

GENERAL COUNCIL COMMISSIONER

As one of the Commissioners to the 43rd General Council in 2018 in Oshawa, Ontario, I have been appointed by our Region to serve on its Executive. I regularly collate important information coming from General Council Executive and Sub-Executive minutes, and any national church news worthy of being highlighted in the Region, and report it to the FDEE Executive. I do also encourage everyone to follow The United Church of Canada on Facebook and the national church website, as each place will have regular updates of actions taken and news to be shared. It is important for us to follow the workings of the national church, especially for response to crises and breaking information, especially during this time of pandemic. Anyone can check in to the United Church Commons to see the minutes of the General Council Sub/Executive. The Governance folder contains minutes of the Sub-Executive and many documents that help explain current issues and decisions made. <https://united-church.ca/leadership/church-administration/united-church-commons>

For this report I have consulted the minutes of the GC Executive and GC Sub-Executive as well as those of those of two full meetings of the General Council 43, the annual recall meeting and one other.

It is hard in some ways to remember the church we were nationally, and locally, before March of 2020. We should all be very thankful for the way in which our denomination pivoted quickly to offer many online learning sessions to ministry personnel, treasurers and others during this pandemic time to help facilitate learning for pivoting to online worship platforms, managing change and maneuvering through the financial issues arising from the pandemic. The GC Executive approved the creation of a far-reaching emergency loans program for communities of faith to provide support through the COVID-19 crisis, which was in addition to government funds that were already announced and available for communities of faith as charities and employers. Great leadership was offered by our Moderator in his worship and Facebook postings as well as by Erik Mathiesen and others in the Finance Unit who disseminated information from government in order to make it workable for local and regional church bodies.

With the retirement of our General Secretary Nora Sanders effective the end of October, a lengthy search for her successor was struck in the Spring and in the Fall of 2020, we were pleased to covenant with Reverend Michael Blair as our new General Secretary. Michael will be known to many of us through his position as the Executive Minister, Church in Mission Unit, and his time spent with us during regional meetings and learning events. We pray God's blessings on Nora as we give thanks for her faithful service and look forward with hope to Michael's ministry with us.

At the June 2020 recall meeting of GC43 it was decided, due to the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, that the 44th General Council scheduled to take place in Calgary July 20-26, 2021 be delayed for a year, to be held in Calgary on similar dates in 2022. This means that the terms of office of the Moderator, the General Council Executive, and the Commissioners of the 43rd General Council will be extended to cover this additional year and the terms of office of members of any committees or boards appointed by the General Council will be extended to cover this additional year. The members of the General Council Planning Committee have been asked to continue the planning process for the 44th General Council and to include in that planning arrangements to enable full participation in the meeting through electronic means, for any Commissioners for whom it is unwise for health or other reasons to attend in person. The General Secretary will put in place any other arrangements that are necessary as a result of these directions.

We all know that our financial situation as a denomination was precipitating major changes for us before COVID-19 became part of our story. As we moved into 2020, we knew that reductions of \$4 million needed to happen. The 2020 budget was essentially a “hold the line” budget, with no major changes for the current year. There were, however, significant reductions needed in order to achieve a balanced budget in 2021, and the report of the Optimus consulting group, provided background analysis to assist with those decisions. The decision of the Executive included a balance between cutting grants and lowering staffing levels. These steps were guided by the Statements of Faith and other guiding documents of the United Church. The Executive recognizes that cuts to services are inevitable, but sees it as the only option with the current decreases in both Mission & Service giving, and in assessments from communities of faith. It is very difficult as a denomination to have to decide which ministries we can no longer support but we pray that we can partner with others for some of the pieces we value and that we can find new ways to focus our resources of time, talent and treasure on the areas we feel called by Christ to give our energies to in these times. We certainly know, as proven by the shift to online working and living during COVID-19, that resources will have to be spent on information technology across the church and this will need to be a budget priority for us as well. We also have to acknowledge that we are projecting an average annual decline in M&S revenue of \$1,000,000 and we have been deferring allocations to the UC Foundation and Embracing the Spirit. Indigenous ministries are not affected in this round of cuts, as the church is in the early stages of discussing reparations, and the new National Indigenous Council is just beginning its work.

