

## **Called to Be Church** *Toward a Unifying Vision*

In preparation for the 40th General Council 2009, this document is being circulated to invite the people of The United Church of Canada to prayerfully consider the vision and purpose of our church. Through this paper and the discernments and discussions it may stimulate, we seek to be faithful in response to God's call, a call embodied in the life and ministry of Christ Jesus.

General Council is the court that allows The United Church of Canada to live out our faith nationally and globally. This paper intends to stimulate conversations that will inform the commissioners of the 40th General Council 2009 as they further discern and discuss our collective vision and purpose as our church steps into the future.

As a diverse church, we recognize the many passions and visions that inspire our members, congregations, mission units, presbyteries, and Conferences. This discussion of vision and purpose is not meant to displace these passions and mission, but rather to focus our collective work as a national and international church (our work as a General Council). At the same time, there is the hope that it might inspire and engage our faith life at all levels of the church.

This paper encourages this discernment and discussion in our faith community by

- a) outlining our present challenge
- b) reminding us of our call to be church
- c) hearing and celebrating our story as The United Church of Canada
- d) focusing on our longing for a unifying vision that is compelling, attainable, and shared
- e) recognizing our need to address some specific issues before us

At the end, four questions are posed to invite and encourage prayerful and discerning conversation.

### **A. Our Present Challenge**

For the past several years, the General Council and its Executive have been working through processes aimed at focusing our life and mission as a church. These efforts are in response to a call heard over the course of the past two decades. Executives of the General Council, General Council staff, and members of the church have expressed frustration with a lack of clarity in the areas of visioning, priority setting, planning, and budgeting.

Progress has been made, yet we recognize that we are not there yet. Perhaps there is no "there" in the sense of an ending place—this kind of work continues as long as we are a changing and living organization.

Recently, the Executive received a report that strongly recommended further attention be given to the matter of vision and purpose. This report, which was commissioned to consider the feasibility of a capital fundraising campaign and which listened to members of the church,

concluded that clarity about the vision and purpose of The United Church of Canada is required before embarking on such a campaign. The Executive concurred with the findings of this report.

While it highlighted the need for articulating a clear, compelling, and unifying vision for the future, this report indicated that The United Church of Canada is populated by people who have a deep love for the church and place a high value on

- the ability of the church to welcome a wide spectrum of theological thought
- the inclusive character of the church
- the spiritual nurture they have experienced through the church
- the role of the church at local and national levels to actively make this world a better place in which to live locally, nationally, and globally
- the voice of the church in social justice
- the international scope of the United Church activity and commitments

This paper places a challenge before the commissioners of the 40th General Council 2009. If we are a church where “we love who we are” but are “uncertain of where we are going,” then we are called to address this challenge by clearly expressing a vision and purpose and inviting others to share in the vision and purpose to which we are committed.

If we can do this, then we open up the possibility of finding our way into the future and establish a framework for leading and funding our vision and purpose.

## **B. Our Call to Be Church**

As The United Church of Canada, we are reminded that we are a community of faith, followers of Christ Jesus who seek to live God’s love in the world. This is the foundation of our vision and purpose. We dare to believe that The United Church of Canada has something important to offer, in Canada and in the world, an offering that declares “we are not alone.”

“We are not alone” are words from our “New Creed,” a creed that also proclaims that “we are called to be the Church.” Our calling to be church means that we seek to be

- a place where people’s spirits are fed and uplifted, where faith is shared, where people find meaning through a deepening relationship with God, where we “celebrate God’s presence”
- a place where people “seek justice and resist evil”; where we “live with respect in Creation”; where we “love and serve others” by walking with those in need and who need companionship, by building right relations, and by making the world a better place through our work for God’s reign as we “proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope”
- a place where people experience welcome and find a home—a home where God’s grace is freely received, for we do not earn God’s grace

“A Song of Faith,” adopted at the 39th General Council 2006, sings of a church “seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ’s presence in the world.” Such a church is “a church with purpose: faith nurtured and hearts comforted, gifts shared for the good of all, resistant to the forces that exploit and marginalize, fierce love in the face of violence, human

dignity defended, members of a community held and inspired by God, corrected and comforted, instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ, creation's mending."

We are reminded of our call to be church as we endeavour to be visionary and faithful in our life as followers in the Way of Christ.

### **C. Our Story as The United Church of Canada**

We also hear and celebrate the vision and purposefulness that is a part of our story as The United Church of Canada.

We were founded on land originally and still inhabited by Aboriginal people with a spirituality not dependent on institutionalized religion. Ours is a rich story closely entwined with the development of Canada itself, with a particular history and way of embodying the Christian faith.

