

Toronto Conference Explorer Project
Evaluative Report
September 2016

Prepared by Carol L. Hancock For Toronto Conference Executive

Background

In September 2014, the Executive of Toronto Conference approved a proposal for The Explorer Project, an initiative which originated from the Conference's Interview committee. Sparked by conversations about recruitment for future ministry leadership, a small task group requested funding for a new initiative to encourage young adults to consider a ministry vocation. The Project was designed to involve people who have demonstrated leadership in our Church but who have not yet discerned a call to ministry or begun the candidacy process or theological education. The Project would not replace or substitute any part of the candidacy process.

The Project

The Executive approved the proposal that Toronto Conference partner with other Conferences to identify active young adult church members who would value this opportunity. Each participating Conference was also asked to identify host sites which would offer an exciting experience of contemporary church identity, mission and ministry. Aware that other Conferences would not have equal financial resources, Toronto offered to cover much of the expense. Costs would include travel to and from the site, an honorarium, and, if necessary, some support for the site providing living arrangements. The first iteration saw three Explorers experience the project and the evaluations from all parties was overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the results.

The Second Iteration – Summer 2016

After the results of the first iteration, Toronto Conference Executive proposed a second iteration. This year, Toronto Conference was joined by British Columbia Conference, the Conference of Manitoba and North-Western Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador Conference and London Conference. All Conferences agreed to cover the costs of travel for Explorers from their Conferences. B.C. and Newfoundland and Labrador also made additional financial contributions to the overall Project. M.N.W.O. also assisted their sites with additional costs.

In four cases, the Executive Secretaries of the partner Conferences assigned one of their staffs to be the Lead Staff. The Executive Secretary of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario picked up this responsibility herself and after initial consultation, these Lead Staff (Betsy Exley, Dale Hildebrand, Doris Kizinna, Shannon McCarthy and Heather Sandford) worked with me, Carol Hancock, to recruit young adults and sites, communicate with them and with the Explorer's home congregation, and oversee the experience. Based on the experience of the first year, we completed the recruitment phase earlier and by January we were able to match seven Explorers to their sites. All Explorers completed three month assignments.

Rebecca Kent from Barrie, 21, Brock University to Springdale United, NF/Lab

Matthew Lindsay, London, 20, Graduated high school, working on NEOS Certificate in Youth Ministry from Five Oaks, to Oak Bay United Church, Victoria, B.C.

Chelsea Skanes, St. John's, 22, Studying Social Work to Burton Avenue United Church, Barrie, ON

Robert Berkowski, Coquitlam, 26, University/college student to North Bramalea United Church.

Maia Walker, Kamloops, 19, Thompson Rivers University to Calvary United Church, London

Valerie Ziegler, Victoria, 24, Intern with Herowork in Victoria to 1Just City (the five community ministries of the UCC in Winnipeg)

Cassie Vermeer-Korittko, Bradford, 25, Personal Support Worker to Emo-Devlin/Fort Frances, MNWO.

All seven Explorers completed their term on their sites and evaluations have been received from each of those sites, with warmly appreciative comment for the experience. Lead Staff were asked to interview the Explorers for a final evaluative report. Ministry personnel and/or staff for each of the sites offered to serve as Mentors and work with the Host Site committees; together they and the Explorer prepared monthly evaluations as the summer unfolded.

Anticipated Explorer Project Outcomes

In creating the Project, the following outcomes were identified:

- Up to 8 already involved younger adult United Church members will be encouraged to consider ministry as a vocation. They will be affirmed as people who are valued and appreciated by their Church and as individuals who have gifts for this vocation
- Ministry sites will have the benefit of meeting these people, benefitting from their shared experience, and being affirmed as healthy communities who can help develop and mentor future leadership. They may be assisted in their own ministries to develop something new and they will experience the service of this healthy spirited young person.
- Committee members will experience the privilege of relationship with vibrant younger members of our Church and be encouraged by their commitment to discipleship.
- Whether the experience leads to a sense of vocation to the orders of ministry or not, we trust it will deepen the sense of joy in discipleship for all who are involved.
- All involved will have an expanded sense of The United Church of Canada, gaining insight into the diversity and distinctiveness of ministry in other parts of the body.

From the evaluations, all of the outcomes were, once again, achieved. Six of the projects report complete satisfaction. One Site feels that it did not receive enough information about its Explorers' particular needs before the project began and we have noted learnings from the experience. The site, however, rose to the challenges magnificently, and completed the project and the Explorer has expressed appreciation for the opportunity. That Explorer did not self-assess accurately and needed much more support than was expected. The persistence of the site committee and mentors allowed the project to be a growth experience for the Explorer.

