

GENERAL COUNCIL EXECUTIVE (GCE)

This report is to supplement the following Accountability Report to Regional Councils for the General Council Executive and General Council Office, prepared by the General Secretary. I will offer my impression of the highlights of my first year on the GCE, while trying not to duplicate material in the General Secretary's report.

The GCE reviewed important issues to be dealt with by the 2023 annual meeting of General Council 44. These included: principles to guide the United Church's justice work, and proposals to eliminate functional distinctions between Designated Lay Ministers and Ordered Ministers.

The GCE sent a letter to the Prime Minister about the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, in response to requests from partners in the Middle East and the GC44-adopted justice principles.

The GCE dealt with important budget matters. At successive meetings it approved principles to guide preparation of the 2024 budget (including COLA, grant reductions and planned deficit), and approved the 2024 budget based on those principles. It has begun preliminary work on the 2025 budget, exploring what it means to "live within our means" at a time of declining assessment revenue.

The GCE continues to explore Decolonizing Governance, including reducing the use of the word "mission", given the negative associations with damaging missionary efforts.

The GCE discussed the Pastoral Relations Equity Report, dealing with systemic challenges faced by equity-seeking ministry personnel. Proposals to address the issues revealed by this research are being prepared for future consideration.

The GCE received a report from the Board of Vocation. Most of the discussion focused on the admissions process, and the disappointingly large number of foreign-ordained ministers admitted to ministry in the United Church of Canada who have not been able to find a call or appointment, despite the large number of congregations without a minister.

The GCE has been briefed on plans for General Council 45, which will take place in Calgary August 7-12, 2025. The theme will be *Visions and Dreams* (Acts 2:17). Two online listening and discussion sessions for proposals will be held in June, with listening and discussion for the most challenging proposals to be in person in Calgary during GC45.

David Leyton-Brown

Accountability Report to Regional Councils

Origin: General Council Executive & the General Council Offices

Greetings as you convene for your annual meeting. We pray that it will be a meaningful time of gathering and work as you visualize what it means to be evolving communities characterized by deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice. We recognize the challenges to our

collective ministries as we imagine the sustainability of the ministries of The United Church of Canada and acknowledge the necessity as leaders to be harbingers of hope. We join you in the journey.

The Executive and staff leaders in the church have committed to find ways to enable the ministries of the Communities of Faith. This report highlights four initiatives that will significantly impact our communities.

UCC Protect United

This initiative is by far the largest financial commitment of the strategic plan, with a \$3 million loan funding a captive insurance program aimed at helping participating United Church ministries first reduce and then contain insurance costs. In addition to providing the start-up capital, the national church is also exposed to providing more capital in the event of particularly adverse claims results - especially if they happen in the early years.

The program was rushed into place for December 2022 to provide immediate premium relief, with a rollback of premium increases from 2020 and 2021. This meant premium reductions of 11-27% during a year when insurance premiums in the industry were going up by 15-30%. Even with a premium rate increase in December 2023, on an apples-to-apples basis, participants paid less for insurance than two years prior.

So far – repeat: so far – the program has been a success financially. Annualized premiums paid for 2021-2022 were \$10.1 million versus \$8.1 million for the first year of the program – a saving of almost \$2 million when adjusted for new business and closures/amalgamations. The interest on the start-up loan is being paid annually. Claims experience has been well within target levels, and with each additional year of reasonable claims experience, the captive insurance arrangement becomes more self-sufficient and the start-up loan potentially repayable.

Despite the very encouraging **initial** financial results, the customer service and administration has been very poor and caused much frustration for participants. Much of this was attributable to rushing the launch of the program to deliver the financial benefit, but our partner's existing systems and staff proved inadequate for the volume of queries that arose. Church-side decisions to deliver more savings also proved challenging administratively. There has been much remedial activity underway, and we expect to achieve proper service capacity by the second quarter of 2024. We will launch greater coverage flexibility and improved communications at the same time.

Everyone is reminded that this initiative will need to run just like a traditional insurance company, with claims administered accordingly. The difference is that we are all in it together to try to reduce risk and claims – and therefore premiums. This captive insurance arrangement exists solely to benefit participants.

Strategic Operational Plan Initiative - Growth

All the Growth Animators are now in place, working actively with regions on their strategies for renewing and creating communities and inviting strong participation in The United Church of Canada. In January and February alone, Growth Animators met with:

- 71 Ministry Personnel
- 37 Governing Bodies (by phone, online or in person)

- 16 Communities of Faiths, and facilitated
- 31 conversations about Growth to some form of regional body.

The focus of these meetings has been visioning; collaboration with other Communities of Faith; exploration of neighbourhood profiles; creation of renewal or growth strategies, and exploring practices of discipleship and invitation. Staff continue to explore and develop possibilities in 40 possible sites for new Communities of Faith amongst migrant, diasporic and Francophone communities; close to 10 of these are sufficiently developed to have leadership contracts to support their continued progress.

