

SOCIAL and ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

The Social and Ecological Justice Commission, formed through the action of the first Regional Council meeting in June 2019, received its mandate through the Regional Council Executive and began its work in the fall of 2019.

The *Mandate* is as follows:

The Social and Ecological Justice Commission will encourage, support, and initiate social justice work within Shining Waters Regional Council, which encompasses but is not limited to anti-racism and becoming a critical intercultural church of justice.

Work Focus

The Commission began its work with a review of social justice and ecological justice work that had been carried out previously by the four Toronto Conference Presbyteries, concluding that program and resources, advocacy and networking would be priorities of the work. This work would be carried out through working with communities of faith locally and networking with larger groups such as regional partners and advocacy organizations.

Referral

The Commission also concluded that other areas of work undertaken by the previous social justice committees, such as funding projects and organizations might be better carried out through the work of the Regional Council's Grants Review Committee.

Work Lens

The Commission identified that **racial justice** and **ecological justice** are named Regional priorities. These are lenses through which all justice work is approached. The commission has met formally through Zoom and by voting electronically on time-sensitive issues that needed immediate response.

This report provides an update of the work carried out under each of the areas of "Responsibilities" assigned to the Commission by the Regional Council Executive.

Responsibilities

1. *The Social and Ecological Justice Commission will encourage, support and animate social justice networks, and grassroots justice initiatives by communities of faith, in cooperation with the Communities of Faith Commission*

Action:

The Commission has undertaken a **review of justice priorities in each Community of Faith** through the creation of an emailed survey and through personal contact. The aim is to become familiar with areas in which there is passion for certain issues, information and expertise which

could be shared, and/or support and resources that are needed. That survey and review, interrupted by the pandemic, continues.

Criteria for Action

Recognizing that the Commission has the power to act and that there are many issues to be addressed as well as myriad requests from organizations and individuals, the Commission developed a draft protocol for discerning which issues should be acted on.

The criteria includes:

- Does the request come from a recognized UCC partner such as KAIROS or ISARC?
- Does the request fall within an identified justice priority for Shining Waters region?
- Does the request fit with national UCC theology and areas of work?
- Do we already have a policy position?
- Is it an issue that requires a timely response, i.e. legislative action pending, etc.?

2. *The Commission will offer occasional gatherings/workshops on particular issues/themes for interested persons in the Region*

Action:

The commission proposed that an annual regional justice gathering and/or an issue-based workshop connected to the Regional Meeting would be a good way to enhance justice networks as well as provide resources and education. These proposals were put on hold temporarily as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. *The Commission will provide educational materials and relevant information resources on justice-related issues to communities of faith and networks*

Action:

The Commission has, during the past year, identified several areas of concern that required timely action (see actions under Responsibility # 6)

4. *The Commission will build on existing relationships, within the UCC and ecumenical/interfaith relationships, and with other justice-seeking coalitions and networks*

Action:

In December 2019, the Commission gave formal approval to membership in the SJNOR (the Social Justice Network of Ontario Regions). This network existed under the previous structure and brought together justice representatives from each of the Ontario Conferences. It meets several times a year to share work and resource information as well as link with national church and KAIROS staff.

The Commission also agreed that it was important to build a relationship with General Council program staff and to be informed about work being done in other Regional Councils across the country.

Other community, ecumenical and interfaith partners, such as ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition), KAIROS, the Ontario Health Coalition and Campaign 2000 have been identified as important resources for carrying out commission work.

5. *In cooperation with the Executive and the other commissions, the commission will help to identify regional social justice priorities*

Action:

Through preliminary survey responses, the Commission identified racism, environment and economic issues as high priorities recognizing that many Communities of Faith have entered into those issues through different doors as they respond to local issues and concerns.

The Commission also identified priorities and “passion for work” for each of the commission members concluding that there was a broad knowledge and experiential base and that this would serve the commission well in addressing these issues.

It was agreed that work on priority issues would be enhanced by creating working groups that could include resource people, local community of faith advocates and local networks to develop in-depth strategic plans for action.

6. *The Commission will advocate and support campaigns around regional priority issues (e.g. racism awareness, being an intercultural church)*

Action:

The Commission undertook specific action on the following issues:

Wet’suwet’en crisis

In March 2020, in consultation with members of the Living into Right Relations Circle (LIRR) a letter was prepared and sent to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Indigenous Justice affirming the sovereignty of the Wet’suwet’en people, and condemning any government or corporate actions that would infringe on Wet’suwet’en lands and rights.

