

## **BNS Cluster Animator Final Report & Recommendations** **January 2025 – June 2026**

### **Background**

In the beginning, when the United Church was considering restructuring, the concept of clusters and networks was presented. In the background document introducing the Three Council Model to GC2015, clusters were described in this way:

*One of the key components of the recommended model would be collegial gatherings called clusters. Clusters would be regular gatherings of communities of faith and their leaders within a geographic area. Clusters would be the driving force in gathering as the people of God to support mission. Clusters would be responsible for • promoting and encouraging communities of faith to work together for worship, mission, justice, collegiality, stewardship development, and strategic planning as well as connecting with networks in the wider church • electing a planning team to manage the regular meetings of clusters • supporting communities of faith in articulating their mission strategy and assessing their success in carrying it out. Within three years, current presbyteries would create appropriate clusters of communities of faith. The presbyteries would then cease to exist as decision-making courts of the church.*

GC2018 received a proposal which asked the General Council to:

- a. affirm that clusters and networks will be central to living out our faith in the Three Council Model, and essential to a healthy transition to the Three-Council Model, and*
- b. instruct the General Council Executive and the Councils of the new model to develop a strategy that prioritizes the formation of clusters and networks beyond simply encouragement for their formation, including incentivizing their creation and facilitating communication during the period of experimentation,*
- c. establish an expectation that each community of faith will engage in the period of experimentation by forming or joining at least one cluster or network.*

### **MANUAL 2026 VII. Clusters and Networks**

9. Alongside the three-council structure, there are clusters and networks that, while not formal governance bodies, are central to the living out of the faith of the United Church: (2019)

9.1. clusters: local clusters of Communities of Faith that provide community and support for Communities of Faith and their leaders, and focus on worship, mission, learning, collegiality, and strategic planning; (2019)

After living with a revised conciliar structure after 2019, the 2023 BNS Regional Council Annual Meeting revisited the expectations related to clusters. It was apparent the initial intention and expectations for clusters expressed in earlier decisions and documents of the national church had not been realized. Without start-up support for local leadership, very few clusters had formed in BNS Region.

A Proposal by the Future Directions Committee was presented to the 2023 Annual Meeting which stated the *'lack of clusters is limiting our health and capacity for faithful mission and mutual support on a local level.'* The BNS council voted to make *'the development of local clusters a priority in its life and work'* and to create a term staff position (12 hours per week). I accepted the

offer to serve as BNS Cluster Animator and began work on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The position was scheduled to end on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2025, but was extended to May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026.

### Cluster Animator’s Role

The main areas of the Animator’s work have been as follows:

- A. Consultation and Engagement:
  - Consult with designated regional representatives and ministry personnel to clarify local needs/interests, determine logical geographic groups, and possibilities for ongoing sustainability.
  - Consult with existing groups and clusters to learn about their purpose, structure and sustainability.
  - Consult with BNS Regional staff and committees.
  - Consult with staff from other regions to learn about their best practices.
- B. Planning and Development:
  - Analyze information collected from consultations to create a plan for Cluster Animation.
  - Organize initial meetings and identify potential ongoing leadership.
- C. Cluster Support:
  - Attend initial meetings of clusters and support their ongoing development by providing information and resources.
  - Create an updated listing of clusters to be shared with the Region on its website.
  - Prepare reports and recommendations for best practices to support clusters.

### Clusters (as of April 24, 2026)

These groups are active or currently taking shape within the Region.

Title	Pre-2019/ New/Renewed	Participants	Contact Identified
Administry	new	UCC Church Administrators	Colleen Naomi
Affirming Communities HRM	new	reps from local CoFs	no
Cape Breton East	new	ministers & lay reps	Sheila VanSchaick
Cape Breton West Causeway	renewed	active ministry personnel	Heather Manuel
Cape Breton West Causeway	new	ministers & lay reps	no
Halifax Regional Municipality	pre-2019	ministry personnel	Rhonda Schofield
HRM Youth	since 2024	youth leaders & youth	Jenny Eisener
Hub (Truro & area)	pre-2019	active ministry personnel	Shannon MacLean
Lunenburg	new	ministers & lay reps	Kim Curlett
North Nova	new	ministers & lay reps	no
North West Halifax	new	ministers & lay reps	Lesley Griffiths
Pictou County	pre-2019	ministry personnel	Mavis Peddie Peters
South Shore	pre-2019	ministry personnel	Carol Smith
South West Nova	new	ministers & lay reps	no
UCC for Dartmouth	pre-2019	ministers & lay reps	Mark Hazen
Valley	Pre-2019	ministry personnel	Karen Lynch
Valley	new	ministers & lay reps	Jane McDonald

There are ongoing clusters that **Pre-date 2019** which have established sustainable patterns of meeting and regularized their activities (such as monthly meetings, annual retreats, collaborative

bible studies, shared worship services). Over time they have developed a strong sense of community and a high level of trust. There is a **Renewed Cluster**, a clergy group which had been meeting regularly before their primary organizer died. I invited them to a meeting, and they made the decision to restart their group.

**New Clusters** have been initiated. After this position was announced, four people representing four different areas in Nova Scotia, reached out for assistance in establishing a local cluster. However, in most cases I reached out to ministry personnel and lay Regional Representatives with an invitation to create a group. My goal for meetings was representation by at least one person from each community of faith within the given area. I will submit a current contact list for each cluster to the regional office and staff at the end of May.

Each initial cluster meeting consisted of:

- getting acquainted and building community
- explaining the purpose for clusters
- prayer or devotional time
- sharing food and coffee/tea
- sharing the Good News from each community of faith
- open conversation, often naming the challenges being experienced by congregations and leadership in their area
- naming the benefits of establishing an ongoing cluster
- confirming next steps, next dates/locations

Those listed are certainly not the only active clusters within the Region. For example, a Mid Valley Cluster representing four Valley CoFs formed several years ago when they were all faced with changes in pastoral relations and they have continued to meet even after vacancies have been filled. Here and there, neighboring church members and ministers have been meeting informally around shared events, bible study or lectionary groups, and for mutual support. In locations from one end of the province to the other, local inter-church congregational and ministerial partnerships are collaborating on local events and worship (ex. World Day of Prayer, Remembrance Day).

### **Bermuda**

Since it is Bermuda Nova Scotia Regional Council and I was curious about the current relationship between the three congregations which fall under the previous Synod structure, I reached out to a contact there. None of the 3 are currently served by UCC ministry personnel. The congregations have managed to maintain some contact with each other and the feedback included the intention to connect more frequently. An annual covenanting service is held in January or February that allows the 3 churches to worship and fellowship together.

### **Regional Committees, Staff and other Regions**

I've consulted with the following regional committees: United Fresh Start, BNS Affirming Committee, Association of UCC Ministers, BNS Future Directions, and Justice, Mission & Outreach. In all three Atlantic Regions, at the time of restructuring, support for clusters was named in the position descriptions of the Regional Ministers. I've spoken with Rev. Dr. Sharon Ballantyne (Growth), David Hewitt (Pastoral Relations & Congregational Support), Seyi Adeyemo (Communications), Rev. Jenny Stephens (Restructuring Review), and Rev. Faith March-McCuish

(Executive Minister). In general, committees and staff see the establishment of permanent, sustainable local groups across the province as vehicles through which their mission and resources might be shared, and avenues of communication improved significantly.

Letters of inquiry were sent to all other 15 Regions, asking about their work with clustering and best practices. Five responses were received. A summary of their responses:

- a.) **Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters:** After 2019, the Executive made an effort to initiate cluster gatherings. \$500 was put aside per cluster as needed. The region was divided into geographical sections, and introductory workshops were held under the direction of a regional committee. A small working group continues to work on making cluster connections. Groups meet primarily for educational and social reasons. The PEI Cluster evolved from PEI Presbytery connections and has continued to meet regularly since 2019. The PEI Cluster's future has been sustained by temporary 'rural experiment opportunity' grant funding from the GCO, which has been discontinued.
- b.) **Chinook Winds:** Rev. Shelley Den Haan serves as regional staff for Communications & Cluster Support. Four hours of her time per week are assigned to cluster support. She facilitated cluster start-ups and continues to assist their continued meetings by sending reminder emails, supplying information and resources. She's found communication between local CoFs and the regional office has been improved as regional staff have attended the clusters as guest speakers. Each cluster has defined its own priorities: one is focused on social justice issues; others meet for mutual support and around local concerns. Since the pandemic, all groups meet in person, except the Rural Cluster which covers a large territory and meets via zoom. During the past year, the Executive Minister has presented the Toward 2035 materials to all the clusters. Shelley says, "*so much depends on willing leadership who are motivated*".
- c.) **Canadian Shield and Shining Waters:** encompass a wide variety of clusters including groups gathered around an Intentional Learning Community (providing faith formation programs), clusters that came together to hire shared staff and ministry personnel, a cross-border cluster between the 2 regions, outreach projects and retreat opportunities, refugee & asylum seekers support and Affirming congregations in GTA, and 'no agenda other than getting to know each other'. Comments from their experience:  
*The notion that clusters can be successful without staff intervention is, for the most part, untrue. Having said that, the most successful clusters are the ones that came together on their own and then asked for staff support. Many of our clusters are precarious – the loss of 1 or 2 key leaders will bring an end. Often clusters are most successful when relationship is the first priority and doing something takes a back seat. Having a preconceived idea about what a cluster may accomplish is rarely useful until time and attention has been given to relationship/trust building and group discernment...which is hard and takes time. (D.M. Dec.2024)*
- d.) **Western Ontario Waterways:** After 2019, the Volunteer Recruitment Team (nominating) organized one-time gatherings on the understanding groups would be self-selecting but need help getting started. Volunteers were recruited to lead the first gatherings and were

provided with a process and PowerPoint resources. Some groups never met because so many CoFs were in transition and without ministry personnel. Several did get together to plan 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary events and have continued since then. (H.L. Dec.2024)

### **Communication within BNS Regional Council**

Cluster conversations regularly named a problem with communication between the different councils of our church in recent years. Here are challenges named during cluster conversations:

- Weekly Regional announcements and national *E-ssentials* newsletter require finding and subscribing;
- Weekly Regional announcements may only reach one person in a community of faith and are put through their sieve – *“there are good things happening but no one knows about them!”*
- Access to the Regional Directory had to be removed temporarily, for privacy and security reasons;
- The Regional Facebook page is undersubscribed and not very active.
- To find contacts for regional committees, searchers need to locate last year’s nominating report.

Communicating effectively with CoFs has been my biggest challenge. Significant effort has been required to bring people together where physical distances are expanded by pastoral vacancies, the absence of lay representatives, undependable internet services, or a lack of familiarity with past presbytery relationships.

After I was first hired, several months passed before I was provided with a contact list for designated Regional Representatives. Many CoF’s have not identified a representative. Further, the names of individuals and CoFs (who expressed an interest in cluster development) collected through last year’s extensive Restructuring Review Survey could not be relayed to me. However, consultant Rev. Jenny Stephens’ presentation to last year’s Annual Meeting did demonstrate interest in clusters being continued and supported, a desire for closer connection between clusters, and for improved communication – more of it, faster, and to the right people.

### **Meet Together, Eat Together, Feet Together – the 3-Step Plan for Cluster Development**

#### **Step 1. Meet Together**

*“Looking forward to it, Robyn, there are so few opportunities to gather in person these days”*

*BJ*

In her 2020 book, *‘This One Wild and Precious Life’*, author Sarah Wilson opens with a long list of the world’s current woes, including wars, famine, climate disasters, intimate partner violence, doomscrolling, and so on. She searched for one word that accurately described the modern human reality, one word that communicated our current experience. Wilson writes, *“what we’re all feeling, at the most basic level, is **disconnected.**”* She suggests that disconnection is humankind’s common condition and a threat to our future survival.

Thousands of recent studies have researched the cost of disconnection, social isolation and loneliness to our personal health and wellbeing. In May 2024, the US Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention, posted the key points of a report on Social Connection: staying connected to others creates feelings of belonging and being loved, cared for, and valued; social connections are important to our mental and physical health; being connected to others helps protect against serious illness and disease; people with stronger social bonds are more likely to live longer, healthier lives.

As I've traveled around the province, I have heard phrases such as '*I feel so isolated*', or '*we're so out of touch with the rest of the church*,' or '*who cares about us out here*' repeatedly. People who remember Presbytery meetings have said they've missed the conversations over supper as much as the scalloped potatoes and ham. People who are new to the United Church or to their location have expressed deep appreciation for the chance to meet and learn more about other congregations around them.

I believe our denomination has suffered from disconnection in recent years, especially since the pandemic, and our 'connective tissue' has been deteriorating. In '*Find Your People: Building Deep Community in a Lonely World*', Jenny Allen identifies the enemies of community: the myth of independence, busyness, laziness or apathy, gossip and make believe, competition and comparison, fear, negativity, indifference (the opposite of curiosity). I've witnessed these enemies at work in the church and suggest clusters offer a chance to intentionally counteract their effect.

Providing opportunities for United Church people to gather in person, in the same safe space, is essential. All BNS clusters have met in person at least once, often over lunch; some groups always meet in person. Zoom is a useful tool, especially during winter months and where physical distances are significant. However, zoom does not lend itself to building trust and deep sharing.

## **Step 2. Eat Together** ***"Can I have the recipe for that?" SW***

Theologian Rachel Held Evans has written, "*The first thing the world knew about Christians was that they ate together*" (*Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*). In Acts 2:41-47, we learn the first Christian community took shape around the dining table. Eating together is the first sacrament of our faith and an indispensable aspect of cluster success.

The 2025 World Happiness Report dedicates an entire chapter to the importance of sharing meals with others. The report presents Gallup evidence on this understudied measure of social connection – sharing food. This practice has a strong impact on our overall wellbeing – on par with the influence of income and employment.

When timing and location made it possible, I arrived at cluster meetings (especially the initial meetings) carrying carrot soup, sandwiches and Turtle clusters. I'm very grateful to local hosts who've also provided hospitality. Potluck becomes pot-blessed, as it is in the face-to-face informal conversations at the table stories are told and relationships are established.

## **Step 3. Feet Together** ***"I don't feel so alone anymore." AR***

Although the United Church makes the credal proclamation “*We are not alone*”, it seems to me in recent times our communities of faith have been living as if we are alone. But continued disconnection is not a life-giving option for our denomination. I suspect the Toward 2035 initiative will make this reality more visible.

Gathered together, cluster conversations have quickly elicited a list of shared concerns and possible collaborative actions. We are communities with service and mission in our DNA, and the desire to grow the Good News. As the local groups have met together, a sense of a common direction has appeared, and a shared hope has emerged.

The clusters are taking shape according to their geography, needs and interests -- whether it be for mutual support, improving communication, sharing resources and ideas, or planning joint events. All it takes is ONE person who’s willing to keep the contact information and send out meeting reminders. All it takes is ONE meeting during which dates and locations for the year ahead are set. Its also helpful if one person agrees to make some basic notes and send them out to all participants.

**Recommendations to the BNS Regional Council Executive:** As the Executive is going through an extensive overview process, the following recommendations have been shared with them for their consideration. These things fall outside the scope of my work, however, they reflect concerns and requests common to many, if not most, of the cluster conversations:

- 1. Improve communication between communities and councils.** This includes work to make the Region’s database and the website more effective, as well as investigating new ways to engage. The Communications Committee needs to be populated with volunteers who have energy and imagination for this work, as well as access to knowledgeable consultants and methods of communication being used in other Regions and organizations. I recommend expanding this committee’s mandate to include work to develop, sustain and connect clusters.
- 2. Expand the Calendar on the BNS website.** At present, our calendar displays regional committee meetings. I recommend its expansion to include cluster meeting dates and all presentations, workshops or webinars being offered by regional staff. In addition, I suggest the Weekly Announcements begin with ‘*This Week in the Region*’, listing all events being offered by regional staff. It would be helpful for our leaders and communities to be aware of the leadership being offered by our staff in different locations, and for our staff to be aware of each other’s activities and the potential for collaboration. This calendar can be subscribed by CoFs, so all this information would show up immediately on their local calendars.
- 3. Create a Resources Toolbox.** The lay leaders within BNS Regional Council are very busy and some are exhausted. Especially in places where ministry positions have not been filled or are part-time, our CoFs rely heavily on laity for worship and program leadership. There are a million resources available online, but our cluster conversations have recommended the creation of one Resources Toolbox: one page on our website listing program and worship resources (complete with sermons and prayers) and links which are free or affordable, and aligned with United Church theology and ethos. This idea has already been

referred to the Faith Formation and Leadership Development Committee for their consideration. This page could also provide a DIY Cluster Meeting Program resource and a PowerPoint or YouTube video introducing CoFs to the structure and ministries of the BNS Regional Council.

- 4. Address the need for Pastoral Care.** As I've listened to cluster conversations, the need for pastoral care has become apparent. Lay leaders are expressing concerns about burn out and exhaustion. Ministry personnel are meeting together for mutual support in at least 5 areas, but not in all areas. Those in active ministry have different needs than those who are retired. The Regional Minister meets regularly with younger ministry personnel and this needs to continue. I would encourage the Retirees Committee to work with a Cluster staff person, to organize in-person meetings for retirees around the province. Individuals have conveyed a request to reestablish triennial pastoral care visits. I recommend the creation of a Regional Pastoral Care team, separate from the Pastoral Relations committee. This would be a small group, skilled in pastoral care who would be available to ministry personnel, to clusters, and to communities of faith.

#### **Recommendation to the BNS Regional Council:**

- 1. Designate staff time to develop, support, and maintain clusters.** Following the example set by Chinook Winds Regional Council, I optimistically recommend a minimum of 4 - 6 hours per week be granted to maintaining contact lists and scheduling, providing Zoom support, supplying suggestions for resources or guest speakers. I have just scratched the surface of what is possible in terms of cluster creation.

#### **Gratitude**

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Rev. Faith March-MacCuish, for her guidance; to all of the BNS Regional Council Staff, for their assistance and knowledgeable suggestions; to all of the leaders who welcomed me and helped me organize local groups; to all who offered hospitality and shared their stories; to my family for their patience. I have truly enjoyed being with you.

Though many, may we be united.

Rev. Robyn Brown-Hewitt