Collaborative Ministry Models

There are many different models of collaborative ministries that already exist in the United Church. Work is underway to develop and offer training programs for lay leaders and ministry personnel in collaborative ministries, and those who might be interested, including candidates for ministry.

Faithful Footprints

To date, we have invested almost \$3M in this initiative to assist Communities of Faith in upgrading and renovating their heating/cooling systems and addressing issues of environmental sustainability and cost savings.

Other Updates:

Addressing Structural Opportunities: These initiatives are a critical part of the ministry of the leadership team consisting of the Executive and staff leaders. We invite your continued engagement in these areas of work. There are several other initiatives to address some structural opportunities, and responses to emerging issues. We have established working groups to provide additional critical information as we address the challenges of sustainability. We established a Total Compensation Task Group to look at the issues relating to the church's compensation challenges. In keeping with the commitment to evaluating the 2019 structural changes in the church, a Steering Committee has been established to work alongside Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa, the staff lead for the project. Both groups will be reporting to the 45th General Council in 2025.

In keeping with The Manual requirement (D.4.1.6), the Executive has established a working group to review the role of the Moderator. Additionally, the Executive agreed to also include the role of the General Secretary in this review.

The Ministry of Justice: As we continue to live into the commitment to becoming an antiracist denomination, we have introduced a new initiative, *Equity, Diversity, and Anti-Oppression Education for Committees*.

To date, most committees have completed, or will soon be completing, their education sessions. From the feedback so far, we hope to offer similar programs more broadly to other leadership groups in the church. Together with the Indigenous Church, an *Indigenous and racialized youth gathering* is now into its second year. This now-annual gathering is firmly lodged as an emerging youth-oriented community of faith. It focuses on building understanding through mutual learning on experiences of racism and creative responses to antiracism in the United Church.

Finding ways to invite a deeper and a broader engagement in advocacy continues to be a challenge, especially when the church is not of one mind and often is unable to speak together in respectful ways across our differences. There have been two new hires in the General Council Office, a *Government Relations Officer* to help to build our capacity to engage with government as we deepen our advocacy efforts, and a *Program Coordinator, Global Advocacy 2SLGBTQIA+*. In addition, we have developed a new advocacy tool to enable sign-on as part of any advocacy campaign. The Justice Principles adopted by the 2023 annual meeting of the 44th General Council has provided a framework for our advocacy particularity with the war in Gaza.

Together with the Indigenous Church, the work on justice and reconciliation continues as we attempt to address both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action and the Calls to Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People. Communities of Faith are invited to witness for justice in this area; this includes the Moose Hide Campaign and our own *#SearchTheLandfill* social media campaign regarding the Brady and Prairie Green landfills in Winnipeg.

The Executive invited the *Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee* (TICIF) in collaboration with the *Indigenous Church* and the *Anti-Racism Common Table* to examine the use of the word "mission," given the colonial history of the word and to bring recommendations; these were adopted in November 2023. (The proposal [GS 63 Recommendations re: Mission](#) is found on the [United Church Commons](#).) Following the request of the 44th General Council, a working group was established to engage the church in learning about and countering antisemitism, particularly within our interpretations of Scripture, in worship, and in Christian education. More information and resources can be found on the [Countering Antisemitism page](#) on the United Church website.

Centennial Celebration: Planning for the United Church centennial is underway. There will be three streams:

1. Commemoration
2. External-focused communication and action plan
3. Fundraising/capital campaign.

June 9, 2024, will be the launch of the centennial year (online and in person) with a worship service at Metropolitan United Church, Toronto, a site close to the inaugural gathering at the former Mutual Street Arena. Every month, from June 2024 to June 2025, a key moment will be highlighted on social media to mark and share our history. The date for the Centennial service itself has been set for June 8, 2025. This will be the celebration to which we invite international guests.

The goal of an external-focused campaign is twofold: to introduce the distinctiveness of the United Church to those who have only a broad umbrella definition of "church," and to reconnect with those who claim United Church identity but have lost connection. The Executive asked The United Church of Canada Foundation to lead a legacy campaign.

Mission and Service: Good news! We are grateful for your continuing support of the collective ministries of the Church. There is good news to report regarding the 2023 Mission and Service results: contributions by congregations, United Church Women (UCW), and special donations all exceeded budget. The totals for these three areas, sitting at \$17,090,056, were slightly over the 2022 actuals of \$17,062,694.

The total for Mission and Service from all areas was \$20,831,564. This compares favourably to the total budget of \$20,225,000, and is close to the 2022 actual amount raised of \$21,132,213. These are preliminary results, and you can expect a final tally and the Mission and Service Accountability Report in June.

Information and updates about the work of the Executive can be found on the [General Council 44 webpage](#).