

Living Into the New Structures of the Regional Council

Presented by Rev Dr Peter Bartlett, EOORC Minister Supporting Visioning

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[SLIDE 1] On January 1, 2019, The United Church of Canada adopted a three-council structure, consisting of communities of faith, regional councils and a denominational council.

Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council (EOORC) is one of 16 new regional councils in The United Church of Canada, replacing former conferences and presbyteries.

[SLIDE 2] Geographically, the region is large, extending east to Hawkesbury, Ontario and Chelsea in western Quebec, west to Denbigh, south to the St. Lawrence River and north to Nânâdônok.

We gratefully acknowledge the traditional unceded lands of Indigenous Peoples on which our buildings and ministries have been built.

The EOORC's population is diverse, with a mix of rural, urban, and small-town dwellers coming from the far reaches of eastern Ontario and western Quebec, the cosmopolitan city of Ottawa, and many towns along the St. Lawrence River all the way to Gananoque.

[SLIDE 3] Living Mission. The five elements of your Regional Council's Living Mission are:

- Supporting and enhancing the ministry of Communities of Faith;
- Supporting Ministry Personnel, Staff and Lay Leadership in Communities of Faith;
- Supporting and nurturing Right Relations, Social, and Ecological Justice;
- Supporting persons in all seasons of life; and
- Supporting and building Communications

[SLIDE 4] Memorandum of Understanding. It is important to know that 3 Regional Councils formally share 1 Executive Minister and Program Assistant to the Executive Minister, across the expansive geographical area which includes approximately 450 Faith Communities:

- Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council
- East Central Ontario Regional Council
- Conseil Régional Nakonha:ka Regional Council

These positions are shared funded positions, with EOORC responsible for 1/6 of each salary.

[SLIDE 5] Leadership Teams. Our Regional Council is led by 12 Standing Teams.

- Finance Leadership Team
- Vision & Transformation Leadership Team
- Property Leadership Team

- Church Extension Committee
- Communications Leadership Team
- Pastoral Relations Commission
 - Licensed Lay Worship Leaders (LLWL)
- Youth and Young Adults (YAYA) Leadership
 - Scrivens/Baillie Leadership Team
- Nominations Leadership Team
- Stewardship Leadership Team
- Spiritual Care Hospital Ministry

When necessary, special Leadership Teams are formed to address critical areas of interest for our Regional Council.

[SLIDE 6] One recent example is the Affirming Leadership Team.

[SLIDE 7] This slide depicts the collaborative interaction of EOORC Leadership Teams, and the Regional Council Executive.

[SLIDE 8] The Regional Council Executive does the continuing work of the Regional Council when the Regional Council is not meeting. The Executive has all of the responsibilities of the Regional Council, unless the Council decides otherwise.

[SLIDE 9] The RC Executive consists of the following members:

- The Executive Minister (1)
- The Chair, Past Chair, and Chair Elect (3);
- Indigenous Representation (1);
- Members at large chosen to reflect the diversity of founding presbyteries, order of ministry, laity, female, male, 2SLGBTQI+, younger and older, UCW (9);
- The EOORC Treasurer as corresponding member;
- EOORC Staff, (other than the Executive Minister) as corresponding members.

[SLIDE 10] The role of the EOORC Staff is to support and enhance the Regional Council in upholding our Living Mission.

[SLIDE 11] This graphic depicts the sum of the many parts of our EOORC Leadership

[SLIDE 12] And here it is, with the 88 faithful who are either already, or, are about to help keep this comprehensive body in motion.

[SLIDE 13] My role, as the EOORC Staff Minister Supporting Visioning in the Region Council, involves supporting faith communities in various stages of visioning and strategic planning, and, encouraging and equipping communities of faith and groups with similar passions for social justice and outreach, to envision creative possibilities for ministry.

[SLIDE 14] I help folks explore new partnerships, and evolve existing ones. This may involve clustering, or, networking ministries and community organizations and groups, and developing ecumenical and interfaith relations.

[SLIDE 15] I encourage the use of technology for connections within and between networking and clustering agencies so that they can regularly meet, organize workshops, study groups, social gatherings, creative worship opportunities, uninhibited by distance and invisible boundaries.

