

Laurentian Area Ministry /Ministère régional des Laurentides (LAM/MRL)

The Laurentian Area Ministry is formed of nine United Church of Canada parishes located in the Laurentians (north of Montreal). It came to birth ten years ago, after 2 years of dreaming, discernment and discussion, with the help of a consultant from EDGE (Bob Richards)

This document is written in English, although one of the major characteristics of LAM/MRL is its bilingualism. Of the nine communities, one functions exclusively in French, and all of our combined work is done in both languages as much as possible.

We are inclusive; we welcome everyone, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation or marital status. We offer our support without prejudice or judgment. We explore spirituality together from different perspectives, including doubt. We know we do not have all the answers.

We regularly have 75 at worship, albeit at 5 or 6 different locations. We can function like a moderate size congregation, instead of 9 tiny ones. And all 9 little congregations continued God's mission in their own communities,

Please visit our website: <https://www.lam-mrl.com/>

You asked "What is working?"

Collaborative worship preparation

Each week in the winter there are at least 5 worship services, and often 6 in the summer. The worship team includes 5 people: A DLM, 2 retired ordained ministers, and 2 LLWLs. One team member is scheduled to prepare a liturgy (leaders notes) for each week, which we all share. It includes prayers, hymns, a children's time and activities as appropriate. The worship leaders are free to adapt anything that they like, and each worship leader prepares their own sermon. Vera, our wonderful office admin prepares bulletins, announcements and PowerPoints with music embedded. All of that is shared through Dropbox. We have a smooth system that saves time and gives us lots of new ideas.

Access by ZOOM

The worship service that is led at Lachute is also available through ZOOM each week. We found it best to have one stable site using the same equipment each week. It works well given the great distances that are involved. This hybrid process provides the possibility for everyone to participate in a worship even when there is no service in his or her local congregation. This is especially important in the winter.

Regular meeting of the worship team

The worship team meets in the summer to create a high-level annual plan. Then we meet every 6 weeks, sometimes via Zoom, sometimes in person. We eat together, laugh, pray for one another, do some biblical reflection, review what has happened, and plan the future worship and study opportunities. This strengthens our ties as a team.

Worship notes

After worship, we use a shared spreadsheet on Dropbox to enter notes on what happened. The spreadsheet has a column for follow up, as well as for how many were in attendance. It allows us to celebrate successes and to share concerns.

Consistent leadership

One person creates the worship schedule, (instead of one for each community having to find pulpit supply). The communities appreciate the different styles, and at the same time have recognizable leadership. We sometimes call on outside help, and sometimes leaders from within the community provide worship. (They have the worship notes and the PowerPoints that have been prepared) There is the regular presence of an “authorized minister” for sacraments, funerals and weddings.

Payroll and expenses

Each community retains their financial autonomy, with their own treasurer paying local expenses. Each community also contributes to the expenses of the collaborative ministry. In addition, the collaborative ministry has their own treasurer who takes care of payroll, including e-transfers for pulpit supply.

Each worship leader sends an invoice to LAM treasurer, and payment is accurate and usually very quick. Much more efficient than each community writing a cheque for pulpit supply.

Shared administration and communication

Vera, our wonderful office administrator not only produces the worship materials but produces a shared announcement sheet which is distributed via email each week. We have communication coordinators to help with translation and to keep the website and other social media up to date (a recent addition, which is just getting under way). In several sites, those who are unable to attend worship in person have a printed bulletin and announcement sheet delivered to them.

Because there is one lead minister, the regional council does not have to provide a pastoral charge supervisor to each of these little communities.

Connection to the UCC

Each small community (sometimes fewer than 10 at worship) has a sense of being part of a larger organization, and they have easier access to what I will call the UCC Brand. We use the Moderator’s messages, hook on to national and regional activities, and promote Mission and Service. Because we work together, we can also be more structured when asking for help from the regional council. For example, the LAM/MRL grant team supported Shawbridge in getting funding for their breakfast program, and Morin Heights in financing their new Heat Pump.