The formation of the United Church culminated on June 10, 1925, in Toronto, Ontario, at an inaugural worship service where the Methodist Church, Canada; the Congregational Union of Canada; and 70 percent of the Presbyterian Church in Canada entered into a union. The smaller General Council of Union Churches, centred largely in Western Canada, also joined. Since 1925 the union has been expanded to welcome the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda (1930) and the Evangelical United Brethren (1968). Many years of talks toward unification with the Anglican Church broke down in 1975.

The United Church was the first union of churches in the world to cross historical denominational lines and hence received international acclaim. Impetus for the union arose out of the challenges of serving the vast Canadian landscape and with a desire for better overseas mission. There was the conviction and vision that by being united, by working together, each of the uniting churches could better live God's call.

Each of the uniting churches brought different traditions and perspectives to the new church. Hence the unity sought was one that would honour diversity and not demand uniformity. In the early days of the United Church, members were well aware of the different streams from which they had come, but this context has gradually shifted. Today, with few of us having any memory of the time before union, the stronger identification is with the United Church itself, or for many people, with individual congregations.

Although generally characterized as a liberal denomination, there are congregations and members representing a broad range of perspectives. We are founded on the basis of respect for different interpretations of faith and a conviction that the things we have in common are more important than our differences, though, at times, we have exhibited more division than tolerance or respect.

Collectively, the United Church has taken some daring stances. For example, the first woman was ordained in the United Church in 1936 (though the church still did not permit "married" women to be ordained until the late 1950s, and in 1988 the General Council decided that sexual orientation was not a reason to exclude someone from ordination). In 1986, we apologized to

First Nations for our historical practice of colonialization and damaging attitudes of superiority that demonstrated a disrespect for the truthfulness inherent within their spiritual traditions. This apology was deepened in 1998 with a further apology for the role we played in residential schools. Globally, our mission work is based on partnerships that bring people together in community for mutual empowerment through the sharing of gifts, recognized as gifts freely given by God for the benefit of all. We actively struggle with our legacies in the areas of racial justice and gender justice, as well as the manner in which we include all family forms.

Throughout the years, The United Church of Canada has been committed to articulating, for each generation, our faith and beliefs. This commitment is evident through “A Statement of Faith” in 1940, “A New Creed” in 1968, and “A Song of Faith” in 2006, faith declarations that are held alongside the 20 Articles that formed the doctrinal portion of our Basis of Union in 1925.

These re-expressions of our faith have been combined with numerous theological statements such as “The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture,” which reminded us that we have at our centre the Bible, a sacred book of stories that inspire us to closer relationship with the Divine and to an urgent compassion for humanity and creation. This theological statement asserted that, while the Bible is central to our belief and practice, we find its messages most powerful when it is not read literally and we recognize that the Word of God is larger than the Bible.

Theological convictions such as these have informed our historical stance of demonstrating respect for other faith traditions, culminating in our embrace of “worldwide ecumenism” and the adoption of documents outlining our relationship with the Jewish faith and the Islamic faith.

Throughout our history, we have recognized the struggle to organize ourselves along institutional lines. This struggle is rooted in a recognition that the church does not exist to be an institution, but to allow the people of the church to “be the church,” to live faithful lives, and to live out God’s mission.

Yet, we also understand that the institution “unites” us so that “we are not alone” in responding to God’s call and mission. At the More Franchises than Tim Hortons? conference held in Toronto in June 2008, church historian Phyllis Airhart, a professor at Emmanuel College, commented that within The United Church of Canada there has existed a tension between “how to balance institutional demands for order and efficiency with the yearning for spiritual renewal that is resistant to being organized.”

The United Church is blessed with a rich history and story as well as an abundance of committed leaders, people, and financial resources. While we undergo considerable change, we remain focused on opportunity, rather than loss. As church, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are to embody a vision and purpose that serves the world.

Yet, any church that exists long enough will acquire traits common to established organizations—an entrenched bureaucracy, an impulse to make a priority of perpetuating itself, and an elevated sense of its own standing and importance in the world. Those perils exist for The United Church of Canada.

Equally there is a strong love and passion for The United Church of Canada. Most of us carry the conviction that the church has tremendous potential for future ministry “if we can find our way.” We wrestle with the challenge of expressing how we will take the visions and purposes of our historical and present story and step into a future that is vibrant and life-giving.

### **D: Our Longing for a Unifying Vision**

Within our church, there is a longing for a unifying vision that is compelling, attainable, and shared. This was expressed in the report for the Executive on the feasibility of a capital fundraising initiative. We also long to be a church that does not act simply by default, but rather “lives forward” in a prayerful way that is visionary and faithful.

