

SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE COMMISSION

The Social and Ecological Justice Commission carries out its work under the following mandate: *The Social and Ecological Justice Commission will encourage, support, and initiate social and ecological justice work within Shining Waters Regional Council, which encompasses but is not limited to anti-racism and becoming a critical intercultural church of justice.*

Currently the Commission is composed of eight members and during the past year met monthly in person or by Zoom except for July, August and December. The following areas of concern were addressed:

POVERTY AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Election Action:

- Provincial election materials prepared by the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) were made available to communities of faith with an invitation to use these materials for dialogue with members of churches and in all-candidates' meetings.
- Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) Lawn Signs were made available to communities of faith to be used during both the provincial and municipal elections to raise awareness about the desperate need for basic income to allow people to have food and shelter.

Dialogue with Elected Leaders:

- As follow-up to a resolution approved by the regional meeting, a letter was sent to Premier Doug Ford as well as several cabinet ministers and leaders of opposition parties from President Betty Lou McNabb, calling on the province to initiate a three-year plan to raise social assistance rates to a level above the Market Basket level of poverty, and immediately raise social assistance rates to the deep poverty threshold of the Market Basket Measure. Also, calling on the Government of Ontario to immediately: index Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates to inflation, and to collapse the basic amount and shelter allowance into a standard flat rate benefit.

Poverty Advocates:

- Letter sent to communities of faith with a request that each community of faith identify a poverty advocate to work with the Social and Ecological Justice Commission. (Letters sent a couple of times)
- Meeting of Poverty Advocates from communities of faith to get a pulse of where congregations are, what concerns they have and to know how to collect and share information. Housing and homelessness were identified as high priorities across Shining Waters region.

Partnerships

- The Commission maintains membership and/or partnerships with ISARC and the national GLI committee. It has also initiated contact with the Ontario Health Coalition. In this way the Commission can receive current information and participate in strategies to respond to issues. ISARC pre-budget submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs was shared with United Church advocacy contacts. GLI work with municipal councils is being used to support GLI proposal being brought to regional council meeting.
- The Commission is working with its social and ecological justice counterparts in other United Church regions through Social Justice Network of Ontario Regions (SJNOR) to implement an initiative of creating a social justice liaison position with the provincial government.

Housing Issues

- The Commission endorsed a letter to Barrie City Council from the Barrie Homelessness & Housing Justice Network.
- The Commission prepared a submission to the provincial government's Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy in opposition to Bill 23, *More Homes Built Faster*, identifying negative impacts for both affordable housing and the environment and also questioning the timing and the process. The submission was signed by Shining Waters Regional Council President, David Leyton-Brown. The submission was also sent to Premier Doug Ford, opposition party leaders, and ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Environment, Conservation and Parks, and Natural Resources and Forestry. It was also made available to communities of faith.

ENVIRONMENT

Education:

- The Commission spent time last summer learning more about environmental issues.

Information Sessions:

- The Commission held two information sessions during the year to assist communities of faith in working toward the goal of implementing the General Council resolution to decrease carbon emissions by 80% by 2030: *Committed to Climate Action: How to Reach 80% Emissions Reduction by 2030* (November 2022) and *Near Net Zero by 2030? Retrofitting Church Buildings with Minimal Resources* (March 2023)
- Two more information sessions are planned for:
June 21, 2023: Green design (concepts such as renewable energy, transportation initiatives, food waste, gardening, etc.)
November 4, 2023: Community engagement (can include advocacy, inspiring and connecting people outside the church building)
- The Environment Sub-Committee is preparing an environmental presentation for the regional meeting, May 26-28, 2023.

Advocacy and Action:

- The commission has encouraged workshop participants to hold meetings in their churches and invite municipal, provincial, and federal elected leaders as well as environmental leaders in their area and community. The focus of the conversation is to acknowledge that there is a crisis and consider actions that can be taken locally.
- The commission is looking to find ways in which data collection and sharing can be facilitated to assist communities of faith with these conversations.
- The commission is also initiating work on a children's environment curriculum for Sunday Schools and youth education, which is age appropriate and respectful of different environments such as urban and rural, Indigenous, etc. including equity issues.

HARM REDUCTION

- The commission has received requests from communities of faith for support in learning more about harm reduction. Budget has been allocated and staff work is being done to prepare a congregational workshop on harm reduction and naloxone training. Interest has been expressed by other regional councils to develop this as a multi-regional effort.

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

- During the past year the commission sponsored attendance at a United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel (UNJPPI) conference and assisted with budget for honoraria.
- It is providing financial support for a November 2023 webinar series, *Palestine: Resistance Through Art*.
- It is also providing up to \$4,000 to assist four first-time attendees from within Shining Waters to participate in an exposure tour being promoted by Palestine Network for this fall.
- The commission is seeking new ways to relate to, and work with, the regional network, PalNet.

UPCOMING:

- The commission, in reviewing its work, has identified some ways in which its work might be strengthened:
 - a more interactive relationship with other commissions and the executive;
 - better knowledge of, and access to, local media to support advocacy by communities of faith.
- The commission has ordered Shining Waters Regional Council banners which will be available for communities of faith hosting or participating in local events.
- The commission is considering the following work:
 - responding to an expressed interest in facilitating a liturgy-writing workshop;
 - organizing another mid-winter event;
 - giving more focus to Calls to Action and progress made in responding to them;
 - creation of art around justice themes.

Questions:

What further resources do communities of faith wish to have to enable education and advocacy work in local justice initiatives?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We continue to use the named regional council priorities of racial justice and ecological justice as the lenses through which all justice work is approached, as we address issues of homelessness/need for affordable housing, income security and environmental challenges.

We are grateful to staff, Jeffrey Dale, Kim Uyede-Kai, Rachael Howes and Celio de Andrade Santos for resource leadership and administrative support. We could not do our work without the strong support of the staff team.

We wish Rachael Howes all the best as she retires from her work with us. Our thanks, also, to Tina Conlon and Bruce Sweet, who served on the commission this past year.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Susan Eagle, Chair

on behalf of Commission members:

Lois Brown, Esther Collier, Don Ford, Jennifer Gordon, Irene Green, Won Hur, and Brian McIntosh.