

A NEW DAY



LESS ABOUT STRUCTURE . . .
. . . MORE ABOUT PEOPLE



**A Staff Recommendation
From:**

**LONDON CONFERENCE OF THE
UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA**

A New Day *Less About Structure / More About People*

It all comes down to one of two choices! We can continue lamenting the loss of the church we've always known, or we can recognize that we're in the birthing pangs of a New Day. We, the staff of London Conference, opt for the latter choice, and perceive our role as fostering the nascent life of a church that is a lot less about structure, and much more about people. In that conviction we collectively respond to the invitation to engage in Triennium Planning and respectfully submit the following proposal.

As a committed staff we appreciate that this may well be the last significant opportunity for ending the decline of our church. Our continuing ministry is premised upon a genuine love for the precepts of our church, accepting that the United Church doesn't always "get-it-right". Nonetheless, we are compelled to believe that of all the denominations, the U.C.C. most diligently attempts to "get-it-right".

With no disrespect to the founders, we must also recognize they were nonetheless very firmly rooted in their prevailing sense of "Christian Triumphalism". With the best of intentions they approached the drafting of the Basis of Union and the Manual determined to craft documents that would stand immutable. Weaving together three such disparate denominations was no simple task, how could they even begin to conceive of the "Post-Christian" era in which the church must now survive?

Yet, it is that urgent need for a flexible structure that can rapidly adapt to a constantly modifying environment, that has frustrated all of our previous attempts at reformation. Our current financial dilemma bears mute testimony to the fact that we can no longer afford the luxury of tinkering with the structure. How can we effectively streamline our operations when the Manual dictates that we must maintain this antiquated and redundant structure? Surely it is evident that the time has come to set aside the Manual in favour of the adoption of guidelines that provide for a more rapid and flexible response mechanism.

OPTIONS OUTLINED IN THE INVITATION: As stand-alone proposals it seems unlikely that any of the three options would prove viable:

1. Current configuration with reductions shared broadly and equitably
 2. Radical re-imagining of roles and relationships among the General Council Office and of the courts of the church to achieve reductions and lift up work in new ways
 3. Reductions and rainy day spending. (*cut deeper than required and use savings as well as additional draws from reserves for innovative work*)
- Option One of maintaining the current configuration with further reductions, will only result in fewer people trying to accomplish the same volume of work, with a predictable diminishment of outcomes, and further decline in staff morale. This inevitably leads to more "downloading" of responsibility to others already fully engaged, and who haven't the authority to dispense with the resultant duplication. It may initially appear to produce some savings, but in the long run these prove more illusionary than real.
 - Option Two is obviously premised upon setting aside the Manual requirements, and if that is the intention, then the revisions need to be a more comprehensive than simply the "*roles and relationships among the General Council Office and the courts of the church*".
 - Option Three lacks the specificity required to be practical, and raises the spectre of arbitrary action being again undertaken. This only serves to foster an increase in staff insecurity and decline in morale.

It is however possible to synthesize elements of these options into a viable proposal. Assuming that the scope for the church "re-imagining" is viewed broadly, the resultant hybrid might be characterized as the "Three R's" - Redeployment - Reduction - Reinvigoration:

- Redeployment of staff, functions, and resources to the conference level, where they are in routine contact with the "grass-roots" of our church;

- Reduction in the types and volume of routine tasks performed by staff, and the duplicate levels of governance; and,
- Reinvigoration of pride on the part of all adherents in the very particular understanding of Jesus' gospel mission that our church strives to live out.