As a diverse church, we recognize the many passions and visions that inspire our members, congregations, mission units, presbyteries, and Conferences. Hence, the development of a “unifying vision” is to focus our collective work as a national and international church (our work as a General Council), while at the same time offering a vision and purpose that inspires and engages the faith life throughout our church.

Over the course of the past few years, efforts have been made to respond to this longing. In the invitation to commissioners for the 39th General Council 2006, our past-Moderator Peter Short indicated that a significant portion of the agenda would “be given to clarifying the purpose to which God is calling The United Church of Canada today.” As a result, the 39th General Council affirmed a “Call to Purpose” that was a “message from the church to the church.” This “Call to Purpose” was directed to the Executive to inform its work as it “gives leadership to the church in its expression of the ministry of Jesus Christ.”

In May 2007, the Executive of the General Council adopted a motion that affirmed the “Call to Purpose” for the purposes of determining the allocation of General Council resources, and affirmed that planning for the period of 2008 to 2010 would give priority to that which

1. deepens our experience of intentional and authentic communities; stretches us beyond the familiar expressions and concerns of our church; with particular concern for our commitment to youth and young adult ministry, becoming an intercultural church, and living with respect in creation
2. supports and develops congregational ministries
3. supports and empowers ministry personnel
4. addresses the church’s brokenness in the relationships with Aboriginal peoples and moving toward healing and building right relations

In response to feedback received from members and courts of the church, the Executive subsequently adopted a motion that placed our historic commitment to social justice alongside these priorities.

Our Moderator, David Giuliano, in his expression of how to live these priorities for this triennium, spoke of

- deepening relationships within congregations to assist them as the primary expression of the mission and our commitment to justice
- raising up and equipping strong leadership for this mission and ministry

- unleashing and embracing the ministry of youth and young adults
- continued healing of the brokenness in our relationship with First Nations
- living out our commitment to becoming an intercultural church
- doing justice in our relationship with the earth

In naming these priorities, the Executive of the General Council responded to the previously expressed frustration about a lack of clarity in the areas of visioning, priority setting, planning, and budgeting. The reaction that the Executive received to these actions included both affirmations and criticisms. In the report on the feasibility of conducting a major capital fundraising initiative, it was noted that, alongside a deep love for the United Church, there also exists lack of confidence and even distrust within and between the various courts of our church, and in particular between local ministries and the ministry of the General Council Office. This tension, along with the need for a compelling, attainable, and shared vision, requires attention.

The 40th General Council 2009 affords an opportunity to build a greater consensus through a continuing, thorough, and honest discussion of our vision and purpose as a church. We must be willing and able to name the things that are most important to us and commit ourselves to doing them, while recognizing that we can't be all things to all people.

Therefore, we invite the people of The United Church of Canada to prayerfully consider the vision and purpose of our church as we place before the church the following question for discernment and further consideration at the 40th General Council 2009. This discernment intends to continue and deepen the conversation that began with the "Call to Purpose."

What "unifying vision" emerges from the question posed in the "Call to Purpose" that asks "what purpose lies at the heart of The United Church of Canada in the beginning of its third generation?" How might this vision help us to "step forward" while attending to

- a) our longing for a deeper relationship with God
- b) our longing for deeper connections with one another
- c) our acknowledgement of the brokenness, pain, and fear we carry
- d) our belief that our spirituality and our prophetic voice spring from one source and are lived in one Body

## **E. Our Need to Address Some Specific Issues before Us**

As we move forward, we recognize some specific issues that face us as a national church. While these issues will be articulated in greater detail in "The State of the Church" being prepared for the 40th General Council 2009, we summarize these challenges in three areas: i) our leadership resources, ii) our people resources, and iii) our financial resources.

### **i) Our Leadership Resources within The United Church of Canada**

We are blessed with many committed leaders within our church, both lay and ordered. As we step into the future, we need to pay careful attention to the kinds of leadership that will be most effective for the church we are called to become. Each generation needs strong leaders, with inspired and prophetic voices that are most suited to the time and society in which they serve.

Insights to guide this discussion will be found in the study on the “meaning of ministry,” which has sought and received advice from across the church about ministry for today and tomorrow. The Emerging Spirit initiative, launched by the 39th General Council 2006 to help the congregations of the United Church engage with the next generation of Canadians, may also offer some directions.

We also wrestle with our leadership resources as we head into the future. Of the 2,200 ministry personnel serving pastoral charges, 70 percent are age 50 or more and 3 percent are under the age of 35. One-half of all ministry personnel presently serving pastoral charges will reach the normal age of retirement within the next 10 years.

## **ii) Our People Resources within The United Church of Canada**

Presently, there are about 700,000 members and adherents within The United Church of Canada. In the last census, 2.8 million Canadians self-identified as United Church. This breadth within our embrace is a wonderful gift.

