

Rev. Dr. Christian Ceconi, Dean of the Central Toronto Ministry Area

Report about our work in the Central Toronto Ministry Area at Eastern Synod Assembly, June 22nd, 2018

Thank you, Laurie, for inviting me to speak about the Central Toronto Ministry Area. Thanks also to Bishop Michael and his crew for their leadership and encouragement in getting the ministry area structure started, and to our first Dean Ilze Kuplens-Ewart.

The bishop nailed it yesterday when he said we have nothing to fear. And yet, we are scared to death that this church won't exist in 20-30 years. Sometimes we spend more time with maintaining the past than living the gospel now. Seeing this so often was the biggest curse of being a dean. My biggest joy is, that we have come to the point where we want to change from just maintenance to mission. I am excited that pastors and lay people in our ministry area want to renew their ministries by creating life-giving and vibrant communities of faith. They want to do it together, renewing their faith and helping each other to be transformed by the gospel.

1. Our situation in the beginning

In 2015 Central Toronto had 21 congregations, most of which were aging and declining in membership and finances with not enough people willing to take on leadership. Half of our congregations have ethnic ministries which increase the risk of inward focus.

Many congregations are between fear and desperation—which is not a bad place for change to begin. Then you have nothing to lose. You are ready to try whatever it takes. You have come to a point where you are willing to take on risks. **You don't just say all are welcome—you whole heartedly welcome new people and allow them to change and transform YOU.** You are ready to truly embrace them as sisters and brothers. This is an incredible opportunity for new life.

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When the new ministry area structure was introduced it seemed like an extra effort and not particularly attractive. Our leadership team didn't know whether our congregations were willing to embrace it. But the ministry area helped us move forward as a community assisting, sharing and leading change together.

Our team held a visioning day and set our Ministry Area goals as

- **Building relationships**
- **Supporting each other's activities**
- **Promoting collaboration**

Building trust was necessary, so we decided to visit each of our 21 churches and their church councils. We created a website [www.LutheransToronto.ca] to share ideas and facilitate communication among our congregations and hosted best practice workshops with about 45 participants each year.

2. Facing reality

Today, we see that this is not enough. This approach was not bringing us real transformation. New life doesn't happen by affirmation and good words only. New life isn't easy. It's time to face the reality that we talk a lot about change but don't do it. If we want to live, we have to embrace this painful truth first.

As an example, I checked the budget of Martin Luther Church, where I serve and where church council set outreach as one of their top 5 priorities this year. In a budget of about \$230,000, \$20,000 is allocated to mission. Wow, that's great, I thought, until I discovered that this is money for Synod, CLWR and to local relief. In the end only about \$5,000 was dedicated to missional outreach. The two newest groups in our church weren't even in the budget and our church, which was emphasizing outreach, was investing less than 3% of the budget. I felt bad that I hadn't seen that and wondered if I was denying this reality.

Check your budgets. Check if your money is where your mouth is. It's time to wake up! And the to make a change.

Our new ministry area structure has a similar problem. The Area Leadership teams are sent to activate congregations and encourage collaboration and renewal. They were trained to be transformational leaders. But we send them with almost no budget and resources.

3. From maintenance to missional

But more important than the actual budgets I asked myself: Have we lost our passion for mission? Are we really excited about the life changing message of the gospel? Is our church committed to seeing lives changed by the gospel (including the life of our church itself)?

Last fall we began to ask, how do we re-discover our passion? What does it take to see our congregations transformed in a way that they can't hold back from sharing the life giving gospel? Like the stories we heard during open mic.

Beginning with a visit from Bishop Michael at our January ministerial we've had ongoing and intense conversations with the pastors. Many of us were frustrated by our current situation, longing to regain our passion for ministry and mission. One of our pastors said "*I am sick of dying. Aren't we in the resurrection business?*".

We stopped complaining for a moment and began to wonder: What if? What if we do not wish and long for new life, but actually do new life?

All of a sudden, there was excitement and energy. I don't know where exactly this has come from, but I strongly and gratefully believe it was the spirit moving us. Fear and desperation has brought us to a point where we say "*Let's do gospel, let's do it whole heartedly. Let's focus on what church is about. Let us rely completely on the power of the gospel*".

And we decided: Renewal of congregations is the only way forward.

We don't want to walk as the living dead; rather live boldly before we die. A renewed faith will be fearless and joyful, trusting that God will show us new ways of being church. Transformation is not a threat, because the whole Gospel is about God transforming lives. And when we are transformed by God's spirit individually and as a church body, there will be life in abundance.

Finally, after three years, we were ready for change. We will now focus on renewing and reviving congregations. We will be serious about this. We will be serious about starting new missional initiatives and missional formation. We will be serious about spiritual renewal. We will be serious about allocating funds where they need to be.

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4. Challenges that we need to manage

In our conversations we identified four main challenges to make sure that they don't stop us any longer:

1. **Denial;** doing ministry as if nothing had changed in the last 40 years. We have to stop this, otherwise, we won't have the resources and the energy we need.

We will give each other feedback, name the reality, speak the truth and not only examine our finances.

2. **Persistence.** There is no quick and easy fix. Pastors can't do this by themselves, one parish can't do this on their own, one or two dedicated people are not enough. We need to build capable teams and will support them in the long run. We will form a culture where people pray for each other, visit, help, discern, encourage and share their experience. We will provide learning opportunities, we will hold each other accountable, we will train, educate and coach leaders.

3. **Change starts with spiritual renewal.** In stressful times this gets neglected. We will follow the call of our National Bishop and make sure that we take time to read the gospel and share our faith. We will **Pray, Read, Worship, Study, Serve, Give and Tell.**

4. **Develop a missional lifestyle.** We need to learn again how to share our faith with those who have never been in church and those who are done with church. We will train missional leaders, who listen carefully and learn about their contexts; leaders who are eager to share their faith and engage in new and creative ways of ministry.

We will share our journey on our website www.LutheransToronto.ca

We are thrilled to go on this journey that will lead us to renewal and re-vitalized congregations. We can't wait. We want to see life in abundance.