

Preliminary Rationalization Report

Deanery of Algoma



The Deanery Council of the Deanery of Algoma met on the 24th of May to begin discussions around the Diocesan Strategic Plan's call for a process of rationalization of buildings and resources within our deanery. At the time of the meeting we had six (6) parishes who had received preliminary post-assessment summaries from the CDO, we had three (3) parishes who had recently completed the process but had no preliminary summaries, and three (3) parishes who were still in process with one (1) parish which has yet to begin any assessment process.

Deanery Council members were asked to sit apart from their parish groups at tables of six with a good mix of clergy and laity present at each table. The meeting began with a short service of worship with a devotional reflection on the story of Paul's shipwreck on the way to Malta from the Book of Acts 27:18-22.

The question was asked if, in our assessment process, we are merely counting the cargo and tackle on the ship only to see what we can throw off to try to keep floating. Instead, it was suggested, perhaps through the metrics of the assessment process we were trying to count something more incalculable and intangible, namely the rescue and presence of God.

With that in mind, the data collected from across the diocese was disseminated through a powerpoint presentation (similar to the one that was presented to the last Executive by the CDO). Following the presentation, table discussion began around three questions in response to the data presented: what surprises you?; what concerns you?; what excites you?

Acts 27:18-22

We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, 'Men... I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.'

Surprises

Table groups were generally surprised by the total number of churches in the Diocese that were in financial positions of dependence upon fundraising and reliant upon such a small percentage of givers within each congregation.

There was surprised recognition that most churches in the Diocese had gone through the assessment process to some degree. Many thought the participation would have been less.

There was shared surprise that 50% of our buildings were considered "in good shape". The flip side, that there are 50% self-declared to be in need of work, was a shared concern.

Concerns

Many concerns focussed on the financial difficulties and the problems of building upkeep that churches across the Diocese are experiencing. Many concerns were expressed from across

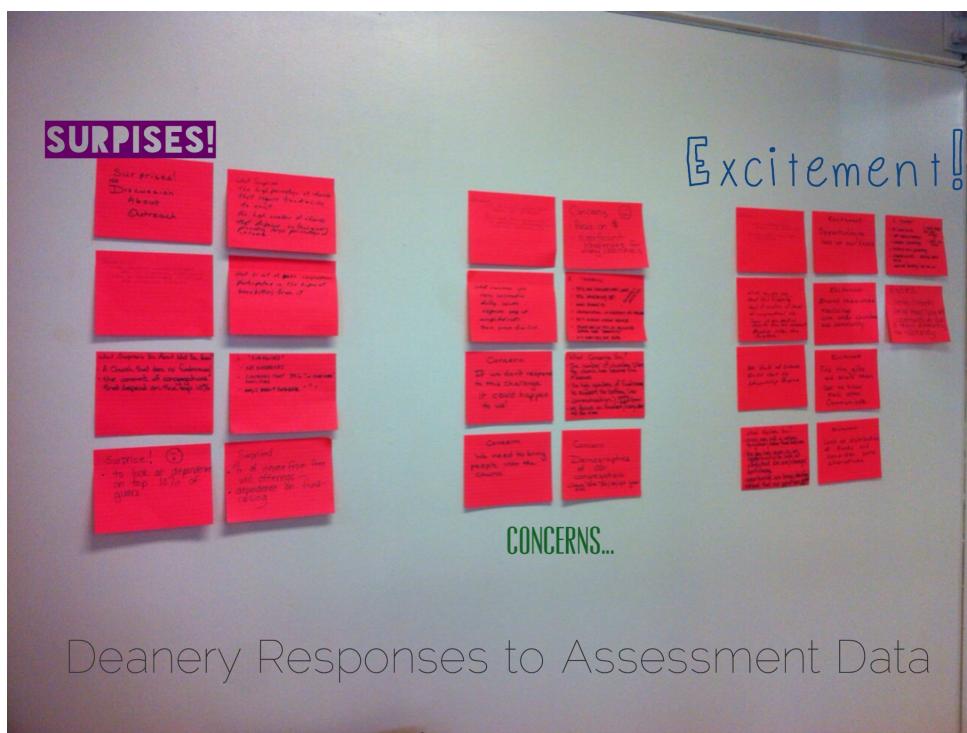
the deanery representation around the demographic realities of aging congregations and lack of younger generations (which was defined broadly as 20-40 yr olds). These concerns were expressed even though the collected and presented data did not identify any demographic issues related to missing generations as such (there is a subtext revealed here that is important).