[SLIDE 16] I also resource your Regional Council Visioning and Transformation Leadership Team, and have a responsibility to help shape the Vision and identity for the Regional Council.

[SLIDE 17] Since starting in my role on February 1 of this year, I have been actively engaged via numerous individual conversations, meetings, workshops, worship events and so on, with folks who are either already networked, or seeking to be; aspiring clusters, and transitioning faith communities who are discerning their Visions for the future.

[SLIDE 18] Put simply, in a few short months, I have witnessed an awesome abundance of faith in action, and affirmation of the living spirit alive and well in our Region.

I believe this to be God's faithful continually arising to the challenge of being Christ's Church in this chaotic changing world.

[SLIDE 19] You may recall the theme of our recent Winter Meeting in February, when we were again reminded that there are many individual gifts, or, or parts but, the One Spirit seeks to animate the entire body.

For those who attended the Winter Meeting, we heard from many of the "many parts" of our Regional "body" who are working together on social justice initiatives.

These are collectives who have embraced healing agendas, and are attending to the woundedness in our communities, offering hope in difficult times.

And of course, these were just samplings of the abundant efforts ongoing in our region, as we lay claim to God's vision in a world of division.

[SLIDE 20] Many of these efforts began, or transitioned from our previous structures, and have embraced technology amid the challenges of a pandemic that interrupted things.

COVID hindered our ability to familiarize with, much less becoming proficient in our new structures, striking as it did, before all the ink in the finalized new Governance Handbook was even dry.

[SLIDE 21] Despite the hurdles, seized upon technology as a necessary pathway to worship, share, gather, group, network and cluster.

Yes, despite the unique challenges of the last 3 years, there's a lot going on in our Region.

[SLIDE 22] However, as much as some things and people are connected, much remains disconnected.

Similarly focussed networks and groups for example, who are unaware of each other, and possible points for collaboration, or, opportunities for efficiency by eliminating overlapping redundancy.

[SLIDE 23] Geographical distance between urban/suburban and rural places, can now be easily covered via technology to network across the church's historical "great divide".

Yet, this remains a road less traveled, leaving communities at arms-length, when they might readily join in, if only they knew with whom and how to do so.

There is so much more promise still on our horizon.

[PAUSE]

[SLIDE 24] This is Mount Nebo, where according to tradition, the Prophet Moses was buried.

[SLIDE 25] The good news in the story is that Moses got a glimpse of the Promised Land, across the River Jordan.

The bad news of course, is that he never got to cross over.

He did all the hard work, but he didn't get to set foot in the new land.

Moses would never taste the grapes, nor eat of the bread of that long-dreamed about place.

No, Moses led a rather grumpy group of Hebrews through the wilderness, faced down assassination plots, and endlessly propped up the spirits of a people who had long ago given up on their dream.

And I can imagine them all standing atop Mount Nebo scratching their heads and exclaiming: "He wasn't making it all up! There it is."

I suspect there were a lot of cynical souls eating crow that day, and looking at Moses with new eyes, as they themselves decided to embrace the new view.

Their Moses, a longstanding part of the structure for the journey, ends, and yet, the dream rolls on.

[PAUSE]

Of course it's not necessary to literally climb a mountain to get to Mount Nebo, is it?

No, Mount Nebo is anywhere visionaries take us to look out over new and fertile ground.

And, there's no quick-fix.

Unlike the short-term, hyper-expedient promises that some folks seize upon for short term gain, the Promised Land has a longterm and evolutionary agenda.

Because, for God's people, there's no quick fix. There never has been.

It's a long game we are in, and a collective and collaborative one too.

Where all things connect to pursue a common dream.

The dream Moses was looking out over from Mount Nebo had been germinating for several centuries, passed through, and was shared by many hearts and hands.

[SLIDE 26] It was a dream first given to Abraham and Sarah, passed on through the ages, lost in the nightmare of slavery in Egypt, and then rekindled when Moses witnessed the injustice in Egypt.

[PAUSE]

And the dream still rolls on.

Does it?

Is this where we are again then?

[SLIDE 27] Are we standing together again, looking out over a land of promise, but feeling a little uncertain, and disconnected, about things?

