

June 29, 2022

Exit Interview Conversation with Kirsty Hunter, Diane Matheson-Jimenez and Todd McDonald

Background: Kirsty was the minister for Minesing United Church for 16 years. Minesing United closed in 2022 and the purpose of the conversation was for Kirsty to speak about her experience, bringing both the positive experiences and the difficult experiences all with a mind to learn and to help other ministers who give leadership and care while their pastoral charge closes.

The Positive Experiences

- a. **Collegiality** helped Kirsty get through this experience. Trusted colleagues (i.e. Simcoe Rural Cluster) where there for Kirsty. Colleagues checked in with Kirsty after seeing posts on Facebook.
- b. **Closing Process:** Jody Maltby provided information in a kind, pastoral and considerate way. Jody attended meeting in person and was able to give the governing body options and ideas. Attentive supportive staff person was invaluable.

The time between decision to close and actual closing date was short. This was helpful because the energy for closing was in a short time span, not dragged out.

The final decision to close was made at the AGM. The process was very important and worked well. Space at the AGM was given first for everyone to have a say about closing on a feeling level – How do you feel about closing? All feelings were welcomed and respected. First sharing on a feeling level then moved to the motion. By that time, the vote was taken without discussion. People were ready.

- c. **Letters of Support and Invitation:** Kirsty invited the churches in the Simcoe Rural Network to write to Minesing United, expressing support and extending hospitality. All the churches responded. The letters let the people of Minesing United know that they were not alone.

The Difficult Experiences

- a. **Chaplaincy:** Kirsty had informal support from colleagues. What about ministers who do not have pastoral support? Need for intentional check in with minister, monthly phone calls and offers for pastoral support, not once, but regularly.
- b. **Physical presence of the larger church:** When it came time to dispose of the furniture etc., it would be helpful for a representative from the larger church to walk through with the congregation early in the closing process. Kirsty mentioned TUCC came to talk about how the building would be turned over, but that visit was last minute and there was some confusion about which pieces of work were to be done by the Region, TUCC, and the congregation.
- c. **Disposing of Church Contents:** At a time for closing, the congregation members were exhausted, emotionally and physical. Kirsty identified the need for physical help to get work done. i.e. a work party, yard sale.
- d. **Social Media:** Kirsty told the story of a GCO employee who read the Facebook posting, contacted Minesing United and made sure they knew that they owed their full assessment. This message was not well received and was not helpful. Kirsty's advice: send a card saying how sorry you are. Kirsty also wondered if the kind of money/creditor related conversation could be restricted to after the building was sold and money recovered then. Emotions run high at a time of loss.

- e. **Regional Council Representative at the final service:** should be a policy. The need here is some kind of recognition like a presence, a card etc.
- f. **Membership:** Kirsty is concerned that Minesing members and adherents will not connect with neighbouring churches. When a local church closes, the contacts of all those connected with that church are lost. Grieving people are left alone to find a new place. The Anglican church has a different governance and when a church closes, the contact list is given to the neighbouring church which follows up pastorally and provides hospitality. Could something similar happen in SWRC?
- g. **Preparing Ministers for closing church:** Kirsty wondered if there needs to be more work for health, joy, and excellence of ministers who are more and more working in contexts of dwindling churches. Is there training available? What can be offered?

Key Takeaways/Follow Up Required

- a. **Helpful process:** Karen Hilfman-Millson impressed upon Kirsty the need for everyone to come up and have a say before they called the question. Kirsty highly recommends this for congregational meetings when difficult conversations are happening. At Minesing, everyone had a say on their feelings about the church and closing. Everyone spoke passionately about how important it was and how much they cared. This process made the vote smoother.
- b. **Engagement with neighbours:** church closings are a great opportunity for community to be built/re-established with neighbouring communities of faith. Neighbours could be encouraged to send letters of support and could also be asked to help with work parties. This may be one way to address the concern that church members will fall away when their worshipping community closes.
- c. **Communities of Faith Commission:** needs to continue conversation about how the Region walks with communities of faith that are closing (i.e. send a card, have a representative at the closing worship, etc.) Consideration needs to be given to what happens with pastoral care lists. Confidentiality must be maintained but how can we ensure former congregants are getting care and not drifting from the UCC?
- d. **Conversation between CF and PR Commissions:** Todd and Diane committed to taking Kirsty's experiences to the joint Pastoral Relations/Communities of Faith Commissions meeting for conversation about support for clergy and lay leaders in times of transition.