It called on all levels of government to:

1. Fundamentally change the ways they engage with sovereign Indigenous nations, adhering strictly to the principles of UNDRIP (including the right to free, prior, and informed consent regarding any projects that encroach on sovereign and traditional Indigenous territories) and respecting nation-to-nation relationships with the Wet’suwet’en and with other Indigenous peoples;

2. Refrain from using differences of position or legal standing within and among Wet'suwet'en and other Indigenous communities to drive wedges between them, promote corporate or government interests, and/or to enable divisive conflicts between Indigenous and colonial political and legal systems; and
3. Cease the use of force against Indigenous peoples, particularly those asserting their sovereign rights on their own territories, and find peaceful and respectful processes to pursue solutions to conflict.

Our thanks to Ren Ito for his work in helping to prepare that response.

Re-opening of Church Buildings

On May 21, 2020, a letter signed by our President, David Leyton-Brown was sent to Premier Doug Ford, expressing concern about the pressure from some churches for the province to re-open churches too soon for the safety of congregants.

In part, the letter stated,

“While we deeply miss the opportunity for in-person gathering and lament the loss of physical closeness, we are willing to postpone coming together in flesh and bone (yet still connecting in and with Spirit) until local health authorities indicate it is safe for our congregants to assemble once more....

However, coming together as the Body of Christ in alternative ways has not stopped our communities of faith from engaging in outreach and justice work among our Region's most vulnerable populations...

It is our understanding that the Church is not a building, nor is it housed within a building. The Church is a community of followers seeking to model their lives after Jesus, whose love for neighbour superseded all tradition and expectation.”

The commission also disseminated the letter to all congregations in Shining Waters Regional Council and to ecumenical and interfaith partners, as well as issuing a media release.

Marginalized Children

In May 2020, the commission endorsed a Campaign 2000 letter to the Prime Minister and the COVID-19 Cabinet Committee calling on the federal government to ensure that marginalized children have first call on federal resources in pandemic response and recovery.

Tragedy at Long-Term Care Homes

In May, the Commission joined ISARC and the Ontario Health Coalition in calling on the Government of Ontario to conduct a public inquiry or commission regarding the many deaths in long-term care homes in the province. It also expressed concern about recent provincial healthcare cuts.

As well, the commission released information to communities of faith inviting them to add their voice to this concern, noting, “The pandemic has caused tremendous damage for residents of long term care homes. There has been shocking loss of life, physical impairment to those infected survivors, and trauma for their family members and the general public. As well, front line workers

have faced very difficult working conditions. Using our racial justice lens, which is one way we are called to examine our work, we are acutely aware of long term care home staff as an especially vulnerable population.”

Black Lives Matter

In early June, in consultation with members of the commission, the Regional Council released a letter to communities of faith expressing lament and anger at the ongoing sin of racism within our communities. It decried the May 25 killing of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American man, by Minneapolis police.

The letter stated, “An action plan for how Shining Waters Regional Council will address the pandemic of racism within our midst will be released after an intentional *first phase* of listening to the experiences and expectations of racialized members within the Region. We have realized that in order to approach this work thoughtfully and authentically, it is necessary for Regional Staff and the Social & Ecological Justice Commission to go through their own internal work first.”

Since then, the commission has met twice in intentional workshops to listen and learn more about our complicity in racist social and political systems and to understand the impact of white power.

Guaranteed Livable Income

In early September, working as part of a larger group of United Church advocates and with national staff support, the commission helped to organize a Prayer Vigil on September 22, the eve of the federal Throne Speech. The commission also requested that a letter be sent from president David Leyton-Brown to the Prime Minister and leaders of the opposition parties, endorsing a private members bill that would push ahead with a national Guaranteed Livable Income. It also distributed resource material to communities of faith in Shining Waters regional Council.

7. *In keeping with the Communication Policy, the Commission may suggest statements to be made on behalf of Shining Waters Regional Council by the President*

Action: see # 6 above

8. *In cooperation with the Executive and the other Commissions, the Commission will support right relations, particularly being mindful of marginalized people such as racialized people and ethnic minorities.*

Action:

In addition to actions undertaken in #6 above, the commission met with Brian McIntosh of the Right Relations Circle to discuss and better understand ways in which the commission could be supportive of the work of right relations within Shining Waters Regional Council. It was agreed that networking with the Right Relations Circle allows for better dissemination of information throughout Shining Waters Regional Council.

Staffing

Our thanks to Jody Maltby for her guidance to the Commission as it began its deliberations and developed a work plan. Out thanks to Bri-anne Swan who has taken over as primary staff and worked steadfastly using her extensive resource and communication skills to help implement and follow up on commission decisions. And thanks to Rachael Howes, who makes sure it all happens!

Our thanks to the Regional Council for the support it has given for the creation of this Commission. It has been a privilege to participate in the start up of its mandate and work.

Respectfully Submitted,
Susan Eagle, Chair

On behalf of Commission members:
Lois Brown, Tina Conlon, Donna Lang, Alana Martin,
Moon-Ja Park, Eleanor Scarlett, Cameron Watt.