

Toronto Conference Explorer Project Evaluative Report September 2018

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Background

In September 2014, sparked by conversations about recruitment for future ministry leadership, Toronto Conference Executive approved 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 does not replace or substitute any part of the candidacy process.

In creating the Project, the following outcomes were identified:

- 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.

Each year, Toronto Conference has partnered with other Conferences to identify active young adult church members and leaders who would value this opportunity. Each selected Explorer is given an honorarium and their round trip expenses to the sites are covered. Each Explorer is placed in a site away from his or her home Conference. The normal pattern is for a three-month experience, from May through July. Each participating Conference is also asked to identify host sites which would offer an exciting experience of contemporary church identity, mission and ministry. The Host Sites create a Host Committee and appoint a Mentor.

In the four years of the project to date, twenty young adults have become Explorers.

Leadership by Conference Appointed Lead Staff

This project was designed to have low central administration costs and its success depends on the careful work done by Conference Staff and/or volunteers who serve as Lead Staff to the Project. Each year, that group, working with me, have refined the process, creating tools and resources that we find beneficial. I monitor our progress throughout the summer and respond to queries as needed. The Lead Staff were, once again, the prime contacts throughout the summer for the host site and Explorers within their Conferences. This year, Dale Hildebrand, Twila MacNair and Doris Kizinna fulfilled this role.

The 2018 Experience

Although seven Conferences initially expressed intention to participate this year, the many challenges demanding attention by staff and volunteers resulted in only four Explorers being matched with sites, and one of those Explorer candidates had to withdraw his application. Between the transitions anticipated in our changing structure and the demands of a General Council year, four of the Conferences had to withdraw, although they each expressed interest in participating in the future.

The 2018 Matches between Explorers and Sites:

Brianna Huet, 21, from Kamloops, B.C. was matched with College St. United Church, Toronto, Toronto Conference.

Wil Lathan, 20, from Owen Sound, ON (Toronto Conference) was matched with Highlands United Church, North Vancouver, B.C.

Catherine Spence, 25, from Toronto, ON, was matched with Knox United Church, Kenora, ON. (Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario)

As we have done each, year, we have collected evaluative comments from all participating bodies. These evaluations are directed at assessing the Project and the learning opportunities for the Explorers. This is not a supervisory evaluation such as ministry Candidates would experience. At the end of each summer, the Lead Staff conduct a reflective interview with the Explorers from their Conferences.

Catherine Spence left her placement early due to medical concerns.

The other two Explorers both report that the experience has furthered their discernment about a vocation in ministry. One believes that this experience has clarified and confirmed a vocation; another says it has helped a great deal in learning about the requirements of leadership and that person's own needed areas of growth. The latter Explorer says: "This helped [me] to see the possibilities of wanting to pursue a vocation in ministry; 'I realized I don't want to just have an ordinary job but I want to do something I am passionate about.'" Both want to strongly recommend the program to other young adults.

While Toronto Conference created this project out of a desire to foster the recruitment of young adults into ministry vocations, it has always been understood that discernment is at the heart of this project. If a young adult grows in their faith and relationship with our Church, but decides that their gifts and calling are in other forms of leadership, we have always understood this to be a "success". A follow-up study to see what impact this project has had on recruitment is in the planning stages. Informally, we have heard that some are pursuing theological education.

Once again we have heard from the host sites that it was exciting and worthwhile to welcome a young adult from a different part of our church into their congregation's life. Although each Explorer has to demonstrate that they have already been offering some form of leadership before he or she is accepted to this project, the opportunity to move to a new Conference context and experience a very different congregation from their home situation has been both challenging and rewarding to these young adults. We only accept applicants who have strong references; nevertheless, these are young people who do not necessarily know what they do not know, and we have always heard that the summer gives them multiple opportunities to grow and develop. Host Site Committees have provided them with both the practical supports needed to live for three months in a new place and also a supportive small community for reflection on their experience. Experienced Mentors who have excitement and energy for ministry, and who have usually been serving the host site congregation, have been key conversation partners, as well as helping make detailed plans for the learning experiences and opportunities for each Explorer.

At the time of writing I believe that the final total expenditure for this year will be approximately \$30,000. With funds contributed to the overall project costs by other Conferences, the net draw on the Toronto Conference budget should be under \$ 26,500. That has included administrative costs which consisted of Conference Call expenses and a fee paid to me, Carol Hancock, for the project co-ordination. Honoraria were given at the rate of \$1300 month with a final \$1100.00 sent at the completion of the project and evaluations. 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.

Planning for a 2019 summer iteration will begin in September. As of writing, the following Conferences have expressed interest in participating: British Columbia, Alberta and Northwest, Saskatchewan, Manitou, Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, London, Toronto and Newfoundland and Labrador. This could be our largest Project iteration yet.