Concerns were also expressed that there is a need for more formation/discipleship around the matrix of missional identity and action. Many table groups voiced concern that buildings and finances have become the mission.

There was a concern voiced that if, as a deanery, we don't respond in a shared and faithful way to this assessment process that the bishop and executive committee will have no choice but to make decisions about our buildings and resources on our behalf.

Shared concern was also voiced around the issue of accessibility in our public buildings and how, given the financial realities we are facing, those issue will/will not be addressed.

Concerns were also voiced over the lack of clear and vital communication between Executive Committee/Implementation Team and the Deanery Council/churches of the deanery.



Excitement!

There was much to be excited about given the data collected to date. The first exciting thing we noticed was that there was more excitement than concern! The excitement stemmed from the reality of being invited into the process of assessment as parishes and

Deanery Council members in order to give shape and voice to the process of rationalization. The phrase "we are blessed to have our voices heard" came up again and again.

There was shared excitement that the process is ongoing and that conversations are happening at the deanery level across parishes and between both ordained/lay incumbents and lay leadership equally.

There was shared excitement that in this process we may be able more clearly to see opportunities for the church to live more faithfully and creatively. There was enthusiasm and excitement that buildings and resources could be re-used or re-purposed for mission/ministry opportunities. Many expressed a joyful hope that this may allow us to explore ways in which we can share resources and energy in new and missional/vital ways.

There was also excitement expressed to see strong and vital churches active within the Diocese and that they are being celebrated. There was also an excitement expressed that we are being given the opportunity to look at our fears and what they say/don't say about us.

We also think it is important to highlight that our deanery council members expressed that change can be exciting and can offer opportunities to "pull a group together rather than fracture us".

Perceptions in the Deanery of Algoma

The question was then asked of the table groups if the data presented from across the Diocese matched our members' perceptions about their own experience in the Deanery of Algoma. Overall there was a sense that the information presented was a good and faithful reflection of what is going on in our deanery and reflective of our common issues. There was a shared perception that came out in a hopeful tone that we as a deanery share in the wider body of Christ in both our triumphs and in our challenges. There was a perception from within the deanery that the number of our buildings that reported not being 'child friendly' (59%) was much too conservative because this was a "self-assessment" and that that number should be significantly higher, at least within our deanery.

In reflecting upon our perceptions questions were generated pertaining to the future landscape of ministry within the deanery of Algoma around the breaking of barriers and the reality that any changes/amalgamations/closures will be hard.

There is a perception that a new, younger cohort of clergy within the deanery are leading efforts to model an embodied vitality within the life of the deanery. This perception seems to be more about the missional energy of these clergy and their not being moored to the past histories/struggles of the deanery rather than to their age or novelty.

Deanery Challenges and Opportunities

Table members were then asked to discuss what challenges and what opportunities they see as present within our deanery.

A significant challenge that was raised from more than one table was the challenge of the fear many have of church closure/change/amalgamation. Another broad challenge was how we might shift the culture of understanding our buildings and finances as "the mission" to understanding them as resources "for mission".

There was wide agreement that we have a great challenge of inspiring imagination within parishes for creative and faithful ('outside the box' is a phrase that popped up more than once) engagement in vital church life and missional living. How we work together as parishes and a deanery and share resources was widely regarded as a significant challenge. The challenge of clear communication was tied to this.

The challenge of our aging congregations, missing generations, and dwindling finances were universally acknowledged. The challenge of how to 'get the missing generations back' came up from various tables. The challenge of the tension of weighing the desire to make buildings accessible against proper and faithful stewardship of our resources came up at different points.

There was consensus that some of our challenges are specific to urban and rural churches. It was suggested that rural parishes have unique challenges due to their isolation and (usually) out-migrating populations.

From two tables came the hopeful reality that God is in the habit of presenting God's people with opportunities within their challenges.



"God presents opportunities in our challenges!"

