

VHP Consultation 2015

The second Vital and Healthy Parishes Consultation (Anglican and Lutheran) took place in Niagara Falls, May 11-13, 2015. In attendance from the Diocese of Algoma were Marie Loewen, Anne Germond and Pamela Rayment. Below is a combined report of their participation in the consultation.

General Observations

This year about half the people were return attendees, making it a great opportunity to connect with Anglicans and our Lutheran partners in faith. It's amazing how quickly the energy in the room builds during the 'speed dating' exercise in which you are given two minutes to have an elevator conversation with someone highlighting your ministry and life!

The 'open space' nature of the meeting — where everyone in attendance has something to bring to a conversation with others, and where participants choose the topics for those 'marketplace' discussions — once again provided a fresh smorgasbord of topics like: "*Creative liturgy*", "*Multipoint parishes*"; "*Part time ministry*", "*Models for team ministry*", "*Rural isolation*", "*Amalgamating ministries*", "*Messy Church*", "*Assessing enquirers for ordination*", "*Church planting*" and "*Talking to millennials about stewardship*", "*Back to Basics*" and "*The Appreciative Inquiry*". There were certainly sufficient topics and interests to keep 70 people actively engaged in conversations in several different locations for over 8 hours!

The small group discussions proved to be both informative, stimulating and challenging. As the large group divides into smaller groups, some people offer a presentation on a topic, whilst others engage in a conversation about a topic. This year it was noticed that those presenting their topics were often challenged by the other participants, particularly when a presenter tried to offer a 'one size fits all' model. That said, there was an evident openness to other view points – what might have been taken as a criticism in other contexts was carefully considered and responded to.

There was an overall emphasis on encouraging gift-based ministry among the baptized, with the recognition that we live out our baptismal covenants our whole life. This differs from simply establishing ministries and then finding 'volunteers' to carry out tasks. We need to be discerning the needs in the world around us as well as the gifts of those in our communities and then look at how the church might participate in God's mission for the world in the particular context we find ourselves in.

Pamela Rayment was struck by the recognition that our language — our words — have power, which became very evident over the course of the consultation. Even across the Canadian church our language is contextual, that is to say that what one word or phrase means in one diocese can mean something very different in another, and therefore we need to spend time providing context as we work together as a wider church. Also, given that our language has power, we need to work to redefine certain phrases in light of the gospel, i.e. what is meant by weak and strong, success and failure, in the context of the church.

Also relating to the topic of language the Algoma attendees all noticed how our language has changed here in Algoma over the last five years. We felt a big part of this shift has come from the work we have undertaken in terms of congregational health and vitality in our own settings as well as our growing awareness of what it means to be a disciple of Christ in that context.

We were also reminded that as a diocese, we are not alone in the challenges we face. Churches across Canada are facing similar kinds of challenges and many are looking at different models of ministry and partnerships. There were conversations about greater cooperation between congregations and denominations within a town/city as well as partnerships between dioceses. These kinds of partnerships often begin in one on one conversations between people and grow into something new, exciting and beautiful.

All in all, there was a sense of hope, excitement and encouragement, all the while recognizing the difficulties moving forward. As one participant put it, the church is finding itself having to live in a brave space. A space that feels uncomfortable, but has the potential for it to be who and what we it — who and what we — have been called to be in this time and place.

Small Groups

In addition to meeting for 'marketplace' discussions, we also gathered in 'diocesan huddles' and in another small 'circle' group setting with a mix of people from across Canada. We shared stories of successes and failures and which was particularly fruitful. One example of this comes from a deaconess from a Lutheran church near Prince George. In hearing how Sudbury-Manitoulin Deanery churches are preparing to welcome members of a congregation that is closing she remarked - that "attending another church in her situation is just not possible - the nearest church is 500 kms away." At our final meeting she noted how meaningful the interaction with others had been for her as she often feels isolated in her setting.

Marketplace Session: Church Planting

This presentation was led by members from the Diocese of Toronto. They have a number of new and growing areas within the city and are looking to plant a new church in one of these areas.

There are four keys to church planting

1. Planter - This person is key to any new church plant and has a very specific calling for this kind of ministry. He/she has specific skills and gifts necessary for the nature of the work, and is often someone who doesn't mind taking risks. A team approach is usually best, but there still needs to be one person who has the capacity to lead such an endeavour.
2. Property - There needs to be a place for people to meet. Initially it could be a storefront, a house, but the final place should be somewhere strategic.
3. Political Will - support of diocese, people.
4. Providence of God

Why don't church plants work? 2/3rds will succeed if the right church planted is placed in a particular setting. The team approach is best, and this group needs formation time ahead of the plant.

Almost all church plants that fail do so because of unresolved conflict in the planting team (1 Cor. 3: 6-9), poor contextualization (one size does not fit all). Other reasons why church plants fail have to do with inadequate resourcing (money or proper coaching for the team).

