

THIS IS WHAT WE HEARD

PASTORAL CHARGE CONVERSATIONS



MARITIME CONFERENCE THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

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THIS IS WHAT WE HEARD PASTORAL CHARGE CONVERSATIONS 2005

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Introduction

As part of the Maritime Conference Staff Strategies to support ministry within the Conference, I and a note-taker visited twenty-five Pastoral Charges, nearly 1/10 of our pastoral charges in Maritime Conference.

We visited at least one Pastoral Charge in every Presbytery and tried to reflect the diversity of the Maritime Conference in the pastoral charges we asked to host conversations. All the congregations we asked responded positively to the invitation.

We noted the following data about each pastoral charge:

- Multi / single point
- Size
- Urban/Town/Rural
- Call/Settlement/ Learning site
- Other: part time; amalgamation etc.

We recorded “size of congregation” based on size theory used by the Alban Institute

- Family size (1-50 attending worship on Sunday including children)
- Pastoral size (51-150 attending worship on Sunday including children)
- Program size (151- 400 attending worship on Sunday including children)

It doesn't appear that size made a significant difference in the tone of what was valued, held as a concern, or noted as a change desired. As we continue to look at the conversations we will explore differences in more depth.

Each Pastoral Charge was asked to invite 4-12 people to join in a conversation. We did not specify who should attend. Some congregations made general announcements and gathered a group; some invited specific participants to represent congregations or perspectives; and others asked members of the Session or Church Council to attend.

We asked three questions.

- What is most important to you about your congregation?
- What do you worry most about when you think of your congregation?
- If you could change one thing about your congregation, what would it be?

Participants answered each question on an index card. These responses are recorded in the summary of their conversation provided for each Pastoral Charge.

Participants were then invited to share their responses in a general discussion. The note-taker indicated the energy of the discussion by recording whether the value/worry/change raised by the participants sparked:

- a great deal,
- quite a bit ,
- some,
- little or no

group interest/energy or involvement in the discussion

The note-taker also recorded significant comments that seem to capture the flow of the conversation. This is also shared in the Pastoral Charge summaries.

At the conclusion of the Pastoral Charge Conversations, a Forum, chaired by Dr. Shirley Cleave, was held to read the Pastoral Charge summaries and offer their reflections of what was heard in the pastoral charge conversations. The Forum included the note-takers, members of Conference Staff, representatives from the Church Revitalization Committee, member of the Christian Life & Growth Executive, and representatives from the Maritime Conference Executive. Some of their reflections are shared in Part Two of this paper.

To the 211 participants in the twenty-five congregations, **thank you** for the privilege of sitting among you in your conversation circles and listening to your honest sharing of values, worries and dreams for change. All of us are looking out over a landscape of change, and it was so valuable to hear your stories of faithful struggling with the shape of change as it affects you. I pray that the Spirit will continue to use these conversations and other conversations which they evoke, to remind us that we are not alone as we seek to make transformation a priority.

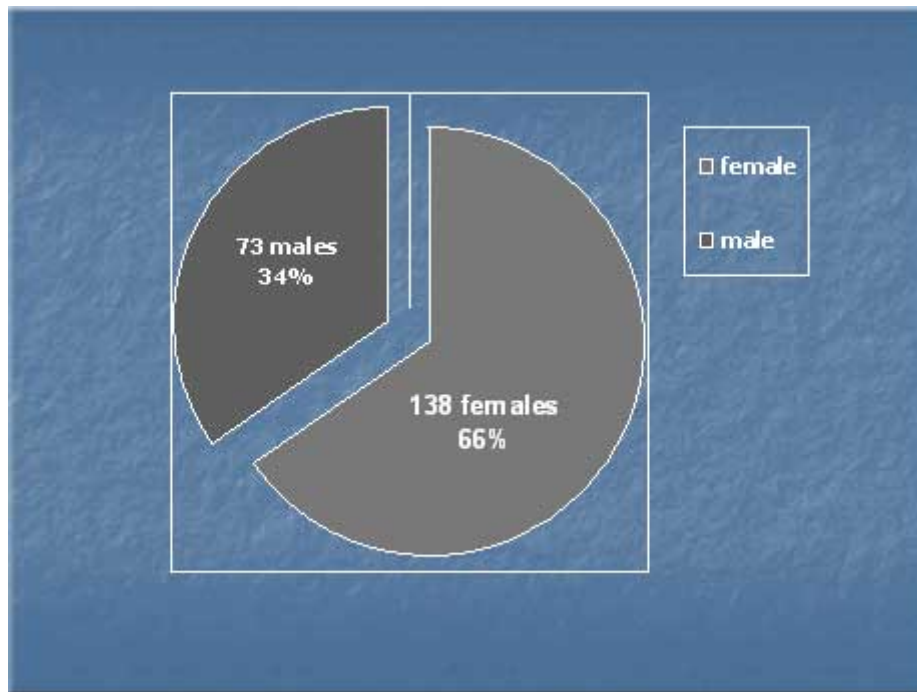
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Part One: Summary of Data

