



General Council News

Corner Brook, Newfoundland

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Why Is the United Church Still Needed?

by Kevin Cox

Moderator Gary Paterson has a challenging question for the people of The United Church of Canada as close to 600 commissioners and guests gather for the 42nd General Council on the green hills of Corner Brook, NL, August 8 to 14.

"What difference does it make in your life or in your community to be part of The United Church of Canada or to be a Christian? Sometimes I worry that we're not being clear that it makes a difference," Paterson said August 7 as delegates began to gather on the Grenfell Campus of Memorial University and at the Corner Brook Civic Centre.

In a wide-ranging interview, Paterson spelled out why he thinks the United Church, Canada's largest Protestant denomination, is needed.

Over the next week, 356 commissioners from 13 Conferences will face a heavy load of reports and proposals that could define the church and change a governing structure that has been in place for its 90-year history.

Paterson sees the United Church as the place where people are called to think for themselves and to ponder theological questions about how God works in the world. Commissioners will be called to worship throughout the Council, which started the evening of Saturday, August 8.

The Moderator has travelled the country during his three-year term and has seen United Church people making a difference in food banks, providing shelter for homeless people, and seeking solutions

to issues of poverty and injustice. But he said he also recognized that the United Church no longer attracts a great deal of attention in the media or the halls of power.

"One of the huge challenges facing us is that we have fewer resources and minimal political clout.



The United Church of Canada

Moderator Gary Paterson

We're not going to move the power people, but neither did they in the first century. So what does that look like?" he asked.

About 90 of the 190 proposals that will come before commissioners deal with the recommendations of the Comprehensive Review Task Group. These recommendations call for changing the way the church is governed, simplifying church structures, and opening up new ways of being the church.

A quick scan of the other proposals shows that passion for social justice is still burning.

Delegates will deal with proposals to direct the church Pension Board to sell its shares in Goldcorp over alleged environmental and human rights violations at the company's mine in Guatemala. Another proposal calls for Canada to sign the Arms Trade Treaty, and there are several proposals related to seeking a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

Topics of other proposals include a revised model for the status and roles of church leaders and quorum requirements at church meetings.

Paterson, the first openly gay leader of a major religious denomination, has spoken passionately about acceptance and celebration of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community.

There is a proposal that the church adopt a three-year program of dialogue and reconciliation with the LGBTQ community in the form of a living apology.

The proposals before the 42nd General Council are complex, and Paterson acknowledged that there is a lot of hard work in the days ahead before he hands off the Moderator's job to one of 12 nominees who will be elected the night of Thursday, August 13.

His approach to the arduous agenda is simple: "Pray."

But the week also includes Sabbath time. On one afternoon commissioners can head out on local excursions and on another evening, they'll be hosted at a "kitchen party" at a local high school.



Survival Tips for First-Time Commissioners

by Mary-Frances Denis

For the 45 percent of commissioners attending a General Council for the first time, veteran commissioners have some advice.

"I think people can look forward to life-changing moments of insight and discipleship," comments Jim McKibbin of Toronto Conference. "For me, General Council is a week of worship, a week of feeling the closeness of God. It is an intense and joyful experience."

All the commissioners emphasized the importance of listening well.

In addition:

- Resist the urge to think about what you're going to say while someone else is speaking.
- Waiting a respectful second or two after someone speaks can allow for a deeper discernment of issues.
- Attend with an open mind—open to change, to new ideas, to fresh concepts.

Table Groups

"It is important to become a viable member of your table group. Listen carefully, participate, learn to know those around you, and understand positions taken by them," explains Lewis Coffman of Hamilton Conference. "Express your own opinions, but be willing and open to change and acceptance of differing opinions."

Other advice:

- Table groups that have been the most meaningful were those where everyone made an effort to connect with each other. Little things made a huge difference, like shifting each person's seating location one place around the table each day so that over the week everyone shared in the good and not-so-good views.
- Look to experienced people for guidance, but do not defer too much. New people must engage in the debate and bring issues forward—that is why you have been elected to be here.
- Observe a rigid adherence to scheduling. You can say we have 10 minutes for table talk, and someone can time. This will encourage people to not speak too long, and it will provide the opportunity for all commissioners to contribute.

