

PROPOSAL

For CONTINUATION OF SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

What is the issue?

The issue to be addressed is the proposal that the Social and Ecological Justice Commission, having completed a two-year trial period, become a permanent commission of Shining Waters Regional Council.

Why is this issue important?

The issue is important because social and ecological justice work needs to be intentionally addressed as an integral part of the ongoing work and witness of Shining Waters Regional Council. The SEJC through the executive of the Shining Waters Regional Council has established a pro-active and comprehensive mandate for work that links communities of faith and enables a regional council response in a timely way.

The following Purpose for the Commission was approved by the Regional Council executive:

“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.”

This mandate, work and leadership of the commission are even more relevant as we emerge from the pandemic shutdown. Many communities of faith have struggled to cope with and survive loss of income and interruption in their way of communicating and working with the community. For some this has meant that local social justice initiatives have been significantly reduced or put on hold.

For others, there has been an expressed concern that the pandemic has affected all of us psychologically, moving us into short-term coping mechanism of “planning for the next 12 hours” and losing the energy and insight to address larger “big picture” issues in any concrete and substantive way.

The Commission is prepared to assist and lead in refocusing and clarifying the justice mission of faith communities.

Review of work: (October 2019 – October 2020)

In October 2020, the commission provided a detailed report on its work to date for the regional council meeting. It is attached for information as **Appendix 1**.

Highlights of that report were:

- *Engagement with communities of faith to identify social justice priorities in local congregational work;*

- *Participation in the Social Justice Network of Ontario Regions (which brings together representatives of all the social justice committees/commissions of the Ontario Regional Councils for information sharing, strategy planning and coordination of action around issues;*
- *Developing working relationships with:
Network partners such as Living into Right Relations and PalNet,
Ecumenical and interfaith partners such as ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition), KAIROS, the Ontario Health Coalition and Campaign 2000, and
Other commissions of Shining Waters Regional Council*
- *Working with partners and the Regional Council executive in providing a Regional Council response to:
Wet'suwet'en crisis
Re-opening of Church Buildings
Marginalized Children
Tragedy at Long Term Care Homes
Black Lives Matter
Guaranteed Livable Income (preparing educational materials and organizing a Vigil)*

Review of work: (October 2020 – October 2021)

During the past year the commission has worked on the following areas of concern

- Monitoring Upper York Sewage issue
- Continuing dialogue with partner networks: PalNet and Living into Right Relations Circle
- Continuing work with national church and other regions to develop Guaranteed Livable Income strategy and resources
- Harm reduction, substance use and safe consumption sites: co-operation with seven Regional Councils, in addition to United in Learning, to co-sponsor a series of workshops, "Seeking to Reduce Harm" organized by Jeffrey Dale.
- Christian University degree granting capacity. Letter sent from Regional Council to provincial government. With much public pressure the Ontario Government withdrew support
- Open letter to Toronto city council addressing the need for more support for warming centres, more shelter beds and cooperation with those supporting residents in encampments.
- Development of an action response for communities of faith in GTA for follow up on letter to Mayor Tory re: issue of homelessness and poverty in local neighbourhoods.
- In cooperation with a coalition of groups, a letter sent from Regional Council to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) expressing

concern regarding the cessation of benefits to OW and ODSP recipients by the Ontario government. The government backtracked on its proposal.

- Support for Davenport Perth and Jane Finch Community ministries as effective and vital community ministries.
- Development of Good Friday worship materials on the theme of homelessness, available on the Shining Waters website
- Paid Sick Days advocacy with Ontario Government including a letter from Regional Council, on-line petition and materials for communities of faith.
- Being responsive to requests for information about, or follow-up action on issues referred to the commission by communities of faith.

How does this proposal help us to live into our church's commitments on equity?

Both the commission mandate and work focus identify ***racial justice and ecological justice*** as lenses through which commission work will be viewed and enacted.

How might the ~~General Council~~ Regional Council respond to the issue?

It is proposed that the Regional Council:

1. approve the Social and Ecological Commission as a permanent commission of Shining Waters Regional Council,
2. extend the two-year term of current commission members to the standard three-year term for regional council appointments, and thereafter follow the regional council protocols for appointment and re-appointment of commission members
3. request the Nominations Committee to immediately recruit and appoint new members to fill the vacant positions on the commission to bring the commission to its full complement of 12 members.

Appendix 1

Report to Regional Council, October 2020

From: Social Justice and Ecological Justice Commission

Work Review 2019 -2020

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 which 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 also 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 also 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 ie: 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 cross 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 that “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, and 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.*