Leadership by Conference Lead Staff

This project was designed to have low central administration and its success depends on the careful work done by the Conference Staff. We developed most of the resources co-operatively, allowing for variation with the conferences. Having central co-ordination and some help remembering dates and tasks was seen to be helpful, since all the staff took summer holiday and had busy workloads to juggle. I monitored our progress throughout the summer and there were a few small interventions which proved helpful. The Lead Staff were the prime contact throughout the summer for the host site and Explorer within their Conferences.

Suggestions for Third Iteration

All involved recommend that the Project continue. From the evaluations, the following list of ideas was offered for the next year:

Again invite connections amongst the year's group of Explorers; both before and during the summer.

Repeat the conference call amongst mentors in advance of the projects beginning; help them think about how to discuss vocation choices and issues with the Explorers and answer any questions.

Start recruiting process in October and finalize matches no later than January. Continue to have each Conference decide on its selection process.

Make it a necessary component for hosts and explorers to talk to each other prior to the start of the experience. Have the Explorers develop learning goals to share with them.

Encourage and facilitate new Explorers connecting with past Explorers prior to their placement.

Consider having Co-ordinator contact Explorers and Host Sites directly after they are matched to ensure consistency of information. Have evaluations sent directly to the Co-ordinator, as well as to the Lead staff.

Consider having the Project run in non-summer months, if Explorers can make themselves available.

Consider having honoraria payments set up to go automatically to Explorers unless payment is stopped.

Excerpts from the evaluations received:

From Explorers

Has the Project helped you reflect upon ministry as a vocation?

“I knew the traditional ministry path was never for me, but it was very interesting to see how I could be a minister in another context....I am still not sure whether I am ready to pursue this path of ministry, however without this opportunity I don't know whether I would have considered it so seriously, or really know what such a position would be like.”

“Coming into this project the Explorer felt that ministry was something that she respected but not for her. She feels that she has been affirmed in the current path that she is on which is teaching but feels now that this may lead to ministry in the future. She feels that she would like to travel more and mature before she would consider ministry as a vocation.”

“The project allowed me to see what ministry is like on a day-to-day basis....I am beginning my discernment process and while that was something that has been on my radar for quite some time, I feel as though the Explorers' Project was the catalyst for me beginning it at this point in time. I feel if I had not participated in the program, I might have continued to put off discernment, or potentially never have completed it at all.”

“Even if it doesn't become my vocation, it doesn't mean I'm not involved in the church but still going to explore the vocation.”

From Mentors

Would you recommend this experience to others?

“Absolutely! It was a great experience for our ministry and we hope that it was equally as great for the Explorer.”

“Yes....As a church we need to look at opportunities like this one so that we can attract young people to be part of this great ministry of ours as the United Church of Canada.”

“Absolutely, yes! It gave the pastoral charge an opportunity to participate in the discernment (and training) of future ministry personnel and the people took that role seriously.”

“Yes—gives the congregations a connection with the wider church, and hope for the future of the church. Great opportunity to encourage young adults to pursue the vocation of ministry.”

“I would love to say yes but I don't know that I would. If a congregation is interested in pursuing this, I would want them to be clear about their expectations around what the explorer would be doing and aware that the experience would be about more

than “the work”. I also would not recommend entering blindly.....I would not do this again without the opportunity to talk on the phone but facetime/skype would be better.”

“Absolutely! It was encouraging to the congregation, to witness and walk alongside a young adult thinking about ministry. It was inspiring to hear him talk about his faith and his sense of call to ministry.....Pick us again!”

From Host Sites

Would you recommend this experience to others?

“DEFINITELY! I think the the Explorer program is an opportunity for youth within the church to expand their awareness of our communities of faith across Canada but also of different ways that faith is being lived as the hands and feet of Christ doing sacred work. We would happily host another Explorer in the future.”

“Yes—brings new life and energy into a congregation, connects us with the larger church. Gave the host churches a sense of purpose that they were contributing to the Explorer’s learning experience.”

“YES. It allows younger questionable [sic] adults to see that they have a place in the church where they can belong....It opens their eyes to new ways of faith sharing and a reaffirmation that the United Church of Canada is willing to go the extra mile to see that we embrace and appreciate who they are and what they stand for.”

Finances

At the time of writing, there are several outstanding bills, but we believe that the final total for this year will be \$43,652.08. With funds contributed to the overall project costs by other Conferences, the net draw on the Toronto Conference budget should be under \$40,000. That has included administrative costs which consisted of Conference Call expenses and a fee paid to me, Carol Hancock, for the project design and co-ordination. Honoraria were given at the rate of \$1500. month. Host sites provided accommodation, most meals, and transportation. Where expenses were high, grants of \$500. were provided to host sites so that the Explorers would experience similar levels of support. As noted earlier, the participating Conferences covered the travel costs.

If the project continues, we would need to have the security of the Toronto Conference funding up to \$75,000, but it could be expected that each year the full amount will not be needed. Based on the experience of the first two years, I believe this project could offer as many as ten experiences next year.