We are also conscious that, over the course of the last 40 years, The United Church of Canada has experienced a decline in formal membership as well as a decline in attendance at worship. Our societal context is one where fewer people attend church, and many people have grown up with no real experience of church. As a church we find ourselves increasingly at the edges of our society. Moreover, although spiritual yearning is expressed in many ways, many people do not necessarily think of the church as a place to turn for spiritual guidance or fulfillment.

Phyllis Airhart comments, “Far from being considered an essential element in the construction of national identity, religion is now often considered an impediment to national cohesion. Its pronouncements are more likely to be met with indifference than with hostility.”

The United Church of Canada can no longer assume that we are a “known quantity.” Setting aside some assumptions about how we function and about our role in society can free us to live out the love of Christ. There is no point trying to be what we were 85 years ago, or 50 years ago, because the society in which we live has changed so much. Given these changes within our church and society, we find ourselves wondering whether our present structure serves our “smaller” church effectively. Perhaps, we may find ourselves wondering if we are willing to simplify our administrative and governance systems.

## **iii) Our Financial Resources within The United Church of Canada**

In the last 20 years, givings to the Mission and Service Fund have remained at around \$30 million, a stable but not growing amount. With the impact of inflation and rising costs, this means that we have lost about 40 percent of our financial capacity for the work of the General Council over this period. Although reserves have been used to supplement givings, there has been a slow and steady reduction in program capacity over the years. For 2008 to 2010, this loss of financial capacity resulted in further reductions to General Council staff as well as reductions in grants to ministries overseas and within Canada.

Over this same period, as givings to the Mission and Service Fund have remained constant, total money raised by congregations has increased from \$263 million to \$409 million and each year a greater proportion of local funding is coming from bequests and sources of revenue other than congregational giving. In 1987, congregational giving accounted for 75 percent of the total money raised; in 2007, that proportion was 66 percent.

Each year fewer people are giving more to local ministry, and even fewer are giving more to the Mission and Service Fund:

Local Giving	1987	2007
Number of givers to local expenses	460,000	286,000
Amount per giver per year	\$425	\$940 (\$585 adjusted for inflation)
M&S Givings	1987	2007
Number of givers to M&S	268,000	133,000
M&S amount per giver per year	\$120	\$225 (\$140 adjusted for inflation)

If this pattern continues, the national and international presence of The United Church of Canada, through its General Council, will continue to lessen. A recent study on the funding of the church affirmed the continued use of a “unified fund,” yet with this affirmation, we must also consider whether there exists a will to creatively address this experience of flat funding.

### **Questions for Discussion and Discernment**

As a church, we are called to “be church.” We are called to arrange our affairs in ways that allow us to faithfully live and work in ways that show our love for one another as beloved children of God. As we struggle to name our vision and to live the vision through our actions, we remember that God’s people have struggled thus through all the ages of humankind.

It is an exciting task that lies ahead for the whole church and for the commissioners at the 40th General Council 2009. Your contribution to this discernment and discussion and the leadership offered by the commissioners to General Council will help us move from “loving who we are” but being “uncertain of where we are going,” to a possibility of “loving who we are” and being “hopeful and inspired about who we long to become.”

All those who help chart the way to a unifying vision that is compelling, attainable, and shared will render a faithful service to God, to the church, and to those who live in the church’s warm embrace.

We encourage you, when considering these questions, to begin by praying the prayer\* that was drafted as part of the “Call to Purpose.” Create enough time to sit with the prayer, and to open yourself to the leading of the Spirit in your discussion.

1. How do we name our vision of living God’s mission as The United Church of Canada steps into the future? What is core and essential, what touches the “heart” of the United Church?

2. What kind of leadership do we need in The United Church of Canada? How do we find and support the leaders we need?
3. What opportunities and challenges face The United Church of Canada with a smaller membership and living in a changed and changing Canada?
4. How do we keep opportunities for rebirth and new growth in a climate of reduced resources, and what responses emerge for you when you consider the impact of Mission and Service Fund givings over the past 30 years?

**\*Prayer from Call to Purpose**

In this spirit we pray:

God of all creation,  
We offer you our thanksgiving for a time rich with connections,  
Among each other and with you.  
We thank you for moments when we have experienced what it is to be united  
even in our differences.  
Help us to grow as a listening, discerning, learning people.  
Help us to give up patterns and structures that enslave us and others.  
Help us to acknowledge our fear  
And lean into your hope and your courage.  
Help us to grow in our trust in each other and in your Spirit.  
Fill us with your grace and with your wisdom,  
With your patience and with your love.  
Propel us into your future,  
Rooted in the richness of our past.  
In Christ we pray.  
Amen