Marketplace Session: New Ways of Partnership

This marketplace session revolved around a conversation surrounding how to engage in various ways of partnership, specifically surrounding rural parishes.

In some rural contexts, formal covenants between a larger urban parishes with team-leadership in place are being established. These relationships focus on the formation of

strong lay leadership in the rural areas (layreaders, pastoral visitation teams, ministry teams), with priestly ministry coming from the larger urban parish. This works best when the rural parishes are within an hour of the urban parish. It allows for the church to maintain a presence in the rural areas, but recognizes that a stipendiary ordained ministry isn't viable financially. It also shifts the idea of individual parishes working as 'lone rangers' and adopts the mentality of 'one mission' with 'various ministries'.

Such partnerships might be viable in some of our deanery contexts, especially if Deaneries begin to think of themselves participating in 'one mission' with 'various ministries'. This would allow for the development of 'mutual ministries' and 'mission partnerships' .

Marketplace Session: Messy Church

There were ten people in this session and half of them had yet to experience or offer Messy Church in their congregation. Those who had offered it had questions about how discipling in the long term is possible for this group when they attend infrequently and aren't usually part of the Sunday morning congregation. Others asked about Baptism and Eucharist - what happens in the Messy Church context. For some the struggle was in forming a leadership team while for others there were issues around convincing their parish council that Messy Church is a worthwhile endeavour as it does not result in 'bums in pews' on Sunday mornings or additional funds to the bottom line. An offering is not usually a part of Messy Church.

Anne Germond spoke of her experience with Messy Church where the younger families who regularly attend on Sundays also come to Messy Church because it is an opportunity for them to be together as a family in the church setting. She spoke of the formation that is taking place in their Messy Church team (now completely lay led) where members are discovering how their gifts (eg. craftiness or hospitality) are being used as part of this great ministry. She shared how it took several invitations before members of the neighbourhood joined us.

She learned from this session that every context has its own particular challenges and rewards and that vital and healthy churches are able to adapt and use a Fresh Expression of ministry to their own setting.

Marketplace Session: Amalgamations

This marketplace featured a presentation surrounding the work being done in the Diocese of Toronto in regards to assessment and rationalization of churches. This involved an in-depth process of mapping churches as either unsustainable, static, strategic or sustainable and then beginning to identify and discern possibilities for ministry.

The session from the Toronto Diocese viewpoint was challenging, in that it seemed a pretty “top down” approach and there were many differences from our situation in Algoma. At the same time, it is helpful to be aware of what is happening in other contexts and learn from the various ways of engaging in this work. One major difference noted was the monetary value of buildings sold. When Marie Loewen asked presenter Dave Robinson about what we do in the less urban areas where church buildings are not a resource we can tap when a congregation closes but rather an huge expense that will have to be borne to dispose of, we were all delightfully surprised when after a moment’s thought, he suggested that perhaps the larger urban Dioceses needed to look at that and share some of their wealth!

The presentation sparked much conversation surrounding the general reality of an excess of buildings (many in poor shape or non-ideal locations) in the Anglican church across Canada.

There was an emphasis on the need for team ministry and new models of ministry and the importance of ensuring that our buildings don’t hinder, but rather foster mission and ministry. This involves those at the parish level along with a deanery and diocesan level commitment to discerning where to invest resources and what the minimum requirements for engaging in ministry are (i.e. buildings need to have, plumbing, heat, roof, etc)

One thing that was discussed was that oftentimes where we need to ‘do church’ in our towns and cities may be places where we don’t have our own church buildings, and the need to investigate the use of alternative spaces.

Some of the possibilities to consider:

- potential rural and urban partnerships
- inter-diocesan partnerships (sharing of resources across dioceses)
- regional church: one church in an area that shares clergy, lay ministers, administrators, etc, with several ‘ministry centres’ each with specific ministry focus

Marketplace Session: Team Leadership/Leadership Care

This marketplace involved discussion surrounding various ways to engage in team leadership and how to provide care for those involved in leadership.

The definition of team leadership varied depending on context. In some cases team leadership was recognized as a team of ordained leaders (Rector, Associate Rector, Deacon, Curate, etc), and in other cases team leadership included both ordained and non-ordained leaders, stipendiary and non-stipendiary. This illustrates the importance of discerning context and recognizing that a one-size fits all approach to team leadership won't suffice.

There was a clear recognition that whatever team leadership looks like, it is necessary to ensure tools and skills are fostered and recognition of gifts is essential, as opposed to simply putting out a call for 'volunteers'. To this end, several dioceses have implemented schools/training programs for mission and ministry to help foster healthy leadership, recognizing this is about living out our baptismal covenant together.

Part of team leadership (or any type of leadership) is providing care for those who lead. One of the dioceses have established formal support teams for those in leadership made up of people who assist with self-care, provide accountability, pray with and for leaders and provide mentorship.

