



General Council News

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No Desire for Large Future Council Meetings

by Kevin Cox

General Council 42 has indicated it would not accept a section of the Comprehensive Review Task Group (CRTG) report that would see a denominational council made up of two representatives of each community of faith.

Commissioners expressed concern about everything from the logistics and cost of hosting a denominational meeting with over 5,000 people to the environmental impact of so many people doing so much travelling to attend. Other commissioners said large conventions are common in denominations like the United Church of Christ in the United States as well as the Baptist faith.

Amy Mueller of Alberta and Northwest Conference said a large meeting offers opportunities for more voices to be heard, such as church camps and The GO Project. She added that online technology provides opportunities for people to come together and share. "We need to find new ways so voices can be heard," she said.

Suzanna Bates of Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario said this General Council is committed to reducing its carbon footprint, but a huge gathering would have a huge environmental cost.

Ken Thomas of Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario said that rural communities would not be able to afford to send representatives to denominational council meetings.

Valerie Kingsbury of Maritime Conference said she was excited about the idea of the church's representatives coming together online. She noted that

congregations are already funding the cost of annual meetings.

No decisions have been made on the size of the denominational council and how it will be constituted. Debate on the CRTG report will continue through the week. Paterson also pledged that there will be discussion of the proposed number and geographic boundaries of the regional councils.

Commissioners voiced concern that there is not enough time left on the agenda to deal with the CRTG report. But Paterson said there is still a significant amount of time available to debate and make decisions about the proposed structure, and he urged the Council to focus on broad principles rather than wordsmithing.



Proportional Representation in Elections

by Jim Cairney

The Executive of the General Council is being asked to develop resources for congregations to understand and advocate for alternatives to "first-past-the-post elections" in Canada.

A commission of the General Council, a decision-making body, voted Aug. 11 for these resources. The goal is "to better understand proportional representation and its impact on Canadian elections."



Competency-Based Education Referred to General Secretary

by Jeff Cook

The adoption of a competency-based approach to ministerial education has been referred to the General Secretary of the General Council for further work, to be brought back for decision to the 43rd General Council.

The competency-based approach would allow the United Church to “expand or broaden our understanding of what is appropriate for theological education,” said Joe Ramsay, United Church Manager, Ministry Personnel Policies and Programs.

He said it would consider a person’s personal, spiritual, cultural, and academic competencies for ministry.

The proposed model (found in the report of the Working Group on Leadership Formation for Ministry at united-church.ca/general-council/gce/2014) would allow for some people to attain a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) from a recognized theological school, but would also allow for people without an M.Div. to be considered for ministry based on combinations of other academic degrees, life and work experiences, and theological studies.

The model was debated on Aug. 11 during a commission, one of three decision-making bodies of the Council. Most of the concerns raised focused on whether theological schools would still grant testamurs (a required certificate indicating that a person is suitable for ordained ministry in the United Church).

“Does this remove schools from being involved in training people for ministry?” asked Vicki McPhee of Alberta and Northwest Conference.

Ramsay replied that schools would still be involved in training, but that “ordination and commissioning would not be limited to having a degree from one of those particular institutions.”

He said the proposal will not reduce the capability or preparedness of people entering ministry.

Bill Miller of Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario said he knows a person who has a theological degree from a school in Nepal who currently cannot be recognized in the United Church.

“This just simply creates the possibility for someone like that to be ordained,” said Miller.

Peter Wyatt of Manitou Conference said that the “question of a testamur really is vital to a flourishing network of theological schools and theologians.”

The motion to refer was passed with 67 percent of the sessional committee voting to refer, and 28 percent voting against.



Restorative Care Plan

by Jeff Cook

United Church mission units, outreach ministries, and other ministries will now be required to participate in the denomination’s Restorative Care Plan.

The decision was made Aug. 11 in one of three commissions that are decision-making bodies of General Council 42. Alan Hall, Executive Officer of the Ministry and Employment Unit, told the commission considering this decision that pastoral charges are currently required to participate in the Plan. The plan was to be opened to these ministries on a voluntary basis next January. In approving the proposal, commissioners made participation mandatory.

The Restorative Care Plan is an insurance plan that provides benefits to assist with costs entailed when ministry personnel are disabled. Such costs include salary, benefits, supply, and staffing costs during the person’s absence.

“The purpose of this proposal is to ensure that everyone is protected,” said Greg White of Hamilton Conference.



New Model of Membership

by Jeff Cook

Presbyteries will vote on whether full members of a local ministry unit may consent to allow adherents to vote on all matters before meetings of that local ministry unit.

A commission, a decision-making body of the 42nd General Council, authorized a category 2 remit regarding this change in church policy.

The commission also directed the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee to “invite the church into a study of the meaning of membership, including the relationship of baptism and membership,” and bring recommendations to the next General Council.

Bruce Gregersen, the senior advisor on Theology and Faith, told the commission that there is a need for such a study.