- Your tablemates can help you when you are lost or not understanding someone. The diversity in each table means someone probably has background on almost every issue.

- Don't be afraid to be silent.

Challenges

"Do not feel guilty about finding time to do pleasurable things and even talk about non-church topics over dinner," says Bill Steadman of Manitow Conference. "You need to keep perspective and balance during this intense experience."

In addition:

- An introvert might find General Council extremely trying. Self-care is important.

- The main challenge is recognizing that you are not representing a constituency. You're not even representing yourself; rather, you are there in discipleship.

- Expect to have people try to convince you to support their perspective. Try to avoid getting hooked if you don't agree with an impassioned plea. Ask why they believe what they do, listen for their wisdom, and practise some respectful closings: "Thank you. I will keep your thoughts in mind as I continue to discern what I believe to be the best way forward for the whole church."

- Do not be embarrassed to ask for clarity—that is your right and duty. There are no silly questions at a General Council. There may be less than helpful answers, but no silly questions.

- It is often hard to get up to the mike the first time, but if there is something you feel strongly about, speak. If you really feel intimidated, get someone from your table to share your concern.

Perks

- Make an extra effort to meet new people. Force yourself out of your comfort zone at meals, and sit with people you don't know. What a perfect opportunity to learn about the church in all its shapes and sizes and to broaden your understanding of the impact proposals may have on various parts of the church.

- Make friends! Each of you is struggling with the same issues and looking for the guidance of the Spirit.

- Worship is always moving and inspiring. Look for ways to hear from ecumenical and global partners.

Staying Awake

- If coffee does it for you, go for it. A little yoga, stretching, and meditating are all good medicine for the awestruck soul.

- Know yourself, and listen to your body. Find ways to counteract all the sitting. Take a brisk walk at every meal break, even up and down hallways and stairs.

- Do not be embarrassed about meeting your physical and spiritual needs. Enjoy special events and social times, but make sure you get reasonable hours of sleep every night. Pace yourself, as the week gets very tiring near the end when the big decisions are left to make.



Introducing the General Council News Team

by Mary-Frances Denis

As a group, the 13-member team working in the 42nd General Council newsroom has attended or worked at 84 General Councils.

The three reporters volunteer their time with the support of their congregations as a gift to the wider church:

Jim Cairney is the minister at Christ Church United Church of Canada in Mississauga, Ontario. Cairney first covered General Council in 1986 as a religion reporter with *The Hamilton Spectator*. He has worked in the General Council newsroom for six Councils. He wasn't at the last one because he was serving as an ecumenical accompanier in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel.

Jeff Cook is in team ministry at Transcona Memorial Pastoral Charge in Winnipeg. Cook has an M.A. in journalism and has had articles published in secular newspapers as well as *Mandate* magazine. In 2011 he won the Canadian Church Press award for best theological reflection. Cook could not work in the newsroom at the last General Council because he was a nominee for Moderator.

Kevin Cox was ordained in 2014 by Maritime Conference and is the minister at Newport Pastoral Charge in Nova Scotia. An experienced journalist, Cox worked for *The Hamilton Spectator* from 1976–1981 and spent 23 years as a staff writer with *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto, Calgary, and Halifax. From 2005–2012, he was managing

editor of *allnovascotia.com*, an electronic business publication.

The newsroom's English-language video reporter is **Elizabeth Macdonald**. Macdonald is the minister at Sydenham Street Pastoral Charge in Kingston, Ontario. Before being ordained, she worked as a radio broadcast journalist for over a decade.

The newsroom's staff component has served a whopping total of 161 years for the General Council Office. They are:

Dan Benson: Photographer

Rebekah Chevalier: Editor

Chris Dumas: Designer

Mary-Frances Denis: Newsroom manager

Stéphane Gaudet: French-language news writer and video reporter

Bill Gillard: Web manager

Bruce Gregersen: Media spokesperson

Aaron McCarroll Gallegos: Social media strategist. McCarroll Gallegos is the one member of the team who is staying connected virtually from Toronto.

