attend the shared services and are committed to their own traditions for worship.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

While the majority of people in both congregations are ready to take the next steps toward a fuller relationship of ESM, they also recognize the importance of hearing and respecting those

who are not ready to make this shift. “How do we listen to everyone?” is an excellent question that was posed and discussed.

Taking into consideration the differing traditions, new people and trying to bring two communities together as one, communication was the key point of turning the challenges into learning opportunities. This includes but is not limited to doctrinal traditions; liturgies and liturgical language; governance structures; and being attentive to concerns of individuals as they arise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is apparent from the excellent turnout of both congregations, that this Ecumenical Shared Ministry is important to everyone. To be an ESM relieves concerns regarding finances, facilities and upkeep, congregational numbers and ministry outreach possibilities. While the large majority of people are in favour of taking the next steps towards Model #3 - two congregations worshipping together weekly with a shared clergy; it is clear that there are two or three in each congregation that are uncomfortable with the situation even as it is now - sharing two services a month. It appears that these concerned few are preventing the two congregations from moving ahead and the congregations aren't sure how to continue. In addition, even those who are in favour of continuing on this path, have many questions and curiosities about how to embrace an ESM with a fullness of heart and understanding.

In our congregational conversations we discussed at length the importance of healthy communication as the key to clarity for all of these concerns and my following recommendations reflect this:

1. To build relationship between the two communities, I would encourage a number of joint SOCIAL events, where the “soul” purpose is to get to know one another. Be curious in your conversations, find out what you have in common and what you can learn from one another.
2. For the same purposes as above, plan a facilitated weekend spiritual retreat where the focus of conversation can move deeply into the spiritual realm, where walls come down and hearts are opened.
3. Facilitated circle conversations that incorporate both congregations will help to build relationship and develop a better understanding of the needs of each community. As a part of these conversations, it will be helpful if those who are opposed to moving further into an ESM are able to articulate their specific concerns so that they might be addressed appropriately. It is difficult, if not impossible to find an agreeable solution to a generalized concern.
4. To incorporate the use of the Pinch/Crunch Theory for resolving differences before they become painful conflict. (Diagram attached)
5. Inviting the Arch Deacon, Bishop, and Conference Minister to be a part of the community in worship, information workshops and social events will allow opportunities for personal

connection and professional relationship building between the congregations and the individual Judicatories.

6. Ongoing educational opportunities to address topics such as doctrine, language and traditions of the two denominations will be important for developing respect and an honouring of each.
7. One point of discussion was in regards to the celebration of the Eucharist/Communion and how both traditions might be honoured. As discussed with Rev. Joan on Sept. 24, it would be appropriate and an honouring of the United Church tradition, to at this time have one of the joint services that does not include eucharist.
8. While the aim of the Gabriola ESM is currently to become two congregations with weekly joint services, I encourage further discussion regarding moving towards becoming a full ESM - one congregation, working together in all things. The results of this would be a more cohesive relationship in all matters, including the elimination of one full set of meetings (both Board/Council and any church committees). Considering the smaller number of people in the two congregations, the need for volunteer time and energy to address the governance of the congregation can be greatly reduced, allowing for more focus to be placed on congregational outreach ministries and ongoing relationship building. The move to a single congregation will also reduce the number of meeting hours for the clergy, freeing her to attend more fully to the spiritual and pastoral care of the congregation and support of other congregational ministries.

While this may require a little more time of discernment, I believe it will be well worth the time taken to give it full consideration.

I see great potential for this ESM and with attention to the above recommendations I believe you will be able to build a vibrant community of faith that, in and of itself, will be a testament to the larger community of God's love, grace, inclusivity and compassion. Again, thank you for inviting me to facilitate these holy conversations. It has been a joy to work with you all!

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this report, please feel free to contact me at ithomas@bc.united-church.ca or by calling 250-319-8355 or 604-431-0434 loc 318