He said it will help the church clarify practices, such as whether—prior to offering leadership in a pastoral charge—a person must express their faith in following Jesus or whether a person could “enter into that role without any Christian affirmation whatever.”

Gregersen said that presbytery can currently approve an adherent becoming a member of a congregational board or committee.

“I support the proposal because times are changing,” said Ed Bardock of Alberta and Northwest Conference. “People we are attracting are growing into our spiritual life, and I want to see them be part of the life of the church and there not be a stumbling block before them.”

Mary Smiley of Bay of Quinte Conference expressed concern about allowing non-members to vote. “Why should anyone want to be a full member of The United Church of Canada if it doesn’t matter whether you are or not?” she asked.

If the remit is approved, it will be enacted by the 43rd General Council.



Art Installation to Be a Living Apology for LGBTTT2Q

by Jim Cairney

Be on the lookout for a “Living Apology” to LGBTTT2Q people. No one knows exactly what this will look like, but this Living Apology will be a travelling, interactive, art installation project.

The proposal, which was approved on Aug. 11 by a commission, a decision-making body of the General Council, originated from the Executive of the General Council.

The vision for this Living Apology is that it would be a three-year “journey of dialogue and reconciliation with LGBTTT2Q persons.”

The intent is to offer “creative opportunities for conversation, worship and education,” as well as opportunities “to explore concepts such as lament, reconciliation and justice.”

It is intended to be a vehicle for dialogue, storytelling, education, and reconciliation with people who identify as sexually or gender diverse, including, but not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, two-spirited, and queer people.

The work of this initiative will be reported and celebrated in 2018 for the 30th anniversary of the 1988 decision of the full participation of LGBTTT2Q persons in the United Church.



Take No Action on Basis of Union Proposal

by Jeff Cook

General Council 42 narrowly approved a motion to take no action on mandating a review of Section 11 of the Basis of Union, but the concern will still have to be dealt with by the Executive of the General Council.

The decision was made by a commission, a decision-making body, dealing with a proposal from

Toronto Conference to instruct the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee "to undertake a broad based and theological review of the Basis of Union" section that deals with the questions asked of people as they are ordained or commissioned.

The first of those questions is "Do you believe in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you commit yourself anew to God?"

The proposal asked the church to "ensure" the continued "relevancy and effectiveness" of the questions.

The motion to take no action passed with 51 percent of the commission voting in favour. Forty-five percent voted no, with the remainder abstaining.

Wendy Cranston, the Program Coordinator for Ministry Personnel Administration, said that the church has changed the words asked at ordination and commissioning three times previously.

Peter Wyatt of Manitou Conference said there is a "crisis of faith" in the church, and it would be "unwise to step back from a basic Trinitarian confession."

"Can we use more contemporary language?" asked Sue Browning of London Conference.

Several commissioners asked if the church needs to clarify what is meant by "essential agreement." (Those being ordained or commissioned are asked to affirm that they are in essential agreement with the Basis of Union.)

After the vote, some commissioners said they had wanted more discussion time. The commission decided to proceed with discussion of a nearly identically worded proposal from Hamilton Conference.

The commission reached the limit of time allotted for its session before it could vote on the Hamilton proposal, so that proposal is referred to the Executive of the General Council.

Also referred to the Executive are proposals dealing with

- justice within the new compensation model
- correcting unintended consequences of the 2010 approved maternity and parental leave policies
- sharing resources and reviewing property and monies held in trust at all levels of the United Church



Letters to Be Sent to Government

by Jeff Cook

The General Secretary and members of the United Church are being asked to write to elected government representatives about the well-being of children and about the treatment of prison inmates.

Child Well-being

Meeting in a commission, one of three decision-making bodies, the 42nd General Council approved that letters be written in support of the adoption of a national Child Well-being Index.

Included in the 10 expectations of the index are the rights of all children to have three meals a day, safe housing, enough clothes for different seasons, and quality education.

Prison Inmates

The commission also directed letters be written to the Prime Minister, party leaders, and appropriate ministers calling on them to create a safer and healthier environment in prisons through several recommendations, including the elimination of solitary confinement, provision of better training of prison staff regarding mental health issues of offenders, and ensuring adequate oversight of prison conditions and other recommendations.

The commission also directed the United Church to work closely with interfaith chaplaincies in seeking changes to the treatment of prison inmates.



Progressive Evangelicals Should Be Welcomed by United Church

by Jim Cairney

Q: Where do progressive evangelicals go when they get the boot from a congregation or denomination for expressing a lesbian and gay positive stance?

A: They should be welcomed into The United Church of Canada!

That's the conclusion reached by General Council 42 on Aug. 11, meeting in a commission, a decision-making body.

The commission hopes the wider United Church will be welcoming and responsive to individuals and congregations who find themselves exiled from, or *persona non grata* with, a denomination or a local congregation after taking stands that are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender positive.

