

## **Report on General Council and Study Leave 2018**

Hello everyone, it's good to be back after four Sundays away! Here is my report on General Council, and on my latest residential weekend for my course.

General Council 43 met in Oshawa, Ontario from July 21 to 27. I have not experienced previous General Councils, but I am told that there was a determined attempt to do things differently than other times. Rather than dividing the work up among various commissions, as I understand was done at the 42nd General Council in Newfoundland and Labrador, or dealing with every proposal on the floor of the plenary gathering as, for example, at BC Conference meetings, we followed a three-step process.

First, those who had moved a proposal (or someone with knowledge of it, if the movers were not present) explained them in a listening session. In these sessions we asked questions for information and clarification only; we did not debate them, raise objections or affirm support for them. The proposals were grouped into themes, and there was only one listening session per theme. There were several sessions at the same time in different locations, so one had to choose to attend some and not others.

Second, we broke into discussion groups of about 20 people each. Discussion groups discussed every proposal and theme, and this is primarily where we wondered and discussed pros and cons. A scribe took notes on our discussions and forwarded those notes to a Facilitation Team.

Third, the Facilitation Team considered the notes from each group and drafted a motion in response to each proposal that seemed to capture the consensus of all the groups or at least the majority opinion. These motions were then the starting point for our discussions in the plenary gatherings where we debated and voted.

## **Big Changes**

### *Remits*

One of our tasks was to pass (or not) the Remits (proposals) from the 42nd General Council that Presbyteries and Pastoral Charges have been voting on, which significantly change how the United Church operates. We passed all seven Remits that came to us (Remit #6 was not approved by a majority of Presbyteries and Pastoral Charges and thus was not considered). Of those Remits, here are the three that are most likely to impact our daily experience as communities of faith.

Remit 1: Three Council Model. Instead of Presbyteries and Conferences, we now have Regions. Many of the responsibilities of Presbyteries have been handed down to individual congregations or pastoral charges (referred to collectively as Communities of Faith). Others have been retained by Regions. We are in Region 1, which will be known as Pacific Mountain Region. Region 1 generally maintains the current boundaries of BC Conference and adds some mountain towns from Alberta (e.g. Banff). The most visible effect of this change will be the disappearance of Presbyteries.

Remit 8: A Step Towards a New Model of Membership. With the consent of members, adherents may now vote on all matters in congregational meetings.

Remit 4: Funding a New Model. Currently Presbyteries assess a fee from each pastoral charge. Conferences likewise fund their operations by assessing Presbyteries. General Council operations are funded by a percentage of Mission and Service Fund givings.

In this new model, the General Council office assesses each community of faith based on its income, and then hands operating funds on to the Regions. Mission and Service givings will all be directed to various missions and ministries.

### *Other Significant Motions*

Generally speaking, three major themes emerged for this Council: challenges faced by rural and isolated ministries; rights, responsibilities, training and salaries for the different streams of paid accountable ministry (partly in response to the needs of rural and isolated communities); and racism, equity and inclusion. Here, again, are a few of the motions that are ready to be implemented (as opposed to being referred to, for example, the General Secretary for further development) and likely to affect us regularly. We passed many more on a variety of topics and I encourage you to seek out more information if you don't see what you were hoping for in this list.

ANW 02: Constitution of a Meeting. The Manual will be amended to allow governing bodies (Boards, Committees) to meet via email in exceptional circumstances. Currently all decisions are supposed to be made in gatherings where all participants can participate in real time (face-to-face or teleconferencing).

BC 05: A Vision to Ground Us. Clarifying identity, purpose and vision as a priority for the next three years.

GCE 19: Assessment Rate (2019-2021). Communities of faith will pay an assessment of 4.5% of 2018 adjusted total revenues to the General Council office. This replaces our payments to Presbytery as noted above (Remit 4).

TOR 2 – TRC Call 60/Blanket Exercise. All current and future church leaders are required to experience the Kairos Blanket Exercise which is a participatory teaching tool to understand colonialism in the Canadian context. We also passed several other motions concerning First Nations and the Church.

Many of the proposals and/or motions called for mandatory training in various areas for paid accountable ministers. A concern began to emerge that the cumulative weight of the new mandatory training was unsustainable.

