

The Tri-Regional Spring Meeting 2024

The Spring Meeting of Antler River Watershed, Horseshoe Falls and Western Ontario Waterways Regional Councils was held at the UNIFOR Centre in Port Elgin from Friday, May 24 until Sunday, May 26. It was my first visit to the UNIFOR Centre and it is an interesting complex built right on Lake Huron. It was also Rev. Martin's first time but Barbara Robbins and Betty Stirling had been there before.

This was also my first introduction to our new Executive Minister of the Tri-Region, Rev. Mark Laird. I was wondering how anyone could replace Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa, but I think he will do just fine. He is young, pleasant, fun, knowledgeable and gets things done without any fuss.

Friday afternoon we heard nine speakers with very long titles who spoke about their work within the United Church. It is impressive to hear all that is being done on our behalf.

Tanya Cameron gave a report from the Office of Vocation which I found interesting. Our Rev. Martin came to us through the "Admission process", that is, ministers from other denominations who apply to become United Church of Canada ministers. The number of ministers in that process reached 200 people in 2022 and the process has since been paused. The problem is that, even though many communities of faith are seeking a minister, few of those are willing to take one of fifty racialized ministers who are ready and willing. A sad reflection on our society.

We were introduced to the new Designated Lay Ministers before our supper break. Following supper, we listened to the Moderator, the Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne. Whenever she begins speaking, she describes her physical self, right down to her blue-could-be-purple glasses, for anyone who is visually impaired. She is a passionate speaker. Vespers ended the day.

Betty and I shared a unit which had everything but heat and it was a coolish weekend. But, on one of our walks during a break, we met two maintenance men in a golf cart who were very pleasant and told us about some of the history of the complex. They asked how we liked our accommodation and we said it was fine except there was no heat. They looked surprised, asked us the number, and drove off. When we returned "home", it was warm.

Saturday morning, we met in our Regional Councils. All of these meetings follow very strict procedural protocols. We were introduced to the Leadership Team and they read the BRAVE/Affirming Statement:

BRAVE: Commitment to Community Safety

We strive, in this time of co-learning, to be brave by

B – being accountable for the impact of both our words and our silence

R – reflecting on and naming our own biases

A – actively listening

V – vocalizing questions that arise from our learning

E – encountering new ideas with curiosity and wonder

We were welcomed by the out-going ARW Regional President, Cheryl Bolton, and then we went through the list of Commissioners to General Council 45 (in Calgary in August 2025). They try to get as varied a group as possible to represent all people.

After a break, the Regions joined together again and the new candidates for Diaconal Ministry and Ordained Ministry were introduced. They (four of them) each gave a short speech. Then the Moderator was given a gift and we went to lunch. During that time, those who were taking part in the Celebration of Ministries Service had a rehearsal and those of us in the choir had a practice.

The Celebration of Ministries Service was the most interesting and the most boring part of the weekend. In November of 2023, all Designated Lay Ministers received notification that, if they wished to become Ordained Ministers or Diaconal Ministers, all they had to do was have the necessary qualification, apply, and be interviewed. If accepted, they would then be recognized at this spring meeting. There was one qualification – to have been performing active ministry in a Community of Faith for at least five years, that is, doing everything an ordained minister would do. There is a benefit to being ordained or commissioned. Once a DLM retires, he/she no longer has ministry status within the United Church. He/she becomes a lay person with no ability to marry, perform baptisms, serve communion, perform a funeral, etc. Retired ordained or diaconal ministers retain that right. So, the service was interesting because six DLMs from ARW, nine from HF, and five from WOW decided to make that change. And also, a choir, under the direction of Devon Hansen from St. Andrew's, Chatham, made up of people from all three Regions including Betty and I, sang during the ceremony. It was boring because we watched the same ordination ceremony twenty times. However, Eric Skillings and Michael Shewburg were among the six from ARW.

The supper break was followed by meeting as a Regional Council again. There was only one person running for President Elect for our Region. Richard Auckland is a retired elementary education administrator from St. Thomas. He has been involved in every meeting of ARW that I have attended. I think he will make a good Regional President. We learned that only one person had put her name forward to volunteer to help our Regional Council in its decision-making responsibilities, clearly not enough. Then the Moderator visited and spoke to each Council in turn to end the evening.

Sunday began with a Regional Council meeting, again. We formally elected Richard as our President Elect. Regional Council had sent out an evaluation form about the new structure back in February 2023 and we were given the results of that. Communication was the biggest issue since the demise of Presbytery. Some solutions were suggested, mainly to form groups to meet over coffee, etc. There was no new business, so we finished in good time.

The morning ended with worship and honouring those who have passed away (Lewis Snow), Community of Faith Life Cycle changes (Wesley United Church is nesting with Charing Cross United Church and Fletcher United Church is nesting with Merlin United Church), Retirees (for UCW members, Mary Dillon DLM and Sheila Macgregor OM, and also John Lovering OM), and Jubilands (Derek Parry OM and William Vanderveeken OM, 50 years). Rev. Mark Laird delivered the closing Message. We picked up bagged lunches and left for home. Betty took the scenic route which made the trip most enjoyable.

I enjoy these meetings. You meet people who are really committed to the vision of the United Church and others, like myself, who are interested and try to do their best within their own Community of Faith.

Wendy Kempster