Regular combined worship events

Several times a year, all 9 communities gather in a large celebration, which usually involves live music and food. It feels like a celebration and reminds us that we are not alone. Although it is

difficult for some to drive to a central location because of distance and aging participants, these combined events have begun to build relationships between the communities of faith.

Students

LAM/MRL has been able to provide field placements for several students from United Theological College. This would not be possible for any of the smaller communities. It allows us to interact with fresh, enthusiastic leaders, and broadens our perspectives. One member of Sainte Adele has been so impressed that they have begun to train as LLWL.

Finances

10 years into this adventure, all 9 communities are still functional. Some have reduced the number of services, some have repurposed their buildings, using it as both a community centre and a place for worship. In some instances these rural communities would not have had the ability to continue without the collaborative ministry model. The collaborative ministry has allowed them to reduce their costs (not having the expense of a full-time or part-time minister) and have a leader in the pulpit as often as they choose.

None the less it is a challenge to finance this structure but doing it together is better than each little church struggling alone. LAM/MRL has been the recipient of grants from the St Thérèse fund, Mission Support, the Trois Rivières fund. This would have been unlikely as independent communities of faith. We would also like to recognize the huge generosity of Lachute United Church who have been paying more than their share, investing in ministry from the proceeds of the sale of their big building.

You also asked, “What is not going so well?”

Distance

We knew it would be a challenge because it is 200 km to drive around each of the buildings involved. When we began, we identified that not only are churches far from each other, but because of the way the roads have been designed, it often seems that “you can’t get there from here”. In addition, each building has very different resources to offer. This means that we often end up using the biggest, most central building. Sometimes it feels a bit of a burden to the hosts.

Consistent leadership

While having a team of 5 leaders is better than having a new worship leader each week through pulpit supply, some miss the consistency of having a “lead minister” in the pulpit nearly every week. Because only one of the team is able to preach every week, leaders mostly see a given community only once per month. Sufficient resources to allow for more focus would be welcomed.

Development needs of individual communities

Worship goes well, but ministry is more than worship. It is hard to address programming and vision needs with only one lead minister. It is also hard to encourage lay leadership in the communities, each of which has different needs. A collaborative ministry needs to have enough resources (human and financial) to allow it to thrive, and not simply to exist. Also, the congregations

need to understand the limited time of the lead minister has for each community and they need to engage in providing local lay leadership. The role of the lead minister is to help to find resources and support, not to do the ministry alone.

Pastoral Care

The lead minister can support emergency pastoral care, often by phone, but ongoing community care is very difficult to support without the engagement of local pastoral care teams.

Worship team members- succession planning

Initially LAM/MRL had two full time ministers. During the pandemic, one took another call and the second retired. Although the search team looked hard, it proved impossible to replace even one of those ministers, and in the end, a member of the worship team undertook training to be recognized as a DLM. It was a huge investment for them. In addition, it is difficult to find people to become part of the worship team, to replace folks as they become too tired to continue, but we finally found the resources needed.

Administration challenges

Some of the administrative requirements prove to be challenging. For example, having the lead minister in attendance at 9 annual meetings is time consuming. Having 9 communities vote on remits can be quite difficult to coordinate. Filing 9 sets of statistics is problematic. And, although it may now have changed, ChurchHub was not designed to provide appropriate support to call ministry leadership for collaborative ministries. It would be good to investigate how some of these limitations can be adapted to support this new model.

All in all, Laurentian Area Ministry / Ministère régional des Laurentides has been a success. We created this from our imaginations and made mistakes along the way. Many more communities and leaders have experience in this style of ministry now. You will find mentors who can help. I strongly encourage you to explore how your ministry can flourish with the right partners, enough resources, and a confidence that God is up to something.

Blessings in your adventure.

Cathy Hamilton on behalf of the Laurentian Area Ministry team: Kelley Molloy (DLM)
Stéphane Godbout (LLWL and LAM chair) Gail Hocquard (LLWL) Jim Kenney (OM) Vera Young (administration)

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