**A Significant (and Painful) Conversation**

Near the end of the day on Friday, our last day of business, we turned from considering motions to listen to the Rev. Paul Walfall, Past President of Alberta & Northwest Conference, and one of our Intercultural Observers. As scheduled, he gave a speech, and he made the following points:

- Racism exists within the United Church, not just outside it.
- We have not condemned the racism within, nor asked racialized people for their stories.
- Inclusion is great, but welcoming someone to the table as a guest (who must take what they are given) is different from welcoming someone as a member who belongs (who has a say in the menu).

We paused, thoughtful, struck by what we had heard. But as we turned to resume considering motions, two youth commissioners encouraged us to spend more time with Paul's statement. Our Moderator, the Right Rev. Jordan Cantwell, encouraged white commissioners to step away from the microphones to leave space for racialized speakers. For two hours, we listened to their experiences.

It was a holy experience, a painful one, a powerful one. We did not conduct any more business, and went to dinner two hours later than we had planned. At one point we made a motion to offer an apology (how Canadian! How United Church!) but it did not seem appropriate. What was needed was action, we were told, and furthermore it was not up to marginalized people to teach the dominant culture how to improve.

I came away feeling saddened by what I had heard, more than a little bit shocked, and overwhelmed. I didn't want to speak to any of my non-white friends and colleagues, because I didn't know what to say to them.

To be honest, one of my reactions was that it felt a bit unfair. It felt like the work we have done, and the work we had been doing all week, much of which did concern racism and equity, was unacknowledged. At points I thought to myself, “if every attempt we have made to address racism is inadequate, and every attempt to correct that inadequacy is inappropriate, naive or offensive, why bother trying?”. I was also unsure why the First Nations elders who were present spoke at length throughout the week when the rest of us were tightly restricted both in subject matter in length in order to keep things moving.

I came away with a lot of thoughts, feelings and learnings to process. It is too early to say with certainty what will emerge from the Church as a whole as a result of these testimonies.

Which brings me to the second part of my report.

### **What I Did on My Study Leave, Part 3**

One week after returning from Oshawa, I left again, this time for Xenia Retreat Centre on Bowen Island. This was the third of four intensive weekends for my contemplative social justice course, called Undivided. I could go on at length about my wonderful instructors and fellow students, and our activities, but instead I’d like to illustrate the value of the course by describing two learnings that helped me reflect on my General Council experience.

The course is sponsored by the Contemplative Justice Network, which is itself an initiative of BC Conference. Our instructor Christina is familiar with the United Church, so she invited me to tell her about my General Council experience. One of the things I mentioned was my observation that First Nations elders spoke at length and not necessarily strictly on the topic at hand. While I knew that it was considered rude to interrupt an elder, I wondered why they were given this latitude when I understood that we were all present under the same guidelines.

She suggested that we were in fact not all present under the same guidelines: given the harm that the Church has done to First Nations peoples in the past, the elders' presence at General Council and their wisdom was in fact a gift to the church. This was a very helpful insight.

As for the second learning, Christina presented models of Marginalized and Dominant Identity Development. The models describe stages in moving from lack of awareness of privilege and oppression, to aiming for social justice. As a straight white able-bodied male, I have a lot of privileged identities, and the third stage – Compensation/Resistance – described exactly where I was in relation to the events on Friday at General Council. This stage may be characterized by withdrawal and distancing (“oh well, I tried and they weren't interested”) with feelings including rejection, humiliation, anxiety and depression.

Hopefully I continue to learn. I am very grateful for both of these opportunities. Please do not hesitate to ask about either of them.

- Tim

For more information on the events of General Council 43, check out [www.gc43.ca](http://www.gc43.ca). Details of specific motions can be found in the Digital Workbook. Look for “Motions as Passed.”

**Appendix: Other Remits**

Here are the other four Remits that received final approval at GC43:

Remit 2: Removal of Transfer and Settlement. New ministers now negotiate directly with communities of faith for a call, rather than being matched by the Transfer and Settlement Committees.

Remit 3: Office of Vocation. Discipline and accreditation of ministers is now the responsibility of a national office rather than happening more locally.

Remit 7: Candidacy Pathway. A more flexible, contextual and uniform process for becoming a minister.

Remit 5: Ministry Partners Within Mutual Recognition Agreements. If we mutually recognize clergy from other denominations, they are eligible for calls or appointments and full members of Presbyteries etc.