Opportunities listed included the opportunity to work together, share resources, programs and expertise, and to break down parochial boundaries and attitudes. It was noted that we are being given the opportunity to explore unique ways of using our buildings in community partnerships, etc.

The opportunity of possible amalgamations was floated from more than one table. There was consensus that the assessment process provided congregational motivation to try new things, to move forward, and to explore faithful responses to God's call upon us.

Many tables recognized the opportunity we were taking (a first in a long while) at the Deanery Council level to forgo business as usual in favour of engaging in conversations and hoped this would continue.

Ministry/Mission and Felt Needs

Following on the opportunities we described together, the group was asked to name some of the felt needs that are not being met within our community and then to name some that were being met but could be met more faithfully.

The rationale for this line of questioning comes from the formation part of the assessment process where we learned that the habits and practices of the church are aimed at meeting the felt needs of those around us. It also serves as a litmus test as to where the responses prioritize and define "community".

Many responses focussed on the felt needs of our worshipping communities surrounding the need for more vital programming/discipleship. Many tables had a difficult time naming specific needs and circled around generalities. A few tables named social/economic realities such as mental health needs, hunger needs, palliative care, and poverty within the wider community.

As for felt needs currently being met that could be met more faithfully, participants tended to name outreach projects such as after-school programs, community gardens, messy church, food bank/soup kitchen ministries rather than specific needs currently being met.

Parting Questions

Upon finishing our time together, council members were sent out with a group of questions generated from the Acts narrative and our current ecclesial situation. They were emailed to each member and they were instructed to think about them, discuss them, and keep them in mind for our further conversations together.

- WHAT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT FOR US TO CAST OFF? WHAT SHIPS MIGHT WE NEED TO LET GO OF? WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO HOLD ON TO?
- WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF? WHAT ARE THE FEARS WE HAVE AS CHURCH?
- WHERE DO WE SEE GOD'S RESCUE?

Reading Between the Lines

There are a few items worthy of highlighting that illustrate certain dynamics that are present within the deanery.

- *Even though the data presented did not mention demographic changes, loss of generations, etc., many members of the council focussed their responses (surprises & concerns) upon the "missing generations". Questions surrounding how to "get them back" arose on several occasions. However, the one piece of data that we did have in relation to children, that 59% of our churches are self-declared to be spatially inhospitable/unfriendly to children did not seem to concern the members of council (neither surprised them nor concerned them). The one concern surrounding this number came from a former deanery council official who has been in most of the deanery churches who suggested that the number should be significantly higher.*

In terms of our opening narrative from the Book of Acts, we have asked ourselves what ships we might need to be willing to let go of. In the terms of the narrative, the ship was their "silver bullet", their final hope for salvation. It strikes us that a current dynamic within the deanery is that if we can only find out how to get young people back, we will be saved. Given that members were overly concerned with how to "get them back" without mentioning concern that upwards of 60% of our churches are inhospitable to children suggests that a pragmatic/functional dynamic is active with regards to the presence of children and young people within our churches. In other words, what is suggested is that their presence meets a felt need within the church, namely its continuance into future generations, rather than the church understanding itself as a body that is there to meet the needs of the whole community, including its children and their parents. This pragmatic/functional dynamic may be a ship we need to be willing to let go of and should be at the forefront of deanery strategies and priorities moving forward.

There is a further dynamic at work in relation to this one and that has to do with the expectation that younger, more energetic clergy will realize more younger, energetic people in the pews which will lead to our future survival.

- *As we continued in our discussion toward more and more concrete realities (from reaction to data, to questions of naming felt needs) responses tended to move in the opposite direction from specific responses to generalities within the life of the church. In other words, members had a relatively easy time naming their surprises, concerns, excitement and the challenges and opportunities within the deanery but had a*

significantly more difficult time naming the felt needs of our community (both within our churches and within the city and surrounding communities).

This was an interesting dynamic to observe and suggests that the challenge listed above of "inspiring imagination within parishes for creative and faithful engagement in vital church life and missional living" is a significant one that should be at the forefront of deanery strategies and priorities moving forward.