I. Number and Gender of Participants

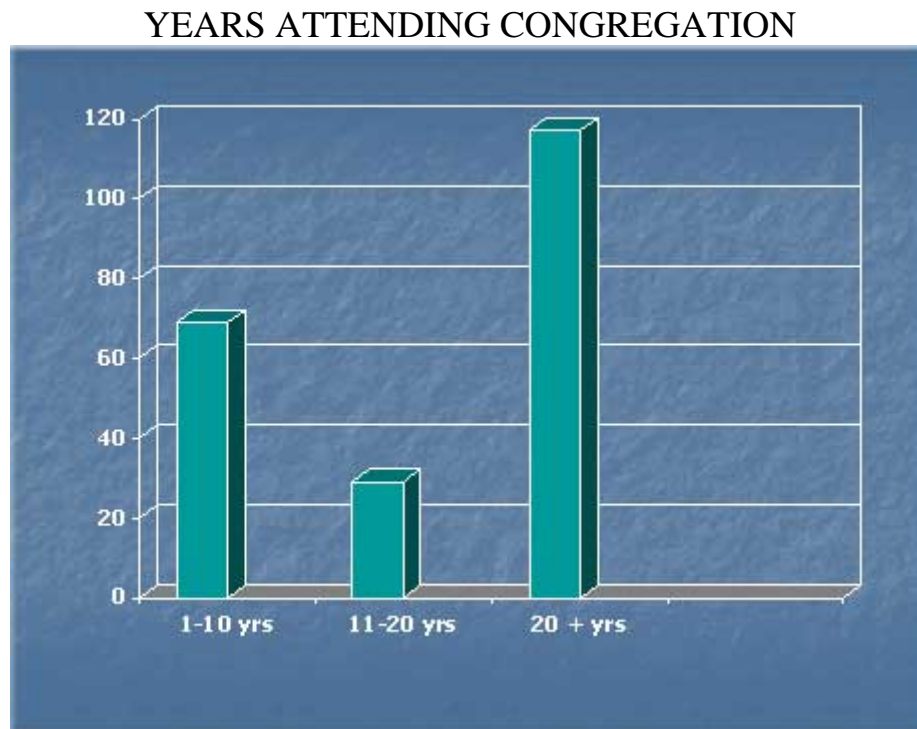
We met with 211 participants who were part of the circle for conversations. Several others participated by sending emails or letters with their responses to the questions. These responses are indicated and included in the pastoral charge summary of conversations.

Of the 211 participants, 138 were female. 73 were male. The percentage is shown below.



II: Years Attending Your Present Congregation

We asked participants how many years they had been attending their present congregation. We recognize that these numbers were offered as “guesses” but the information shown below is organized to show the total numbers in terms of participants who were involved in their congregations for less than 10 years, 11-20 years and more than 20 years. This graph shows that the majority of participants in the conversations were long term members of their congregation.



Gil Rendle, at a recent event at Tatamagouche Centre, suggested that those involved in congregations for twenty or more years were part of the “group identity” and interpreted and reacted to events from the perspective of “the group.” This is illustrated in stories where participants told of past disagreements when people “had their say” and then “went along with the feeling of the group.” Maintaining and supporting the sense of “group identity” was highly valued. Members of “the group” tend to be the ones who are committed to being present in church every Sunday. Newer members tend to see “church” differently and put less emphasis on “group identity” and more emphasis on personal needs and their individual faith journey. This simply indicates different value systems, different ways of understanding the church

We met with some groups who had a mixture of participants including “newcomers” and those who had been involved for greater number of years. In these groups, there was often interesting conversation on issues around the need to be “in church every Sunday” and the busy lifestyle of young families. There was also a different set of worries. Long term members tended to worry more about numbers and debt while these were of less concern to newcomers. One young university student pointed out his personal student debt was higher than the church debt that was of such concern to others in the group! We have different ways of seeing the world and we need to find a way to continue having conversations in congregations so these differences that get reflected in church life will be understood!

It should be noted that “group identity” does not necessarily mean “older folk.” Anyone who has been part of a congregation for 20+ years is likely to be part of the “group identity” of that congregation regardless of age.