Kate Rodd: Video producer

Two others are volunteering their time in the newsroom during General Council. They are Janet McDonald and John Leffler, who are serving as newsroom stewards. They deliver messages from the newsroom to commissioners and assist reporters at the press table.



General Council Memories from 1964

by Mary-Frances Denis

The last time the General Council met in Newfoundland and Labrador was in 1964 in St. John's. The meeting was held September 9–17 and took place in Gower Street United Church. *General Council News* contacted three United Church ministers who attended that meeting as commissioners and asked them to share some of their memories.

Bruce McLeod

There were Welcome to the United Church ban-

ners on light poles all the way in from the airport. It was a province-wide welcome!

Moderator candidates in those days were not allowed to be seen or heard. The nominator's speech was a key factor in their election. Ernie Howse had the benefit of an eloquent speech from George Birtch, then of Toronto's Metropolitan United Church. But as a native Newfoundlander, and well known already, he was in the right place at the right time.

The custom of keeping Moderator candidates silent and invisible lasted until 1968 when, after the nominations had been made, someone from the floor asked, "Can we at least see these people?" So the candidates, still silent, lined up at the front of Sydenham Street United Church in Kingston, Ontario, as though for a joint selfie. The custom continued to loosen up as General Councils went by.

One of the issues in 1964 was whether one-board systems could legally replace the old session/steward system. The Judicial Committee was asked to rule. They withdrew in all their dignity. When they returned, they solemnly announced that, "No, such a change was not legal." I was sitting beside Doug Walker, whose church in Calgary (like a very few others) already had switched to a one-board system. Wide-eyed, I whispered, "What will you do?" "Nothing at all," he whispered back.

At the following General Council, two years later, the Judicial committee was again asked to rule. By this time there were 40 or 50 one-board systems across the church. Again the committee retired in all their dignity. Again they returned, but this time to announce, with equal solemnity, that, "Yes, one-board systems were legal." Not quite so wide-eyed now, I learned how change comes in the United Church. And I love what I learned!



1964 General Council, Gower Street United Church

Murray R. Binsted

The Government of Newfoundland hosted a state dinner for us. Premier Joey Smallwood spoke, as well as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and local choirs entertained us with folk songs of the island.

On the afternoon of Saturday, September 12, each commissioner was assigned to a family in one of the United Churches in the city. My family's name was Noseworthy. They took me out to some of the villages around Conception Bay, and we travelled as far as Harbour Grace.

One of the best addresses of the Council was given by Leslie Cook of the World Council of Churches. He spoke about the church in the changing world with special reference to the refugee problem. On Sunday evening there was a mass rally of commissioners and local citizens in Memorial Arena. There was an overflow crowd.

I found the experience of the Council an educational experience and one that made me appreciate this United Church of ours.

Ken Micklethwaite

I came to Canada in 1955, and am now 96 years old. As Chair of Brandon Presbytery I was appointed to the General Council in 1964. It was an amazing experience.

On Saturday we were invited by the Premier, Joey Smallwood, and his wife to an at-home from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m., and I still have the card of invitation. The Premier gave us a steak dinner and held a barbecue for us on the Sunday, which I had reluctantly to miss because I flew north to Windsor to preach. The people there were so welcoming, and when I left they presented me with cans of salmon, which they had caught and canned themselves.

My free time was very limited, as I was made the Chair of a powerful committee to consider the troubles in the head office in Toronto. Ernie Long, the General Secretary, presented me with dozens of files to read concerning the problem. On behalf of the committee I presented our conclusion, which made some people very happy and others very upset and disappointed.

Years later when I attended General Council in Kingston, I expected the city to provide the same importance to the event that had been accorded in Newfoundland, but discovered it was not so. Newfoundland is unique in its friendliness and welcome to visitors.