- ***As we discussed the perceived felt needs of the community and how we are meeting these needs we recognized that discussions were primarily focused on bringing people to the church buildings as opposed to congregations going out into the wider community to engage in ministry together. This we will call a "culture of assimilation".***

This dynamic is tied to the above but with the practical reality that it illustrates a high dependance on our buildings that may prove to be a challenge in shared ministry (i.e. which church will host which 'event', etc).

Moving Forward

Moving forward, deanery officials will be visiting each parish to 'come alongside' and offer tools and resources to read, understand and act upon their congregational reports from the assessment process. We have recognized the value in the fact that this assessment process has largely been a formational exercise in Christian discipleship. Our desire is to continue along that trajectory so that our response to the parish assessments continues to be a formational exercise in Christian discipleship. In light of this we have highlighted four (4) main areas of congregational life that we have deemed priorities for healthy and vital congregations within the deanery of Algoma. We will highlight them in no particular order as well as action items that are either currently underway or will be shortly to address these priorities.

1. Children in Church: Moving from Function to Formation

As addressed above, we have observed a functional view of children in church that is widely held and is detrimental to vitality. This dynamic is by no means unique to our deanery. Only by addressing a proper theology/ecclesiology of children will we be able to address the wider issue of missing generations. In light of this, the deanery is currently planning a deanery event for spring of 2015 with an expert in the field to help us address this dynamic and offer us tools to move forward as parishes and a deanery. As well, we will be reviewing the role of the deanery child and youth worker position and ask ourselves if it is a good use of our resources.

2. Inspiring Missional Thinking: Shifting the Culture of "Assimilation"

As addressed above, we have observed a lack of inspiring imagination within parishes for creative and faithful engagement in vital church life and missional living. We have also, in relation to this recognized a concurrent dynamic that we have labelled a "culture of assimilation". Moving in the direction of missional thinking also moves us away from this culture of assimilation because it forces us to re-orient our ecclesiology. The deanery proposes to prioritize this through shared programs/deanery library of resources that will be geared toward cultivating greater missional thinking in our discipleship as well as through the possibility of teaming more closely with organizations such as Wycliffe College's Institute of Evangelism. Looking toward our fall Deanery Council meeting, it is hoped that we will be able to gather lay individuals from within the deanery who embody such creative imaginations and invite them to join our discussions.

3. Encouraging Creative Conversations

We recognize that at all levels of the deanery, the best way forward is to give permission and space to voice creative thinking and to encourage conversations that look "around the corner" at what future ministry will look like in our deanery. As a deanery we need to be supportive of conversations around possible shared ministries/new ministries/church plants, shared outreach and mission, resources, and allow leaders and laity to voice the possibility of creative amalgamations that could possibly foster vitality. The deanery officials will begin to encourage such conversations and provide the tools, space, and resources necessary to have them. Conversations between churches, with specific goals and outcomes, are currently being planned in consultation with parish incumbents as a part of our strategic response and prioritizing. As full reports are coming in, deanery officials, in consultation with the CDO and the PA, are in the process of identifying what specific support is needed in the parishes that have fallen below the benchmarks and how/what resources, tools and opportunities are needed to be brought to bear upon the specific issues those parishes are facing. This will be done through conversations within those parishes. Those parishes that are recognizably meeting benchmarks will also be supported in their response to their reports through similar conversations.

4. Finances and Faithful Stewardship Models

Much good work has been done across the Anglican Church of Canada in relation to faithful stewardship models. The deanery officials intend to explore those efforts in consultation with the CDO and PA of the deanery and begin to work together as a deanery council to make those resources available to individual parishes and congregations.

Conclusion

We are a deanery that is hopeful and courageous that the living God will rescue His church. We have much to celebrate in our common life together and we have vital, missional energy alive in the deanery! We also may have some ships (ideas, dynamics, yes, perhaps even buildings) that we need to let go of. We have a clear sense of priorities and are developing a faithful and strategic response to this assessment process. We are moving forward in this process of 'rationalization' with the deep instinct that whatever the landscape of ministry within our deanery will look like around the corner, that we are called to it together and in the power of God's Spirit. Finally we are aware that as we are on this journey, God is moving us beyond what has been to what will be. That doesn't mean in any way that we are not thankful for what has been. However, it does mean that good days with faithful work are right here in front of us and still to come. With this in mind, we urge our brothers and sisters in this deanery and across the Diocese, "now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship."