

General Council Executive Report to the Regional Councils

Dear Regional Council Friends;

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..... (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We hear this passage this year, in these times of pandemic isolation, differently than ever before. These days we are not tempted to neglect meeting together, but are *yearning* for the “normal” world when it is safe for all of us to meet together, to worship together, and to serve together once again. And yet we hear these words today with a new understanding of what it means to gather together, with a new understanding of the possibility of experiencing genuine community as we gather and worship through electronic means rather than sitting side by side in our pews.

We are writing to you in the middle of the summer, thinking ahead to your plans to gather for regional council meetings this fall. The usual spring meetings were put off this year with the expectation of meeting in person in the fall, but as the summer progresses, it seems increasingly clear that fall gatherings may be held virtually after all.

Your leadership in these unusual times is so important, and we are grateful to serve God alongside you in the United Church of Canada.

COVID-19

Sometimes in the past few months, it has felt almost impossible to think of anything except the pandemic and how it is affecting all of our lives and the life of our church! This has been a year of unexpectedly rapid and massive change. If you had told any of us as 2020 dawned that in less than three months all the churches would be closed, all the schools would be closed, all the restaurants would be closed, all but “essential” businesses would be closed, vacation trips would all be cancelled, and we would be expected to stay home and not visit with friends or family, we simply would not have believed you. Even in the early part of the year, when these things became realities in China, we felt compassion for the people there, but still could not imagine that we would ever be affected in a similar way.

This is something that none of us have ever experienced before, and it is not something we ever expected to experience. Anxiety and grief are natural and real, but we have also felt deeply inspired by the creativity, innovation and adaptability that our ministers and members have demonstrated. Online worship is vibrant and meaningful, and serving not only our members but also numbers of people who had not been attending church, but have somehow found their way in through our virtual doorways. Bible studies, youth groups, baking nights, book clubs, board meetings, refugee support committees, the National Indigenous Elders Council, and so many more groups and events are all happening through the use of electronic tools. Although clusters and networks were slow to get off the ground after the reorganization of the Church structures, now there are regular ZOOM gatherings of ministry and lay leaders in regional groups, where real conversations take place as they support one another through the changes of these times. The Moderator and General Secretary have both appreciated opportunities to be part of these regional gatherings, perhaps connecting in this way with more of you than it would have been possible to meet in person during the same time period.

The General Council Office closed on March 16, initially for “two weeks” but as of the time of writing it has not reopened. We are beginning to bring some staff back into the office this fall, but, especially with our open space layout and close proximity of neighbouring workspaces, it will be some considerable time before all staff are back. Planning for staff to return to the office will take into account the ability of job functions to be performed from outside the office, the health and family situations of staff members. Those working in the office will find that it feels different in many respects with the appearance of masks, lack of access to the common lunch area, limited use of meeting formats, and so on. Fortunately, we have seen staff rise to the occasion and find creative ways of doing their jobs and connecting with the wider church from their own homes. As with other churches and organizations, this experience has given us the opportunity to examine travel practices and question the “necessity” of some of our former ways, and to consider the possibility of some staff doing all or some of their work from locations outside of the office on a continuing basis.

No doubt you are also looking for the learnings from this time, the things that you have found possible and that you do not want to lose in “returning to normal”. We do not know yet what the “new normal” will look like, but it seems most likely that it will be different from what we understood as normal in the past. As we explore these unfamiliar paths, we give thanks that we are doing it together as a church, and with the comfort of God’s ever loving presence.

Budget Cuts

When so many things “shut down” in mid March because of the pandemic, we were less than two weeks away from the spring meeting of the General Council Executive. This was to have been an in person gathering with a focus on identifying strategic priorities to offer to the church for discussion leading into the 44th General Council. There was one significant piece of business of the agenda, the approval of budget principles to guide the 2021 budget of the General Council Office. Given the circumstances in which this meeting was held (electronically), with so many immediate practical concerns in people’s minds, the “big picture strategic” work was deferred, and the focus shifted to the budget decisions that were needed. Although it would have been nice to avoid the difficult budget decisions too, this was not possible with church revenues are going down, as the size of our membership and number of congregations goes down. This has been a reality for some years and is accelerating. If anything was changed by the pandemic, it is the likelihood that even more serious reductions will be needed as a result of the economic fallout that accompanies the pandemic shutdown.

The budget principles that the General Council Executive approved on March 28 require the 2021 budget to be about \$4 million smaller than this year’s budget. These reductions will be roughly divided between grants and staff. Grant recipients have already been notified of the reduced grant levels that will apply in 2021, and this includes reductions in the Mission and Service allocations to Regional Councils. Staff reductions were made this spring and summer, so that severance costs could be borne within this fiscal year.

Anti-Racism

The issues raised by racialized and Indigenous participants at the unplanned, passionate, and painful discussion that ended the General Council 43 meeting in Oshawa, and the ongoing presence of systemic racism within our church, have been a major concern and area of work for this Executive of the General Council.

Early on in its tenure, the GCE set up an Anti-Racism Working Group, and they have been working hard to lift up issues of racial injustice, and to seek practical measures that will make a difference. Their

[report](#) to the General Council Executive in March of 2020 lifts up the work done and the directions identified for further work.

The White Privilege Working Group has gone through some transitions in membership this year, and the willingness of Shannon McCarthy (Regional Council Executive Minister for the Prairie to Pine, Living Skies, and Northern Spirit regional councils) to take on the role of chair provides an important basis for partnership in this work between the General Council and Regional Councils. These two Working Groups, along with the Reference Group for Indigenous Peoples and the Reference Group for Racialized Peoples, and the staff that support them, will be meeting in September to discuss coordination and clarification of the work and to develop an outline for the United Church's Anti-Racism Strategy. We will be in conversation with Regional Councils as the anti-racism strategy is being developed.

Meanwhile, with advice from racialized staff, and oversight from both Working Groups, revisions have been made to the General Council Harassment policy to clarify its application to racial harassment, and the process that are available to activate it. The revised policy is slated for approval by the sub-executive this summer and will be in place by the time you meet this fall. Information and training will be available to help everyone become familiar with the scope and requirements of the revised policy.

We have been working closely with Anglicans and Lutherans, and with others from the Canadian Council of Churches, to express our shared commitment to the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent, with links to statements in [March](#), [June](#) and [July](#). In June, the General Council Executive released a statement expressing clearly its conviction that [Black Lives Matter](#) to the United Church. The Moderator has also written to the Prime Minister to express strong support for the national recognition of August 1 as [Emancipation Day](#), to mark the abolition of slavery in Canada. If you want a practical step that you can take, we encourage you to write your own letter to the Prime Minister on this topic. Feel free to use the Moderator's letter as a model.

GC43 Commissioners will know that when the General Council was recalled in June to consider whether the next General Council meeting should be delayed, a [proposal](#) outlining a number of steps to combat racism was received. Although this proposal was received too close to the time of the meeting to allow for adequate discussion and preparation by commissioners, its principles received clear support and it was referred to the General Council Executive for further work with the expectation that there will be a report back to the next electronic recall of GC43 on October 24.

Those present in Oshawa, and those following closely the business of the General Council there heard clearly the importance of acknowledging and addressing racism. Even still, one challenge is that many United Church people assume that OTHER people are racists, and that racism is an individual and overt act as opposed to a system. We have denounced racism as a church. But some among us—particularly those of us who are White—may not really understand that although we oppose racism, we are part of racist systems and institutions, whether we realize it or not. The sad murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis has generated wider discussion and a deeper recognition of the systemic racism that is part the world in which we live. Many in the church have been educating themselves about White privilege, deepening their commitment to anti-racism work, affirming that Black Lives Matter, and following through with tangible actions that support our words. Too often, people believe that racism is a particular issue in the United States, or a problem outside the United Church. But racism actually relates to each of us, and is present in our own church. The good news is that understanding the reality of racism provides the basis for doing something about it, for speaking up when we hear inappropriate

conversations, for sharing resources that have helped our own learning, and for pushing for social, institutional, and political changes that will bring about true respect, safety, and equality of opportunity for all.

We are in the process of recruiting an Anti-Racism and Equity Officer who will serve in the General Council Office and report directly to the General Secretary. This person will ensure that the various pieces of related work are coordinated, that information about the work is shared, and that learning opportunities are widely available.

Anti-racism work needs the leadership of the General Council Office, but also needs the commitment of United Church people in every Regional Council, and in local communities of faith. If you are doing work in this area, or have suggestions for us, we would be grateful to hear from you.

National Indigenous Council

The National Indigenous Council is now a year into its new structure. Through the first ten months of the life of this new body, they were ably supported by Cheryl Jourdain, former Speaker of the All Native Circle Conference, who had agreed to provide interim leadership through a transitional period. As of July 1, Murray Pruden has been serving as the Executive Minister for Indigenous Ministries and Justice. The General Council Executive looks forward to working closely with the National Indigenous Council to advance the commitments made when the 43rd General Council accepted the Calls to the Church from the Caretakers of the Indigenous Circle.

United Property Resource Corporation

The establishment of the United Property Resource Corporation (UPRC) was approved by the General Council Executive in April of 2019 and got started in the months that followed. It is continuing to scale up quickly to achieve its mandate of becoming a trusted real estate advisor and support to faith communities by leading real estate initiatives on their behalf.

UPRC will work to ensure projects are commercially viable and support the mission of the community of faith and the United Church of Canada. This includes the development of safe, stable, and affordable housing for all Canadians while maximizing the social impact to achieve the highest possible economic, environmental and social benefits. UPRC has formally executed the agreement with Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) and is continuing to advance UCC real initiatives working alongside local faith communities.

The UPRC board is chaired by Don Hunter, who previously served on the General Council Executive as chair of the Permanent Committee on Finance. The first two staff of the corporation are Kris Tavella, who formerly did related work as part of EDGE, and the Chief Executive Officer Tim Blair, who began this spring in the midst of the COVID shutdown. Tim brings 20 years of real estate investment banking and private equity experience, and a strong commitment to the social values of the United Church, to the work.

This corporation has been created as a resource to the church, and either Tim or Kris are happy to hear from congregations and regional councils who have questions about property issues. You can expect to hear more announcements about the United Property Resource Group this fall.

(tblair@united-church.ca or ktavella@united-church.ca)

Recruitment of the new General Secretary

At last October's recall meeting of the 43rd General Council, the General Secretary shared the news of her wish to retire in the fall of 2020. A Search Committee was appointed (chaired by the Moderator). and, after a bit of delay because of COVID-19 distractions, they concluded interviews in August, and came to a strong consensus in their recommendation, which was approved by the General Council Executive on August 27.

[Michael Blair](#) will begin his term as General Secretary of the General Council on November 1. Many of you will already know him..... and we are excited about the excellent experience and faithful vision that he will bring to this new role. Nora Sanders will continue to serve until the end of October.

44th General Council Delayed Until 2020

At a special electronic meeting held on June 20, 2020, Commissioners of the 43rd General Council made this decision to delay the 44th General Council from 2021 to 2022. Given the uncertainty caused by the Global pandemic, this decision was made having in mind the health and well being of all participants, including Commissioners, global partners, staff, and guests.

The revised dates for GC44 have been set for July 22–26, 2022. These dates were selected based on the original 2021 dates, availability of the venues, and the UCW 60th Anniversary celebration which is scheduled to be held in Sydney Nova Scotia, July 11 – 15, 2022. [More Information](#).

Deadlines for GC44 are June 14, 2021 for electing Commissioners and October 29, 2021 for submitting proposals.

Richard Bott, Moderator
Nora Sanders, General Secretary
On behalf of the General Council Executive