III. Age of Participants

We “guessed” the age of participants by recording whether they were children, youth, young adults, adult or senior adults.

There were no children or youth present in any of the twenty-five conversations. There were very few young adults.

Most of the participants were adults or senior adults.

This may reflect the concern that emerged with “the lack of youth and young adults” in the congregation.

It may also reflect a need to have this kind of conversation with the children, youth and young adults who are present in congregations. It might be interesting to repeat the questions in a conversation with a group of youth and young adults and explore if there are differences in perspective.

When young adults were present in conversations, it was very valuable to hear the differences in perspectives

IV. Roles

We asked participants about the roles they played in the congregation. The majority of participants wore “a number of hats” and participated in the life and work of their congregations in more than one role.

We did note the large number of participants who were members of their choir. I asked some groups to comment on this. Most indicated that choir members were in the church building at least twice a week (for choir practice and for the worship service) and therefore were people invested in the life and work of their congregation. It would not be surprising, then, to have choir members interested in the topics raised by this conversation. It was also noted that it is often choir members who count the people and keep track of attendance. From their choir loft looking out over a congregation, they have a clear sense of the changes that are taking place.

V. Reasons for Attending Conversations

We asked participants to share their reasons for attending the conversations. Here are some of the typical reasons offered:

- Minister or someone asked me to attend and represent the congregation.
- Some congregations asked Board or Council members to attend. So participants were present because of a role or responsibility (*Board/Council/long range planning team*)
- Interest in topic/ future of the church
- Curiosity, hear what other’s think
- “There’s a meeting at the church”
- Support Conference

Part Two: This is What We Heard

I. What is most important to you about your congregation?

In response to this question we heard over and over again **that fellowship, a sense of church as family and place for community is highly valued.**

Here is a sample of what was recorded on the index cards participants completed or recorded during the conversation.

Comment

What's most important to me? The love and support I receive; I enjoy my church family and they are always ready to help in any way.

Comment

The most important thing for me about our congregation is the way we work together as a group. The warmth and caring of our congregation is evident to me and has been for 39 years.

Comment

Most important to me is the sense of community, of belonging.

Comment

I value our sense of community – we know each other - and being part of a church congregation helps to break down the barriers that make cities “anonymous.”

Comment

The support of the church in good times and bad.

Comment

These people are my extended family. The United Church of Canada is the only church I've found around here that allows me to journey as it 'fits' me. I am United Church 'born and bred.' This is home.

Relationships are valued, life-giving and sustaining.

Do you hear something of your church story in these reflections?

II. What do you worry most about when you think about your Congregation?

In response to this question we heard that congregations are worried about **viability; the missing generations, particularly the lack of youth and young adults; and the aging of our congregations**

Here are some of the comments that reflect these concerns.

Comment

I worry about the lack of young families and I worry about finances.

Comment

There are financial concerns - and there are questions... Where will we be in 10 years?

Comment

I worry most about the age of our congregation. We are getting older and we do not have a lot of younger people attending our church... young people are leaving town for colleges or work in another town or city.

Comment

I worry about the fact that many faces are having more and more wrinkles and those others without the wrinkles may head down the road, and fear that both may be gone too soon for my liking. I often wonder how, or even if, their torches will be passed on.

Comment

Are we meeting the needs of all segments of the congregation? Are we able to attract and retain newcomers?

Comment

I worry that we are not bringing in more young people. As our congregation is becoming older we have a majority of elderly members but not enough younger members with young families to secure the future of the church.

Comment

When faced with the crunches that are on the horizon, not being able to adapt intelligently; apathy, mediocrity can eat away at a congregation; ignorance of our roots.

Do you hear something of your church story in these stories?

III. If you could change one thing about your congregation what would it be?

The conversations around change are more difficult to relate. Overall, there is a sense that:

- When we talk about change, there is hope.
- A few places are trying new models.
- Others are willing to change; if only we knew what to change.

Here is what was said about change. The discussion on change is organized under a number of topics

Our buildings are life-giving and a legacy but, often they are also our burden.

Comment

We are attached to the building. It offers continuity from the time of our grandparents... the building holds memories. Communities need to have steeples and landmarks.

Comment

We've spent \$3800 in oil since January to keep the pipe organ warm. Our programs are going up the chimney.

Comment

We need 50-75 more seats in the sanctuary; some people left because it was too claustrophobic when the church is full.

Comment

I worry about the age of our building and how we will raise money for repairs and upgrades.

Do you hear something of your church story?