SOME OBSERVATIONS: *(Basic facts regarding the current circumstances)*

- The U.C.C. is asset rich and liquidity poor;
- The U.C.C. is over-invested in a single vision of service delivery which no longer connects with the majority of the church's natural constituency;
- Excessive veneration of past accomplishments clouds the contemporary decision-making of all governance levels within the U.C.C.;
- Geographic distribution of virtually all U.C.C. facilities follows historic patterns, rather than recognizing current market placement strategies;
- Local trusteeship of facilities serves to burden congregations with problematic circumstances, for which they have insufficient financial and professional resources to appropriately resolve;
- Similarly, local trusteeship of facilities frequently blocks efforts at effective re-allocation of resources, relocation, consolidation, and new church development;
- Duplication and redundancy within U.C.C. governance retards remediation, dividing efficacious decision-making over too many levels;
- The U.C.C. inadvertently abuses volunteers, placing them in decision-making roles for which they have neither the skills nor inclination to be decisive;
- The circumstances in which the U.C.C. presently finds itself are only the current stage of a long and gradual process of decline that has stretched over decades;
- Following the accepted rules of process, without remediation the rate of decline for the U.C.C. will further increase in inverse relationship to gathering momentum;
- Without prompt and comprehensive remediation it is reasonable to predict the essential elimination of the overall U.C.C. within the next ten years;
- The difficulties experienced by the U.C.C. are essentially shared by virtually every other Christian denomination in Canada;
- There are at present few examples of efficacious co-operation in service delivery between the U.C.C. and other appropriate Christian denominations.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

I. How can the United Church best use its resources to live into the themes named by the 40th General Council?

- Remove the General Council overhead operational component from the Mission & Service Fund and stipulate a congregational levy *(in a similar manner to what Presbyteries and Conferences now utilize)* to adequately fund the costs of the national office.
- Ensure that all Mission & Service Fund donations are solely used for domestic and foreign mission.
- Routinize all reporting functions to be automatically generated from normal data flow.
- To as great a degree as possible, merge all mission and justice work of the national church into ecumenical agencies (eg: *Kairos, ISARC, Canadian Council of Churches, WARC, etc*) ensuring adequate funding to co-operatively complete the tasks assigned.
- Increase the co-operative utilization of ecumenical agencies in advocating on behalf of social justice concerns, and decrease the reliance upon church staff and elected officials.
- Retain a national core staff adequate to conduct the centralization of all financial services, and to

provide effective network co-ordination between all conferences.

- Deploy remaining programme staff to conferences for more direct involvement with the prevailing conditions in the congregations.
- Provide for the co-ordination of effort and overall policy development through enhanced electronic national networks.
- Develop a suitable in-house electronic network that would drastically reduce the frequency of face-to-face meetings in favour of video-conferencing and consultation.
- To as great a degree as feasible permit staff to work from home offices, thus drastically reducing the need for office space, in favour of a greater reliance upon electronic networking.
- Permit presbyteries to function as local co-operatives and clergy support by removing the burden of decision-making from them by centralizing this function in the conferences.
- Provide conferences with sufficient authority to ensure that service delivery is provided on a strategically rationalized basis, and that decisions are promptly complied with.
- Establish a three year maximum period for any congregation to receive mission support, and a temporary moratorium on all new applications.
- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of all facilities that takes into account the value of the property, possible duplication of service delivery, the operational condition of the structures, the ongoing viability of the present congregation or occupants.
- Commence a in-depth market analysis of the major urban centres to determine the best location for new church development and amalgamation of churches in leased facilities. Subsequent to this survey, repeat the same process in smaller urban settings, and then again in more rural areas.
- Immediately commence a dialogue with other appropriate denominations regarding methods by which the service delivery of two or more denominations might be conducted through co-operatively shared rental facilities.
- Commence a process of systematically divesting the church of all surplus properties, commencing with those of the greatest market value, and ensuring that the resultant proceeds are invested solely in new service delivery initiatives.
- Free congregations from the perennial preoccupation over building maintenance, renovation, and repair by introducing a policy of utilizing leased premises exclusively.
- Establish a separate corporation under the aegis of the church for the redevelopment of suitable surplus church properties into income assisted rental accommodation (eg: *senior's housing, low-income housing, hospice and/or palliative care, etc*) ensuring that the resultant proceeds are invested solely in new service delivery initiatives.
- Decrease the frequency, duration, and number of participants at all general meetings, confining the topics to broad policy matters, and ensuring sufficient residual authority for staff to conduct appropriate implementation.