Marketplace Session: Talking to Millennials about Stewardship

Presented by Peter Misiasek from the Diocese of Toronto, this marketplace involved a conversation about engaging 'millennials' (those born between 1982-2005) in the church. Peter noted that this group have the potential to be the next "Great Generation" (those born between 1930-1940), the group who funded mission and ministry in the church and who are fully committed to church IF we find new and meaningful ways to connect with them. Millennials are intensely community focussed and want to know how the church is impacting the community in which they find themselves. They are mostly well educated, but find the church does not feed their minds or invites them into positions of leadership. Millennials are processing the 'bad experiences' of the church (abuse scandals, residential schools) and it will take a while for them to return.

Peter offered ideas on how churches could make giving easier for millennials (who don't carry cash). He suggested online giving programs, EOP and even setting up a debit machine in the foyer.

Anne Germond noted that many millennials she knows are educated but either unemployed, being unable to find a job in their profession. Many of them are working several jobs paying only minimum wage, and have very little in the way of spare cash. Because they are working at jobs that aren't always meaningful, millennials want to contribute to society in other ways. Millennials care for the earth and social justice issues. This is one way the church can connect with them.

Some other noteworthy points:

- millennials' education has been largely group-based (collaboration-based)
- by the year 2030 millennials will be the largest demographic of our population
- millennials want to be engaged in relationships
- millennials are the least religiously affiliated generation
- millennials are doctrinally serious - they want to know why they do what they do
- millennials use technology to communicate and carry out daily tasks

Marketplace Session: Appreciative Enquiry

Appreciative Enquiry involves listening to peoples' stories in a particular setting and identifying common themes that appear in the stories. Through further questioning members of a group (congregation in our context) are able to work towards a particular and hopeful future. The language that is used is all important in this type of work, and it encourages members to talk about 'their best experience' of their organization. It is used often in the Diocese of New Westminster and Toronto.

Anne Germond would like to host an Appreciative Enquiry training day in Algoma (some funding would be required).

Marketplace Session: School for Parish Development

A participant from the Diocese of New Westminster offered a session about the Diocese's establishment of a "School for Parish Development." The model they are using and the content of the courses sounds very exciting, particularly as it appears to address Bishop Stephen's concern for transition times and the development of lay and clergy leadership as highlighted in his recent charge to Synod. All those in attendance were taken with the ideas and as well with the report from the Kooteny School of

Ministry but it quickly became apparent that the costs might be prohibitive for any one Diocese to set up. Immediately, there was an offer to see if something might be done cooperatively with the more northern Dioceses and the “Golden Triangle” Dioceses. This is something that needs to be pursued for sure.

One way of looking at ministry was particularly interesting and especially caught Marie Loewen’s imagination. It was described as a process of “Gather, Transform, and Send”.

Churches wishing to take advantage of the program would need to be prepared to send a team for training, with a mix of lay and clergy. This seemed a pretty healthy and exciting prospect for parish renewal. That said, the commitment is significant – a full one week session for two years in a row, with 7 or 8 books to be read in between. There is also an option to run the course over several weekends during the year, but that protocol has its own challenges. In any case, this is worthwhile investigating.

Marketplace Session: Integrating Spirituality

Another fruitful session was a discussion about ways of integrating spirituality into the everyday life of our congregations. While this would seem an obvious goal, all agreed that this is not as easy to achieve as one would wish. Here, as perviously mentioned, the issue of language became important. The move from looking at “parishioners” and “volunteers” to developing “disciples” is critical. Of interest as far as programming is concerned, we spoke about one church that use a film, shown over several nights, with discussion to engage people not open to “Bible Study”, as well as book clubs for this purpose. Cursillo and monthly healing services were enthusiastically promoted, and such things as “Third Space”

Marketplace: Staff Positions

This marketplace was a chance for those who work in staff positions (resourced by dioceses or national church bodies) to gather and discuss challenges, needs, best practices for those engaged in these ministries.

Generally speaking, staff positions were recognized to be about equipping parish leadership and development and working towards the broad missional formation of a diocese/deanery. Staff positions are not about running programs in churches. Program positions are resourced by deaneries (synods) and or particular congregations.

There was a recognition that we can learn much from one another and the need for 'staffers' to be connected with one another across the national churches (both Anglican & Lutheran) was identified. Steps are being taken to help make this a reality.

Final thoughts

The setting of the VHP Consultation was the stunning Carmelite Monastery in Niagara Falls. It stands elegantly as an icon to a different way of life than is portrayed by all the buildings around it - hotels, casinos, restaurants. I think it's safe to say we all came away feeling the same about the church we love and serve. It stands in the world, but is not of the world, and as it centres in Christ it offers its people a message that is always filled with hope, even in the midst of so much that would try to tell us otherwise.

Suggestions for 2016

If there is another gathering in 2016 we would suggest that lay leaders from Algoma be invited to attend this consultation.