

United Community Ministry (UCM)
A Collaborative Ministry in the East Central Ontario Region
of the United Church of Canada
www.ucministry.ca

The United Community Ministry, a collaborative ministry in the East Central Ontario Region, was officially launched September 1, 2018. The 'original 5' were Trinity United in Cannington, Woodville United and Peniel United (a 2-point pastoral charge), Oakwood United, and Cambray Community United Church. St. Andrew's United in Beaverton joined the collaborative in 2019. This collaborative grew out of conversations held in 2015 by the then Kawartha Lakes Presbytery. The organizational model for the collaborative drew inspiration from the Genesis Cooperative near Ottawa.

The Nature of a Collaborative

Flexibility

Flexibility is a key characteristic of a collaborative. Since its 2018 official inception with five original partners, the UCM has had one partner addition, two amalgamations, one property sold, and one property assumed by the Region and then later sold. The UCM is also invitational to other Communities of Faith in geographic proximity who might be interested in becoming part of the collaborative.

Collaboration

Churches are solitary in nature. While they collaborate with each other within their church family, how often do they collaborate with United Church congregations outside their four walls? There is considerable work for the clergy to foster and model collaboration as the collaborative learns to live into its calling.

Relationships

Initially when attending joint worship services, each congregation sat together. But over time, the congregations mixed more freely as they became familiar with each other's building and worship styles. When a time came for one of the congregations to close, they were able to find a new home in one of the partner churches. It helped for a smoother transition for the closing congregation. For the clergy, they could still see those church members at the other churches in the collaborative, providing a continuity of relationship.

Change

The key to working with a collaborative is to be aware that it will change. A collaborative is a living entity because of the growing relationships across the collaborative. The geographic 'shape' of the collaborative will change, as churches close, amalgamate, or perhaps a new church will join.

Unique Stories

Each congregation in the collaborative is different, in its energy, its personality. Some have buildings in good repair, others are neglected. Some have clear ideas of their work and presence in their communities, others seem lost. Some are confident in their financial health, others fear one more significant repair and they'll close. Some are tired and exhausted and require more encouragement and time from the clergy to revitalize their energy and spirit.

Components of a Collaborative

Council

The UCM Council is made up of two members from each community of faith. The Council meets every two months, and there is a sharing of ideas and review of past worship and events. The clergy and the administrator provide a report of work done over that time. A UCM M&P Team is responsible for the clergy and administrator's annual reviews.

Learning Curve

1. Over time, the UCM Council grew from simply sharing events to a place of sharing of concerns and issues, such as a coming retirement of a treasurer, software programs for computers, repairs to the building. There is a learned wisdom that comes over time to this gathering. It is not just a reporting relationship but a sharing for mutual growth, learning, and support.

Financial

Congregational financial contributions to fund the UCM budget are determined annually using a formula similar to the United Church of Canada's assessment in the annual statistics form that determines 'net' income. A common budget percentage is then applied to that figure. The budget is approved at the UCM AGM held in the Spring. The UCM Policies & Procedures Manual outlines the composition of the Council and Standing Committees; policies on Baptism, Marriage, and Funerals; position descriptions for the administrator and clergy; an Appendix outlining the protocol for a congregation opting out of the UCM; emergency cancellation of worship services due to inclement weather; Holy Manners, etc.

Learning Curve

1. As time moves on, churches may opt out of the collaborative. This places stress on the financial formulae that holds the collaborative together. Here is a place for the Region to offer support to a collaborative who is experiencing significant change.

Clergy

At any time, one congregation within the collaborative may require more clergy assistance than others (e.g. amalgamation process). As well, clergy cannot attend every meeting, event, program, etc. The clergy is present for the Annual Meetings, and those Council/Board meetings where an agenda item warrants their attendance. If the clergy has indicated they will not be in attendance, the Chair is to email them the agenda for the meeting, and if there are any changes to the agenda to inform them. Additionally, the elected congregational Region Representative must be in attendance if the clergy is not present.

It is important to note that a clergy position description for a solo minister will not apply to a collaborative. The UCM clergy position description offers this breakdown of time: 45% Worship; 10% Pastoral Care; 15% Discipleship; 10% Administration; 20% Undesignated (more on this below in Learning Curves). There is an expectation that the clergy will be observant of emerging needs and to communicate these to the UCM Council. The clergy will endeavor to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit as the collaborative lives into its expression of presence and ministry.

Learning Curves

1. Clearly, the clergy cannot do everything in each of the partner churches. Lay leadership is integral to the ongoing energy and momentum of the collaborative. Some things will go on without the clergy!
2. There is a definite change in the pastoral identity of the clergy in collaborative ministry vs. solo ministry. It can feel more like being a pastoral charge supervisor than a shepherd. It is hard to know where 'home' is for the clergy because you can't place down roots in one place.
3. It can be frustrating to build momentum in one church only to be distracted by a crisis in another church. You do accomplish things, but it seems to take longer to get to the finish line. When you only see a congregation once every two or three weeks because of the preaching schedule, it impacts the ability to deepen relationships. It takes longer to 'know your flock'. A related frustration is when a sermon is needed to meet a crisis in one congregation but is not suitable for the next church on the preaching roster that day.
4. 20% of the call is allocated to the clergy to take time to observe what is trying to show up. The initial call set aside 15% for this work but it became evident that more of the clergy's time was taken up by understanding and learning about collaborative ministry and what it can be. The collaborative model is always moving into its 'next expression.' This 20% allowed the clergy to be curious about collaborative ministry, in conversations and reading, both at the local/regional/national levels, and to suggest changes and ideas to the UCM Council for their consideration. Included in this time allotment was the sharing of wisdom and experience gained in collaborative ministry with others in the wider church, via zoom or in-person events. As collaborative ministry is a newer form of ministry models, this became part of the UCM's calling as well – to share in their learning with others who are curious or wanting to form their own version of a collaborative.
5. The UCM was approved as a Supervised Ministry Education (SME) site in 2024, with funding from the National Office. There was no interest from students which was discouraging, and which poses the question, "Who *will* be available to minister to these collaboratives?"