It needs to be noted that, while many pastoral charges struggled with buildings that were too big for their present reality, we did visit a few who had buildings that were too small or inadequate for their present needs. We also visited a couple of places who were raising concerns about the environmental impact of their buildings.

We need a language to struggle with the tension we feel as we name the significance of our buildings and grapple with the fact that we believe our viability, as congregations rests with maintaining our church buildings.

Because we value so highly our relationships, we fear conflict

Here is what was said:

Comment

I fear a split over the gay marriage issue ... that controversy will cause division.

Comment

I worry about changes that perhaps, although not meant to be offending will, in some way, offend members of our congregations.

Comment

I worry that things might not get said or done for fear of hurting someone's feelings i.e. that the congregation can be overly cautious, therefore decisions can be a long time coming, and actions sometimes don't happen.

Comment

The challenge for our dear community is how to change to attract new members without hurting or losing those who need and understand the current message. So perhaps my dearest wish is for the United Church and for Christianity itself to reshape its important and vital message in a way that non-adherents would find it compelling, add value and meaning to their lives, and help to quench their (much spoken of) spiritual thirst.

Do you hear something of your church story?

This is another place of tension for us. We value fellowship, a sense of family, and community and fear that conflict or disagreement will shatter this. There seems to be a norm that if people cannot agree with the position of the majority then they need to leave the congregation. One thing is certain; the church in the 21st century will continue to face issues like the same gender marriage debate. Can we find ways to live together as family even though we do not agree? Can we talk about how we are going to talk about divisive issues?

We have a picture of what it means to be “United Church.” We name it in our losses and our hope for a restored past.

Comment

I'd like to see chairs in the aisles again ... like in the 70's when we used to be concerned about the fire marshal...

Comment

Last year there were 23 funerals and only 18 baptisms in the congregation and the Sunday School program is shrinking.

Comment

“Roll back the clock” to a time when there was so many young people here that is was always crowded, active and happy.

Do you hear something of your church story here?

We need new pictures of what it means to be the United Church of Canada in the Maritimes that take in the reality of our shifting demographics. Some communities will not have the booming Sunday School and Junior Choir but could be energized by a tourist ministry or ministry to seniors. Perhaps we need ways to name what we have lost, to grieve, and to look around with new eyes to see new opportunities.

We also need information on how to access information on community demographics. Some congregations have a good sense of what is happening in the community around them in terms of trends; others need accurate information in order to challenge assumptions and hopes.

We struggle with differences in generations.

Comment

We recently sent home a letter affirming marriage as between a man and a woman. My daughter was furious and said we were “closing the doors on people.”

Comment

As a newcomer, I have a new understanding of what it takes for us to tick. Some of what I heard tonight as “issues” is new for me.

Comment

Where are the younger members? ... Why aren't they willing to take a more active role in the church ... ?

Comment

I worry most about having different concerns and beliefs from the rest of the congregation (usually due to age) and feeling the need to go elsewhere.

Do you hear something of your church story in these struggles?

A lot of what is happening and being named in congregations as “different” and therefore “uncomfortable” is “normal.” The church is changing and we need a broader understanding of how changes in the culture are reflected in church, of millennial differences between age groups. We need more opportunity for conversations between generations. There are no solutions to the change that is upon us; there are only choices to be made.

IV. When we asked what stood out for you from the Conversations, you answered with hope.

Comment

We all have a passion for this place. We need to re-look at our mission statement.

Comment

We need more conversations like this!

Comment

I needed this conversation this evening. I needed to hear genuine love and care, regardless of direction. It's about quality and not quantity. God will prepare something for us. It's larger than us. It's not the end!

Comment

This [conversation] helped us understand each other better.

Comment

I hope we will be here in 2015. We are stubborn. We have committed ourselves to a future as long as we can.

Comment

What stands out is the willingness of this group to talk and think about the future – need an atmosphere where more conversation can happen ... Where will the Spirit lead us?

Hope was made concrete in the opportunity for conversation. It is my sense that the conversations were valued by many congregations. Some groups have decided to meet again for further reflection, other groups indicated issues were raised that will be considered more fully. I was struck by the number of participants who indicated that they had been thinking about such things as were raised but had never said them out loud before. I was often touched by the energy that rose in the group even as difficult thoughts were expressed and fears were named. I often left groups deep in conversation even though we blew out the candle!

I close with a comment noted by one participant. It is the voice of the prophet and our call for further conversation as we continue together to be the church.

Who we are to become is different from what we have been. We are being transformed. What will it take from all of us?