The commission voted to "encourage and/or invite, congregations who have made such statements and find themselves without a church building due to the denominational body withdrawing their support and property from the congregation, to enter into negotiations with any congregations that are open to sharing their space."

"The negotiations, along with presbytery, could provide these progressive congregations with a building and explore ways for them to become a part of The United Church of Canada," said the commission.

The General Secretary was also asked to "send letters of support and solidarity to the Progressive Evangelical congregations in Canada and the United States who have made supportive statements of inclusion and welcome to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people."



Church Vision Statement Called For

by Kevin Cox

As General Council debates a new structure, commissioners are looking for a vision statement. Meeting on Aug. 11 in a commission, a decision-making body, it has asked the General Secretary of the General Council to create a process to develop a new vision statement for the United Church and to present the results at the next General Council.

The initial motion from Bay of Quinte Conference called for a new mission statement, but the commission changed that to vision statement at the suggestion of Hewitt Holmes of Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario.

He explained that a mission statement explains

what the church does, but a vision statement looks to where the church wants to be in five to 10 years. "We must have the form before we can have the function. What we are doing is having a big conversation about the function without ever talking about where we want to see ourselves in five or ten years," Holmes said.

But Ross Bartlett of Maritime Conference cautioned that drafting such a statement was a huge undertaking and said there was little chance it could be done in three years.



Energy East Pipeline Motion Referred to Executive

by Kevin Cox

A motion that called for letters to be sent expressing opposition to the TransCanada Energy East Pipeline was referred to the Executive of the General Council after some heated debate.

The decision to refer was made by the Council in one of three decision-making commissions. The commission was divided between supporters of the proposed 4,600-kilometre project who saw it as creating jobs and providing much-needed energy and those who opposed it as dangerous and environmentally damaging.

David Pollard of Alberta and Northwest Conference said his pastoral charge in Airdrie, Alberta, was not opposed to the pipeline and should not be asked to write a letter opposing it. "Stop assuming The United Church of Canada thinks the same way on every single issue right across the country," he said.

In other business, the commission called on the Canadian government to create a comprehensive corporate accountability framework for Canadian mining companies working in foreign countries. The framework would require mining companies to respect the human rights of the people living near the mining projects and to follow environmental, human rights, and labour laws wherever they are working.



Des décisions importantes en commissions

Traduit et adapté de Jim Cairney et Kevin Cox

Le Conseil général a pris mardi des décisions importantes lors de la journée de travail en commission.

Quelques propositions ont été adoptées concernant Israël et la Palestine. L'une d'elles réaffirme le « droit des Palestiniens et des Israéliens à l'autodétermination et que toute décision concernant le statut d'État doit être prise par les populations qui vivent en Israël-Palestine ». Une autre réaffirme le droit des Israéliens et des Palestiniens de vivre dans la paix à l'intérieur de frontières reconnues par la communauté internationale. Le Conseil général a également voté en faveur d'un renforcement des stratégies et des actions adoptées au dernier Conseil général en 2012 pour contribuer à résoudre le problème de l'occupation illégale des territoires palestiniens par l'État d'Israël. Ce renforcement comprend « la création et l'élaboration, en coopération avec nos partenaires, d'un programme d'éducation et de promotion en lien avec l'adoption de sanctions économiques et de stratégies de désinvestissement contre toutes les sociétés et institutions qui sont complices de l'occupation illégale et en tirent des bénéfices. »

De plus, le Conseil général appelle le gouvernement canadien à déclencher une enquête publique sur

les disparitions et assassinats de femmes autochtones. Les paroisses et les ministères de l'Église Unie sont invités « à rappeler chaque année la mémoire des femmes autochtones disparues et assassinées au moyen de l'éducation et de la prière, en particulier le dernier dimanche avant le 4 octobre, date de la veille annuelle de Sœurs par l'esprit, tenue partout au Canada ».

Sur un autre sujet, les délégués-es du Conseil général pressent l'Église Unie de vendre ses avoirs de 8,7 millions de dollars dans l'industrie des combustibles fossiles et de réinvestir ces fonds dans le domaine des énergies renouvelables. Le Conseil général demande à ce que le Conseil de retraite de l'Église Unie du Canada examine l'étendue et la raison d'être de ses investissements dans l'industrie des combustibles fossiles et détermine si ces « avoirs sont en harmonie avec l'impératif chrétien de rechercher la justice, de résister au mal et de vivre avec respect dans la Création ».

Le Conseil général a aussi exprimé le souhait que son Conseil de retraite vende ses actions de Goldcorp, une compagnie minière. La motion demande à la Secrétaire générale « d'informer le Conseil de retraite de l'Église Unie du Canada que la volonté de l'Église est de se défaire de ses actions de Goldcorp et de rendre ce geste public ». Au 30 juin 2015, le Conseil de retraite de l'Église Unie du Canada détenait directement 66 700 actions de Goldcorp, pour une valeur de 1 352 000 \$.