2. Which of these themes should be given the most prominence? *(There is a clear inter-relationship between all of the themes of the 40th General Council, and any attempt to accord more prominence to one over the others would work a disservice to them all.)*

- To develop a comprehensive notion of an “Emerging Church”, the primary effort must be in fostering an “Authentic Relationship with Youth and Young Adults” we already find within our constituency.
- The appeal must also be broadened to encompass other youth and young adults, who have either drifted away from our church, or have never previously been involved with organized religion.
- The principle avenues of appeal to this broader demographic comes through the revitalization of our historic concern for “Outreach and Social Justice”.

- Each congregation must assume a much more dynamic presence in advocating on behalf of local issues, and evolve into an effective engine of reform within their home communities.
- Rather than relying upon national to identify and prioritize issues in a “top-down” manner, the initiatives of the U.C.C. should represent a consolidation of issues “raised-up” from the grass-roots.
- Genuine “Care of Creation” will also be regarded by this expanding demographic as a logical adjunct to social justice, thus assuring the on-going reformation of the church’s environmental footprint.
- The degree to which our church successfully embodies these global concerns within its theological perspective, and evolves a spirituality that serves to empower individuals within an increasingly fragmented society, will prove the truest test of practical “Faith Formation”.
- As all indicators point toward a society further splintered by a greater sense of personal alienation and isolation, the desire for a supportive and affirming faith community will grow in parallel trajectory.
- Embracing spiritual expressions that have emanated from a host of cultural and ethnic origins, the emerging church of the whole people will finally supplant the last vestiges of “dominion”, with a vision that values the inclusivity of all Creation, and divine spark within each member of the human family.

3. How can we do our work more effectively, and in which court of the church should specific work be lodged? *(The governance structure is flawed in a many ways that serve to thwart reformation. The overarching problem is that critical decision-making is vested with those who by training and disposition are least prepared to objectively exercise it, or ensure compliance.)*

- Relieve presbyteries and their volunteer committees from the burden of administrative decision-making concerning their clergy colleagues and member congregations.
- Empower presbyteries to provide effective support, pastoral care, and collegial networking to relieve the persistent sense of isolation and alienation experienced by both ordered and lay clergy.
- Entrust in-service training and ongoing education for clergy (*both ordered and lay*) as a continuous mandate of presbyteries.
- Freed from their present "watch-dog" roles, mandate presbyteries to provide an efficacious atmosphere of mutual sharing, assistance, co-operative strategizing, and support for all the congregations within their boundaries.
- Mandate conferences to fully assume the burden of objective and efficient administrative decision-making and the ensuring of compliance.
- Through decentralization and redeployment of national programme staff to the conference level, enhance the administrative capacity and the amount of time dedicated to visitation with each pastoral charge.
- Introduce a routinized form of augmented quarterly reporting from each pastoral charge, (*replacing the Annual Reports*) ensuring prompt "flagging" of any potentially problematic circumstances while still nascent, and alerting experienced staff to initiate appropriate remediation before the situation further deteriorates.
- Dramatically increase the electronic networking capacity of National Office so that existing and re-deployed programme staff in each conference can more readily access a broad pool of expertise, effectively linked from coast to coast.
- Relieve conferences from routine financial administration by centralizing all accounting functions in national office.

4. What stands in the way? *(The barriers to achieving a more efficient and effective structure could essentially be catalogued under the following general headings:)*

- A general failure to acknowledge that a post-Christian Canada no longer desires simple affiliation

within organized religion, but is desperately seeking involvement with a genuine expression of holistic spirituality;

- The rigid governance model imposed by the Manual;
- An erroneous notion that it is possible to design a permanent structure to meet systemic requirements, rather than a constantly innovating structure with sufficient flexibility to recognize and service the changing needs of the client base;
- The vested interest of those who would prefer to maintain the comfortable familiarity of the status-quo, rather than embrace the challenges of continuous reformation;
- Over investment on the part of the church as a whole, in a single vision of service delivery that attempts to exclude all other alternatives;
- A General failure to recognize that although our ancestors in the faith planned well for the immediate future they were capable of perceiving, it was never their intention to hobble today's church with the outmoded fetters of yesterday's methodology.
- An overarching sense of foreboding that has insidiously caused many to believe that the church's situation is already beyond remedy and that demise is now inevitable.
- Fear, (*both individually and collectively*) and a flagging confidence that the Holy Spirit will continue to empower all who fully embrace the challenges of Jesus' mission.