Part Three: Resources for Further Conversations

I. Suggested Resources for Transformation and Revitalization

Recommended by the Maritime Conference Church Revitalization Committee

Gilbert Rendle and Alice Mann, Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations (Alban Institute)

Reginald W. Bibby, Restless Church

Donald Posterski and Gary Nelson, Future Faith Churches: Reconnecting with the Power of the Gospel for the 21st Century

Alice Mann, Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline (Alban Institute)

Roy Oswald, Discerning Your Congregation's Future (Alban Institute)

Gilbert Rendle, Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders (Alban Institute)

Shannon Jung et al, Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come

David Poling-Goldenne and L. Shannon Jung, Discovering Hope: Building Vitality in Rural Congregations (*video & book available from AVEL*)

The church Revitalization Committee has a web page at:

<http://www.marconf.ca/ch-revitaliz.htm> Visit this link for other helpful resources.

II. Readyng Our Hearts: A Spiritual Discernment Workbook

This four week workbook introduces individuals to the language and practices of spiritual discernment. Produced by the Maritime Conference Discernment Team, the resource explores ways the practice of discernment helps us make decisions in our personal lives and in the life of our faith communities. Suggestions are made for ways Boards/Councils can also use this resource to reflect on how we make decisions together especially in a time of change. Spirituality Groups may find this a useful resource for exploring connections between faith and daily life.

Cost: \$10 (\$7 + \$3 for postage). Payment MUST accompany orders. Send your order and cheque (made out to Maritime Conference Fund) to Maritime Conference Office, 32 York Street, Sackville, NB E4L 4R4.

For more information about the resource contact Janice MacLean at jmaclean@marconf.ca

III. Story Circle Video

Professionally produced in the Maritime Conference with funding from the United Church of Canada Vision fund, AVEL, and Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee!

Six storytellers from the Conference share their reflections on the question: The church of today is changing before our very eyes and you are faced with at least two decisions. What would be important for you to keep? What would you leave behind?

Story Circles are a way to create conversation between young adults, adults and seniors.

For use in confirmation classes, inter-generational gatherings, and wherever deeper understanding between the generations is desired!

AVAILABLE FROM MARITIME CONFERENCE AVEL

IV. Other AVEL Resources

AVEL is the United Church of Canada's Audio Visual Education Library. Maritime AVEL serves the congregations in the Maritime Conference. Every United Church congregation is a member (no fee for using the video resources). AVEL has over 1200 titles. Not sure what to order? We have suggestions and will assist you.

Check out the AVEL website where many of our titles are listed: (lists are updated every June) www.marconf.ca

For more information, contact the AVEL office 506-364-1990 [avel@nbnet.nb.ca]

(The AVEL office is open every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon from 1-4 pm, September – June; and is located at the Sackville United Church, Sackville, NB)

V. Spirituality of Church Buildings

We have begun work on a project called "The Spirituality of Church Buildings." We have received a very good response to a questionnaire we sent out asking for reflections on the place of church buildings in our life and faith. We plan to develop resources that honour the place of church buildings in our life of faith while supporting and enabling congregations to make faithful choices about their church buildings.

VI. Demographics

In order to find some of the demographic data for your community go to Statistics Canada website

<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/profil01/PlaceSearchForm1.cfm> .

This webpage for “Community Profiles” allows you to enter your community name and provides you with information on various topics from the 2001 and 1996 censuses. Topics which might be helpful are: Population, Religion, Education, Earnings. You will also find information on Work, Income, and Families and Dwellings. Many communities are served by regional community development authorities. If you contact the one serving your community, it may be able to provide specific information for portions of communities.

Two other resources recommended by the Maritime Conference Faith and Action Committee are:

Restoring Communities to Live In: A Community Engagement Handbook, 1998.
Available from the United Church Resource Distribution Centre

Contextual Theology of Mission in the Area of Maritime Conference. Theology and Faith Committee, Pages 112-118 of 1997 Reports to Conference (Section 1)

VII. Environment Impact

In addition to this statistical information about your community you may also find it helpful to discuss the environmental issues of concern in your community. There is no registry of environmental concerns for most communities. In each of the Maritime Provinces there are environmental groups that monitor, provide information on and can suggest actions on specific issues that affect your community. In Nova Scotia is Clean Nova Scotia <http://www.clean.ns.ca/> phone: (902) 420-3474. In New Brunswick is Conservation Council of New Brunswick <http://www.conservaioncouncil.ca/> and phone: (506) 458-8747. In PEI is Eco-PEI <http://www.ecopei.ca/> phone: 902-566-4696.