Our Moderator’s role took a great shift with the shutdown of the world in March as he had just taken part in the Canadian Council of Churches church leaders retreat, was having Moderator online conversations (ModCons) using the Zoom platform in early Winter and travelled to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in late January with Full Communion partners from the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. The Moderator very ably pivoted to offering online leadership as the pandemic struck and was thankful that he was able to be even more present to more people and situations than he would have in normal times where travel and calendar conflicts would have hampered that.

The Moderator and General Secretary continue to lead the Executive and the church in our decolonization and racism awareness work as we must, as church, understand how we live in the racism, individually, corporately and systemically. The General Council Executive and the working groups who are creating resources for the church are to be thanked, including the GCE Anti-Racism Working Group: Paul Douglas Walfall, Janet Sigurdson, Larry Doyle, Ha Na Park, and Jordan Cantwell. Shannon McCarthy is now chairing the White Privilege Working Group. At the June GC43 meeting, after much conversation and discernment, it was agreed to refer to the GC Executive the Proposal “Towards an Anti-Racist Denomination”, so that, in conjunction with other work and initiatives, it can serve as guidance for strategic planning, prioritization, and implementation with a report back to the next gathering of the General Council. (you can read the proposal here: [Referral of Proposal “Towards an Anti-Racist Denomination”](#))

The Moderator spoke of his travels to partners in the Philippines and how deeply moving and humbling it had been. To be a Christian, active in social justice, in Canada costs us little, in the Philippines; it is often costing people their lives. The trip reinforced the need for the United Church to stand in solidarity with other Christians around the world. Both the Moderator and General Secretary were present at the inaugural National Indigenous Spiritual Gathering (NISG) in August of 2019. They listened to many of the participants stories of hurt and exclusion, but also heard the sense of hope that the gathering had begun that the new relationship between the Indigenous church and the Settler/Newcomer church within The

United Church of Canada and will help us continue to move toward right relations as we all take our time to work through how the new relationship will evolve. Murray Pruden was named Executive Minister for Indigenous Ministries and Justice Circle in July, after the retirement of Maggie Dieter.

The criteria for Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) in Canada are evolving as court decisions affecting the 2016 law and new legislation are before Parliament. The United Church issued its statement on MAID in 2017; the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee (TICIF), having done further review, brought an update to this statement to the GC Executive this year. TICIF recommends responding to the possible developments in the law, as well as continuing to serve people and promote reasonable discussions on this very difficult issue. The church believes that these are very difficult issues and that compassionate pastoral care must be there for all who face these decisions. The Executive accepted the recommendations in this updated report that underlines the principle of free and informed choice and urges the government to maintain the criterion of “foreseeable death”, not to add mental illness to the allowable categories for MAID, but instead to advocate for increased mental health resources, not to permit advance directives for MAID by people whose conditions will eventually take away their power for informed consent and to recognize the capacity of mature minors to request MAID and that these be judged on a case-by-case basis.

The United Church of Canada is committed to reducing its carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, starting with a focus on its buildings. There are resources to help us live our climate commitments through the Faithful Footprints program ideas, tools and communities of faith are encouraged to seek out the program.

A new major music resource for the church, *Sing 2025*, is in the early stages of development as are sources of funding and bringing in ecumenical partners. It will be a digitally based collection that can be regularly updated. All rights will be cleared in advance, and the hope it will make the music life of communities of faith easier.

The United Property Development Corporation is underway and I encourage you to seek out more information about the role of this new corporation. This Corporation will be available to provide project leadership or support to churches and church entities who face major decisions about property.

A new Professional and Vocational Leave Policy was adopted to replace the current Continuing Education and Sabbatical Leave policies.

