

COMMUNITIES OF FAITH COMMISSION

The mainstay of the Communities of Faith Commission's work continues to be approvals related to loans, lease agreements, sale of property, governance changes, property development, and collaboration agreements. This year we continued to share much of this work across task groups that consider these approvals and we are grateful for the work that members put in between monthly meetings of the full commission. At those meetings we have been able to consider how the commission can support the strategic direction of the church and region and take time with policy issues that effect all communities of faith.

In the summer of 2022, the Commission started to lay out activities that would support the goals we discerned during our strategic planning in the spring. As set out in the commission's report last year, our priority goals included: strengthening connection between communities of faith and the Shining Waters Regional Council; connecting rural and small ministries for resource sharing, and helping small/rural communities of faith imagine new possibilities for ministry.

Some of our work this year has been to advance the direction of "deepening connection" with the goal of "strengthening connections between communities of faith and Shining Waters Regional Council." In the summer a survey was conducted to better understand needs from the perspective of leaders in communities of faith. A strong sentiment that came through was that of disconnection from the region and each other. It was clear that some of the first work in deepening connection would be re-introductions and familiarization with the region. In the fall we conducted the first of our "*Let's Connect*" sessions that was framed as a region 101 session. This has been followed by a session in February where Jennifer Henry provided information on the United Church Strategic Plan. Further sessions will be scheduled for later in the spring and summer.

As part of our ongoing efforts to ensure currency and relevance of regional policies, the commission undertook a review and modest updates to the Property Policy this year.

The United Church and the communities of faith across the denomination have been reckoning with declining attendance and contributions along with flagging energy among lay leaders for many years. These challenges were amplified over the years of the pandemic. As we emerge from this, most communities of faith are taking steps to discern the path forward – often facing difficult decisions about viability. Working to support communities of faith navigate these challenging discussions has been a focus of the commission. Intentional Interim Ministry (IIM) is one method for congregations to do this discernment and in this past year we have seen three more congregations in our region embark on this process. The commission's purpose through the IIM Committee is to provide support to our interim ministers, the regional reps appointed to serve on transition teams, and to partner with the Communities of Faith Commission to support congregations in the Intentional Interim Ministry process. The IIM Committee has been considering how it can provide a wider range of supports to congregations in transition to make the process more accessible and to support a wider range of needs in the region.

Amalgamation is another option that some congregations will see as a possible path for the future. Staff at the commission are developing reference tools to help congregations who wish to consider

amalgamation as part of their path forward. Since last spring the commission has approved three amalgamations in the region.

This past October the commission met together with the Pastoral Relations Commission to discuss issues of common interest and how we could help each other meet our respective mandates. We discussed the challenges and opportunities of lay led congregations, how to bring an equity lens to the Living Faith Story, how intentional interim ministry can contribute as described above, and supporting communities of faith as they close. This meeting highlighted how our mandates overlap and further collaboration opportunities emerged from this meeting.

Another initiative that has occupied the attention of the commission is the working group that was struck to build a proposal to address concerns around sustainability of community ministries in the region. The work of this committee, ably shepherded by Jeffrey Dale, resulted in proposals that address sustainability for community ministry, bring greater attention to this form of ministry, and build an understanding of how community ministry can be incorporated more fully into the future directions for all communities of faith in the region.

The Commission expresses gratitude to the leadership of communities of faith in these challenging times. As noted above, many communities are discerning futures that will include difficult conversations and decisions. Know that in the course of our work this year, we have also seen new opportunities and new hope in communities throughout the region. We give thanks for your faithfulness and resilience, and we will strive to accompany you along the way.

As chair, I am grateful for the dedication and skill of the staff who support the work of the commission and the communities of faith throughout the region; and to the commission members who bring wisdom and commitment to all the discussions and decisions we face.

Respectfully submitted,
Chris Bennett, Chair