5. What can we let go of?

- The all but obsessive compulsion for venerating past decision-making, and the existent organizational structure of governance.
- The costly necessity for conference general meetings, replaced by an enhanced network of electronic sharing instantly linking every presbytery and pastoral charge.
- The faulty notion that the personal disposition and skill-sets generally most prized in a pastoral minister and honed through theological education are necessarily compatible with those required for effective administrative adjudication.
- The sense of despair that seems to have permeated so much of the U.C.C., and fosters the notion that we are doomed regardless of our efforts.
- Complacent acquiescence to the status-quo, and the resultant failure to embrace the Holy Spirit's challenge of "Daring to Be the Church" of the twenty-first century.
- The misguided notion that the U.C.C. just naturally embodies the spiritual aspirations of the average Canadian, which has allowed a significant segment of our leadership to drift into a sort of protracted stasis condition.
- Our inflated sense of our own self-importance to influence political events, which often displaces our proper role of joyfully spreading the gospel mission of Jesus at the grass-roots through a holistic appreciation of universal spirituality.
- The anachronistic distinction between "members" and "adherents", which contemporary society generally regards as a barrier to full participation, and causes the church to lose the innovative and challenging input of "adherents". (*In many congregations this requirement is already more honoured in the breach than in practice, without apparent detriment being suffered by the polity.*)
- Any notion that the reformation completed today will be permanent, or are likely to have a viable existence beyond our own limited ability to perceive future trends.

6. What shouldn't we let go of?

- Our unique position as home to "a thinking person's appreciation of Christianity", that does not expect attendees to "check-your-brains-at-the-door", and absorb by rote a carefully

prescribed dogma. We must never “let go” of our historic orientation as a welcoming refuge for “thinking people”, or as a body that continues seeking to identify and directly confront either inequality or injustice.

- The willingness to assist in renewing the confidence of those still wounded from past confrontations, and resist the temptation to retreat from new controversies as they emerge. The U.C.C. has never demurred from controversy, and in daring to be the emerging church it is only reasonable to assume that fresh dispute will again frequent the various courts.
- Our commitment to not only advocate on behalf of those subjected to inequality or injustice, but to welcome them as full participants within the Body of Christ. It is not enough to simply “talk-the-talk”, the church must continuously demonstrate itself to a cynical world as remaining willing to “walk-the-walk” in the same ragged shoes as those who are victimized.
- Our ability to recognize when we’ve been wrong, apologize sincerely, and then to set about trying to the best of our ability to “get-it-right”.