Proposals were offered for new nominations processes for GC Commissioners and Executive members as well as Nominations as the need to ensure skill sets and diversity are met. This new Nominations process would include leading elders and presiding officers of the regions would act as the nominations body.

A task group was authorized to look specifically at how we can better utilize ministry personnel and lay leadership resources to meet the ministry needs of small, rural and remote ministries. Their mandate, while not limited to these, in particular directs the group to consider and advise on whether the Statement on Ministry (2012) continues to reflect the denomination’s understanding and practice of ministry in The United Church of Canada or new realities and requirements of communities of faith dictate that it needs to be revised so that even the type of training and designation offered for ministry personnel meets our churches’ needs any longer, especially when it comes to Licensed Lay Leaders and Sacrament Elders and smaller or marginalized communities of faith. This has led to the development of

an initial two-part proposal towards a larger national rural strategy. This proposal will include funding to support Multi-Site Worship through web-video technology. This infrastructure would provide local internet access and technology hubs needed for rural congregations to access Multi-Site Worship services. Funding would be in response to specific requests from communities, and based on the availability of technical support to assist with implementation. The proposal also includes a grant program to expand access to the United in Worship Dropbox project. The Dropbox project provides the elements of a full service including, prayers, readings, a sermon in both text and video format, through a Dropbox link (or similar option that allows congregations to easily download). The grant program part of the proposal would provide funding to assist in the purchase of the equipment (laptop and large screen monitor) to allow the use of the materials in worship, where adequate internet access is available. The plan was for a preliminary report with recommendations to be presented to the Executive in November 2020 with a final report to the Executive in the winter of 2021 in anticipation of proposals to the next General Council.

Two proposals relating to Youth and Young Adults were received as new business at General Council 43, and subsequently referred by the Executive to the General Secretary for further work. GC43-04 proposed the establishment of a National Young Adult Board, and BC43-05 proposed the creation of a Youth Intern position on the Executive Council. Both named a yearning for young people to have a larger place in the life of the United Church but because they each came at this with different proposed solutions, the perspectives from a wider group of youth and young adults were gathered through a survey. The results of that survey indicated clearly that there is strong interest in being more involved in the life of the United Church, particularly through mission and ministry activities. Having this in mind, the process has begun to develop a proposal for a leadership program that would go beyond governance and offer opportunities for active engagement.

The Financial Services Regulatory Authority has revised regulations regarding funding levels for pension plans registered in Ontario. The Executive approved revisions to the United Church Pension Plan Funding Policy to reflect these changes, to reorganize and restate the policy for greater clarity, and to revise minimum funding requirements before benefit improvements can be considered. There are three key revisions: 1. Funding levels required before benefit improvements can be considered have been changed from 110% solvency and 105% going concern, respectively, to 100% solvency and 115% going concern, respectively. These thresholds reflect the regulatory changes, which now place more emphasis on going concern (long-term) funding levels than on point-in-time solvency levels. 2. While the Pension Board has annually considered benefit improvements, the policy now outlines the process to be followed each year. 3. While benefit reductions must be considered if funding levels fall below regulated levels, the Pension Plan Funding Policy now acknowledges that benefit reductions will not be a first course of action because of the differing benefit reduction restrictions across Canadian pension jurisdictions.

Part of the work assigned to the General Secretary after the 43rd General Council came from two proposals (ANW 7 and MAR 1) focused on mental health in the church, including training and education. These proposed that there be a working group formed to help the church become intentionally caring and welcoming to people living with mental illnesses, as well as proposing that training be offered to paid accountable ministers on combating the stigma surrounding people with mental illness. A diverse working group made up of both ministry personnel and lay people from across the church was recruited in Spring 2019 and they have been meeting since. To accomplish the work, the group has subdivided into three teams, which will each focus on key tasks. One group will focus on mental health care in communities of faith, including considering how faith communities can respond to mental health and the realities of mental illness in the church, and encouraging dialogues within the church about mental

illness. Another group is focused on education, including both considering the development of mandatory training for ministry personnel on mental health and gathering educational resources for communities of faith in the area of mental wellness. The third group will work on developing a theology of care related to mental health, which builds on the previous work done on theologies of disabilities. This work will include a historical consideration of the history of mission, and its attitudes of mental health.