Administration

The UCM has a paid part-time administrator (6 hrs/wk) who provides a communications and administrative role to support the collaborative ministry and its congregations, clergy, and UCM Council. Duties include: to receive and disperse UCM partners' information (i.e. church events/programs for bulletins, UCM newsletters/annual reports), maintain UCM social media presence through Facebook and website, to produce a monthly newsletter, and to forward or direct inquiries to the appropriate clergy or Council member/committee. The administrator also assembles and edits the weekly worship services for YouTube.

Learning Curve

1. It is essential that all partners receive the same information (i.e. written email format, bulletin announcements) from UCM Council or administrator, etc. in a timely manner to avoid possible misinformation or misunderstanding communicated by word of mouth, or by lack of communication. Those without email receive print copies of information shared.

Worship

Worship services are on a rotational schedule led by either the clergy or Licensed Lay Worship Leaders. A Common Order of Service is used, as well as a Common Offertory Hymn (changed seasonally). Some congregations use only the Voices United Hymnal, others are familiar with More Voices. Some churches have a choir. Some have a pianist, others an organist.

Several times a year, the congregations gather for combined worship services, hosted in turn by the churches in the collaborative. The current schedule of combined services is as follows: Worldwide Communion, Reign of Christ Communion, Epiphany Communion, Lent Communion, Palm Sunday Communion, Good Friday, Easter Sunrise Service, Pentecost Communion, an end of June Outdoor service & Pot-Luck Picnic. There are Joint Summer Services for July (no August services or Labour Day weekend).

Learning Curves

1. The worship schedule relies on a core complement of Licensed Lay Worship Leaders. They meet twice a year with the clergy, over lunch and conversation, to catch up with each other and to share how they're experiencing the UCM. Relationship building amongst the worship leaders is itself a collaborative endeavour.
2. In a rotating worship schedule, the clergy might miss the build up found in the seasons of Advent and Christmas, Lent and Holy Week, because they are not with the same congregation throughout those weeks.

Pastoral Care

The UCM created an Emergency Pastoral Care Team to provide timely response to pastoral crisis. It was not possible for the called clergy to respond to pastoral emergencies in a timely manner given the distance between communities and local hospitals. The Pastoral Care Team is comprised of the clergy along with a paid (per diem call) Emergency Pastoral Care Team (retired clergy and retired hospital chaplain) to respond to emergencies (i.e. hospital, crisis). Other pastoral care is the responsibility of the partner congregations (i.e. Visitation Teams, Pastoral Care Teams). Congregations are to keep the clergy updated.

Learning Curve

1. The pastoral identity of the clergy is different in a collaborative from solo ministry. There is neither the time nor the energy to be that 'shepherd' to all the sheep in a collaborative that was possible in a single congregation. This is a challenging part of the pastoral identity to let go. But it is a sign of collaboration between clergy and laity that can be leaned into.

Collaborative Projects

UCM collaborative events and programs to date include: prep/maintenance/harvesting of two garden sites for donations of produce to local Food Banks, Beer & Hymns nights at local Pub, pot luck lunches and picnics, Car Rally, Book Studies, field trips (i.e. Pow Wow), UCM Joint Choir for combined services, individual partners' events (i.e. dinners, euchre nights, concerts), VBS summer children's program, UCW combined events.

Learning Curve

1. It is a growing edge, how a group of connected churches begin to understand the ‘bigger picture’ of their togetherness. It grows each year, with repeated and new ideas that demonstrate how this work feels and what it looks like.

Region

Not all Regions have materials on their websites to support communities of faith in their development of a collaborative ministry. It is essential that the Region supports collaboratives in their design and implementation phase with well written support documents.

The Region is also the place where communities of faith will look to for advice, wisdom, and example for setting up new forms of ministry models. With more intentional sharing of collaborative ministry experiences, clarity will emerge about the ways in which these ministry models can provide a viable alternative for congregations and clergy.

Learning Curves

1. What marks ‘success’ in a collaborative? It is discouraging that when one of the churches closes in a collaborative, it is thought of as a failure of the collaborative, when it is simply the collaborative moving into its next expression. Success is not measured by the number of buildings in the collaborative, but rather by the relationships and the ministry that evolves from these connections.
2. A collaborative ministry might ask the Region to help nuance protocols and expectations that do not serve a collaborative. For example, a position description for the clergy will have a significantly different profile/expectations than in solo ministry. There is a learning curve for Region staff as they work with these ministry models, which are always changing as we grow in experience and wisdom.

In Summary

In my twenty-two years of ministry, the last four (2021-2025) as clergy to the United Community Ministry have been the most rewarding. With the collaborative, I found the freedom and the encouragement to be curious, to see what is trying to emerge. The UCM has been a compassionate, listening, vibrant partner for me as together we’ve figured out this collaborative ministry piece by piece along the way. As collaboratives become more the norm, the work that we’ve done will encourage the church to move into this model with understanding, curiosity, and an appreciation for the ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work in our church.

Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Cunningham
Retired United Church of Canada Clergy

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