7. What innovative ways can we be church in our time and place?

- Continue the initiatives of the Emerging Church programme. The fact that it has generated controversy within the church is likely one of the more positive outcomes, since it's served as a "wake-up-call" for those who had drifted into complacency.
- Over the course of its short existence WonderCafé has demonstrated a constituency among the general public who are not church attendees, but are still seeking some contact with a source they recognize as welcoming and appropriate to their needs. *(Whether this tentative outreach can be transformed into something more continuous and contributing, still remains to be seen.)*
- New initiatives in physical church development will need to be placed at the nexus of current traffic-flow patterns. Since these patterns are likely not to remain constant for extended periods of time, these churches are going to have to be free to move with them. This dictates reliance upon lease facilities, ideally located in close proximity to other community resources that serve the needs of the same targeted demographic.
- We are going to have to be a great deal more intentional in targeting those whom we propose to serve in each location. If a church is intended to primarily serve young families, then utilize leased facilities in the local sports complex. With the growth in retirement communities, the church should be leasing space in the fitness centre or golf club. In projects geared towards elders, the church should be working with developers for rental accommodation in the medical complex. With the younger cohort habitually frequenting malls, why is a U.C.C. outlet never found in a store-front location?
- For the U.C.C. to be successful we have to stop bucking trends already well established in the Canadian society, and serve the need where we find it. The past few decades have proved ample evidence that the younger generations are simply not prepared to go out of their way to "come to us", and so we will have to "go to them". *(Surely Jesus would have been a lot more comfortable in a well upholstered sanctuary rather than roaming the countryside, wading around a dockside, or contending with the distractions of the marketplace.)*
- The church should lament consumerism and continue to do its level best to educate people to a different standard. But, the U.C.C. ignores this trend at its absolute peril! Those lured by the siren-song of consumerism to flock to malls and "shop-till-they-drop" are attempting to fill the void within by acquiring the latest fashion accessory or gadget. What clearer evidence could we require of their rampant spiritual hunger, and yet our church is not on-site to offer a more viable alternative.

- To offer a credible alternative the U.C.C. must also cease allowing itself to be inadvertently drawn into the debate between "science" and "religion". Only pure closed-mindedness fails to acknowledge that these are not competitive visions of Creation but complementary perspectives. Still, it is possible to venture into a church, ostensibly functioning under the U.C.C. banner, and be confronted by an assertion of "Creationism" over evolution. (*It doesn't require much imagination to speculate about the impression a visitor will likely take away.*)
- It required courage for the U.C.C. to adopt an enlightened stance on the matter of human sexuality and to accept desertion by disaffected members. In this instance the church addressed an injustice, demonstrating that it was prepared to pay the cost. A clear articulation regarding the respective roles of "science" and "religion" in a complementary vision of Creation is a matter of intellectual honesty and will doubtlessly be accompanied by a certain level of dissension. It's a cost the church must be equally willing to bear to present a credible face to an educated and literate public who've ceased to look to religion for scientific explanation.
- Intellectual honesty also calls the U.C.C. to confess the fallacies and untruths traditionally propagated, which still find echo in contemporary worship. The authors and editors of the compilation of scripture doubtlessly believed that what flowed from their pens was "divinely inspired". With the knowledge and sensibilities available to them, it was reassuring to interpret salvation from natural disaster, or the utter destruction of one's enemies, as the active intervention of God. Divine origin also provides a more palatable rationalization for the routine examples of brutality, and the all too human excesses of leadership that fill scriptures. Consider however, the reaction of a visitor to one of our churches who has just been assailed with a particularly blood-chilling account from scripture, followed by: "The word of God." What possible justification could this person perceive for the congregational response of "Thanks be to God"? Not only would it be intellectually honest, but also a good deal more understandable to that visitor, to openly acknowledge the mythologically instructive nature of the scriptural material. The Bible represents a collection of excellent teaching myths, why blur its contemporary instructive value by shrouding it with claims of divinity that can neither be supported nor justified?
- Anyone who attempted to gain an appreciation of God based solely upon the descriptive portrayed in scripture would have to be left with the distinct impression of an obsessively jealous, capricious, retributive, and vindictive deity, every bit as prone to petty tantrums as any from the Pantheon. Over the past millennia the Christian church (*for both noble and self-serving reasons*) has perpetrated a hoax regarding the nature of the God it purports to serve. In so doing it has fashioned an image of a wrathful deity, omnipresently ready to scrupulously record every transgression, in preparation for some impending day of judgement. Is this really the image we want to perpetuate?
- If there remains any doubt regarding the negative impressions conveyed through the resort to fallacious language, then one only need be acquainted with the "Twenty Articles of Faith". Is this the God the U.C.C. truly worships in practice? Is this the portrait of Jesus that we commend to our attendees? Is this the understanding of spirituality that is likely to answer the gaping void in the souls of contemporary Canadian society? If it is not, then surely the U.C.C. need no longer retain this anachronistic expression of nineteenth century theology as a normative document.