At the October GC43 recall meeting, the motion "Becoming An Anti-Racist Church" was approved by the GC. There will be a process and material provided to help congregations start work on that from wherever they are. We are setting an example to other Canadian denominations and faith communities in this important work. An anti-racist denomination is one that actively works at dismantling racism and white supremacy at all levels of the church, continues to work at decolonizing its theology, and strives to redistribute racial power more fairly.

A motion was passed by GCE in the Fall to approve the formalization of The United Church of Canada's commitment with Bloor Street United Church by giving approval for The United Church of Canada to enter into a 15-year lease of the premises to be developed at 300 Bloor Street West (Toronto), approve The United Church of Canada entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Presbyterian Church in Canada to commit to the goal of sharing office space and services at 300 Bloor Street West, and direct the General Secretary to continue conversations with the Anglican Church of Canada and other faith groups about the possibility of sharing office space and services at 300 Bloor Street West.

Adele Halliday has been hired as the UCC's first ever Anti-Racism and Equity Officer and will be tasked, especially, with overseeing the work that comes with our Anti-Racist commitment.

GCE issued an apology for the UCC's role in separating mothers and their babies in maternity homes it operated from the end of World War II to 1980. "Women told us that they felt, pressured, coerced, or forced to give up their babies and the church recognizes it participated in the culture of shame that surrounded unmarried mothers at that time," says the Rev. Daniel Hayward, chairperson of the church's Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee that recommended the apology.

As a way of making things right in our global relations, the GCE also voted to return properties in Japan to our global partners there. It was noted that work also has to be done to make similar reparations with our Indigenous communities here in Canada.

The GCE approved significant increases to premiums paid by active employees for health and dental plans and changes for retirees as well in an effort to make this plan self-funding.

An evaluation of the "new" church structure will be done at the five-year mark but the General Secretary is in regular contact with the Regional Council Executive Ministers in order to share any problems or ideas. All of the mandated structure is now in place, but what hasn't yet developed completely are the more organic pieces like the clusters and networks. The GC Executive is also receiving comments from the broader church which will be developed for presentation to the 44th General Council as guidance for the next triennium. This is big work and difficult decisions will have to be made.

Each meeting of the recalled General Council and the GC Sub-Executive meetings have two appointed Equity Monitors (both members of the GC Executive). They hold before the participants and the work these questions and they are questions we should hold before us in all of our work as church.

Equity Self-Monitoring Questions

1. Am I responding with my bias(es)?
2. Just because we've always done it this way, should we continue?
3. Who is missing around our table in this discussion? (Do we need to consult wider?)
4. Whose voices haven't been heard? Have I spoken too much?
5. Am I using correct pronouns for colleagues?
6. Am I making assumptions based on race, sexual orientation, gender, to name a few?

I also send this reminder to all Commissioners to GC that your work extends beyond attending the actual GC meeting and that you are expected to be in attendance at all recall meetings of the GC during your term as well.

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At the March 28 meeting of GC Executive, Jordan Cantwell led the worship based on Ezekiel 37: 1-8 – the valley of the dry bones. Michael Blair reflected that we are discerning what God is calling us to be in this time and not to recreate the past. Our task is not to manage decline, but to plan for the future church that serves God's mission. Michael grounded his remarks in the church's foundational documents, including the *Song of Faith*, with the question being, what does it mean for us to be church in this time? I think it is a necessary question for us to ask ourselves in all of our communities of faith, our Regions and as a national denomination.

Yours in Christ's service,

Paula Gale
Commissioner, General Council 43