[PAUSE]

[SLIDE 28] The first ten years of my life were lived during the end of what scientists would call a “centripetal world”.

A world where everything spun toward the middle. A world that was deeply centered; when philosophers talked about the unification of all reality.

I lived my first 10 years at the end of an era when people dreamed about unifying the diversity of human experience.

The Christian church was confident about its centre in those days, with many prophesying that the Twentieth Century would be the “Christian Century”.

When I was growing up confidence in Christ the King seemed non-negotiable, and even taken for granted.

We reinforced the sheepfolds, to protect the center. Rules to protect the center abounded, even overprotected, and often excluded non-conformists, or sinners, as the Church tends to call them.

[SLIDE 29] But of course, beginning in the 60s lots of people railed against the rules, and society gradually moved away from a centripetal world into a, a world spinning away from the centre, centrifugal world.

And now, far from those lofty notions of a Christian Century, and living in a post-Christian world, many Christians struggle.

The world appears more and more unhinged; a centering point elusive.

Amidst the abundant new ministries that I have witnessed in our Regional Council these past few months, I have also heard grief, resentment, and anger.

Much of it is directed at our fledgling new structures, that for many, are unfamiliar or not yet fully understood.

Within the Regional Council, in the absence of Presbytery's old gravitational pull, many faith communities, networks and clusters have become like stars looking for a centering orbit, or, perhaps more precise, a "docking station," where they can plug in and connect with any and all the entities and resources they seek.

A place where everything is connected.

[PAUSE]

Yes, many people have forged ahead in diverse and awesome ways during this challenging period.

Various "parts" of our "body" have connected with other "parts," locally, regionally, nationally, and globally, and are marching forth with promise.

But, that is clearly not the case for everyone.

Some have gravitated to what you have always known, reclaiming former presbytery bonds, but without the connections regionally.

And, scarcity looms large still for those of us who struggle to see promise on the horizon at all.

For whom disconnection disheartens, and technology remains either evasive, insufficient, or, both.

[SLIDE 30] So, the banner for this presentation this morning is, "Living Into the New Structures of the Regional Council".

In the last few minutes I have offered some thoughts about how things are going, based upon my last 4 months "on the road," in our Regional Council.

[SLIDE 31] So, for the next 20 or so minutes, I invite you to gather in your breakout rooms to ponder and discuss the following two questions:

1. **[SLIDE 32]** Thinking in terms of abundance and scarcity what has your experience of the transition into, "networks, clusters, and groups" been like? Please share your examples.
2. **[SLIDE 33]** The five elements of The Living Mission of your Regional Council are:
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Do you feel that we are living into our Mission? What recommendations do you have?

[SLIDE 34] We ask that each breakout group appoint a facilitator and scribe for your discussions. As we continue to transition, evolve, and live into our calling as God's faithful travellers, your feedback is critical. We ask that scribes capture your notes and post them into the chat room upon completion of your discussions. And/or email your comments to me at pbartlett@united-church.ca

Closing Comments and Prayer

[SLIDE 35] Gracious God, help us remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day and is rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children.

Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19-year-old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester, never mind the challenged of virtual learning.

Remind us, O, God, that the scary looking vagrant, begging for money in the same spot every day (who some say, "Really ought to get a job!") is a slave to addictions that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares.

Help us to remember that those folks walking annoyingly slow through the store aisles and blocking our shopping progress are savouring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she got back last week, this will be the last year that they go shopping together.

Remind us that many, if not all of these people, are people of faith, perhaps even of Christian faith, who are either already members, or, seek to be members of our faith communities; our, networks, our clusters, our groups...

Holy and ever present one, remind us each day that, of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love. Remind us that it is not enough to share that love only with those we hold dear. Open our hearts not to just those that are close to us, but to all humanity.

Let us be slow to judge and quick to forgive, move us to show patience, empathy and love for all, as we risk the joy and consequences of a living and loving faith in Jesus, in whose name we pray...

As we go forth from this gathering shortly, may we feel God's presence within us, may we see Christ's example before us, and may we hear the Spirit connecting us to one another, enlightening us to new clarity and new hope to be found upon this earth and within one another, here and over the horizon.

Above all O, God, as we travel the steps of challenge and change, may we be patient and kind with one another... **Amen**