The United Church of Canada

Linda Stonehouse and Kathy Brett

Newfoundland Hospitality Greet Commissioners

by Jim Cairney

"Our main thing is to make people feel welcome." That's how Kathy Brett explains the role of the Local Arrangements Committee for General Council 42. Brett and Linda Stonehouse are co-chairs of the committee.

The team has made sure a major dose of Newfoundland hospitality is in store for General Council commissioners, who began meeting in Corner Brook yesterday.

There will be moose to eat, a kitchen party, opportunities for knitting and rug hooking, and a jigs dinner for some commissioners taking part in excursions. (A jigs dinner, a Newfoundland standard, is vegetables and salt meat.)

Stonehouse and Brett explain that some of the moose was donated, and Linda's husband, Dave Stonehouse, and his hunting buddy Ralph Ellsworth bagged a small moose on a charity moose licence on behalf of the General Council.

There will be a demonstration of rug hooking, and people can knit squares that will be made into blankets by the Mount Pearl UCW. The blankets will go to Stella's Circle, a community service in St. John's.

"We hope people will have fun," says Brett. "We

know there will be a lot of heavy work here."

She adds that she hopes commissioners will experience a flavour of Newfoundland and also gain a spiritual sense of Newfoundlanders. "We hope there will be some uplifting as well," Brett says.

The committee of 15 has worked steadily on local arrangements since the last General Council, with the intensity increasing in the last two years. Officially, the team has 130 volunteers, but plenty of additional people just show up to help.

"We have a good crew and things are working out," says Brett.

Almost all the pastoral charges in the province have been involved in some way. "People have been very generous," adds Stonehouse.

A number of services have been donated or discounted. Every UCW group has made at least a half dozen registration bags.

Transportation has been the biggest issue, getting both people and things here. "Being an island, it's hard to get in and out," notes Stonehouse.



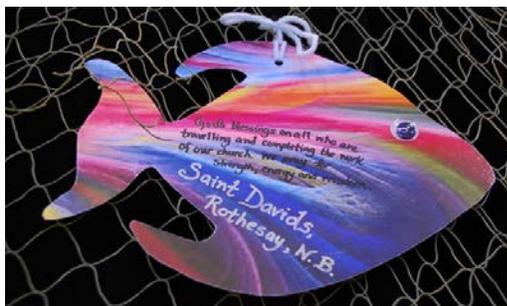
Prayer Fish

by Jim Cairney

One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish... A stream of colourful, one-of-kind prayer fish have made their way to Corner Brook for General Council 42.

The request for prayer fish from congregations across the United Church has spawned an "unbelievable!" response says Maya Landell, Worship and Music Coordinator.

The hundreds of fish are being displayed in "schools" around the meeting and worship space.



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Prayer fish

"It reminds us we are surrounded by the sea," says Landell. "It's so rooted in who we are as Christ's followers, with a fish as the secret sign.

"Every time we see the fish we are reminded of the stories of Jesus."

The request for the prayer fish went out across the church months ago in Infopac and "on the Net." In response, more than 500 were mailed to Linda Stonehouse, co-chair of Local Arrangements, in Corner Brook.

"The hope was that congregations would be invited to send their prayers [with the fish] for the General Council to be surrounded by the prayers of our congregations," says Landell.

Every day for weeks, packages were delivered to Stonehouse. Many arrived with their prayers attached.

"When people were opening them, people were crying," says Landell.

Every fish is different. Most are brightly coloured. Some sparkle. The fish are fabric art, paper, sewn, woven, knitted, or cross-stitched. Some have photos embedded.

In addition, General Council commissioners will be given a palm-sized, hand-carved wooden fish to hold during the times of prayer. Local wood carvers prepared 650 wooden fish.



Tree Planting to Offset Carbon Footprint

by Jim Cairney

To help reduce the environmental impact of General Council 42, the Local Arrangements Committee has partnered with the Forest Centre of the Grenfell Campus of Memorial University. Donations will be received toward tree planting in western Newfoundland and Labrador to offset the carbon footprint of Council travel. A tree is 25 cents.

The collection jars are well labelled, saying, "Reduce your hoof print. From wherever you've been sent, put in your 'green' to keep our planet clean."

