

**Executive of the General Council of The United Church of Canada**  
**Meeting Summary**  
**November 12 to 14, 2011**

This document summarizes some of the events, discussions and decisions made by the Executive of the General Council, at its November 12-14, 2011 meeting. The Executive acts on behalf of the General Council between General Council meetings. It is composed of 50 people, representing all 13 Conferences, the church's laity and ministry personnel, as well as the church's francophone, ethnic, and Aboriginal constituencies.

**Accommodations**

The Executive gave unanimous approval to a proposal directing the negotiation of leased office space in one of two development projects now in the planning stages by two downtown Toronto United churches – Bloor Street United and Metropolitan United. To allow time for negotiations to proceed with these development projects, the Executive also directed General Secretary Nora Sanders to negotiate either an interim renewal of the current lease or an equivalent lease arrangement.

The Executive made this decision on the third day of a meeting where they spent time each day in prayerful consideration of a number of options for the location of the office. Members expressed great gratitude for all of the proposals received, the visions that they embodied and the energy generated in the process. Faithful stewardship of the resources of the church, including financial and human, was a key consideration in discerning the place where our General Council Office will best live out God's mission through the church.

Executive members named a strong desire for an office more closely associated to a local church ministry, and a location that would embody a sense of the sacred. There was great optimism that the association with a United Church development would symbolize an important commitment to the future of the United Church.

The Executive of the General Council began this process after learning the current lease for the General Council Office will expire in January 2015.

**Effective Leadership and Healthy Pastoral Relationships**

The Permanent Committee Ministry and Employment Policies and Services' presented its report *Effective Leadership and Healthy Pastoral Relationships* as part of the committee's complete review of all pastoral relations and oversight and discipline policies and practices, per the Executive's instruction (GS 29: Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action, May 2010). The report included a new model for pastoral relations and oversight and discipline that would shift the majority of responsibility for these processes from presbyteries to Conferences, and from volunteers to paid staff.

The Executive received the report, and after some debate, directed the General Secretary to initiate consultation with the wider church on the wisdom and viability of some or the entire proposed model, and, based on the outcomes of the consultation, to provide options for possible implementation. Consultations will begin immediately and conclude in February 2012.

### **2011 Identity Survey**

Jane Armstrong, principal researcher from Jane Armstrong Research Associates, joined the meeting and provided the Executive with an overview of the *2011 Identity Survey*, the largest survey of United Church people in its 86-year-history (report attached). The independent research firm collected information from approximately 7,500 regular United Church worshippers in order to build a portrait of the identity, values, and beliefs of United Church people. The Permanent Committee Programs for Mission and Ministry commissioned the study to assist in planning, priority setting, and decision making at the 41<sup>st</sup> General Council 2012. Results are available on the United Church website.

### **Youth and Young Adult Strategy**

The Executive affirmed the principles of the General Council's Youth and Young Adult strategy focusing on leaders and leadership. They also directed the General Secretary to explore an increase to the Vision Fund of \$100,000 in the 2012 budget cycle, and report back to the Executive of the General Council with the results.

### **Trans/gender Diversity Working Group**

The Executive of the General Council affirmed the report of the Trans/gender Diversity Working Group, and referred the group's proposal back to Permanent Committee Programs for Mission and Ministry for further preparation.

### **Racial Identity and Language Data Collection**

The Executive directed the General Secretary take steps towards creating a policy addressing the process of collecting data about the racial identity and languages spoken of ministry personnel and candidates. The church lacks this information at present. Language and racial data of United Church ministry personnel will help the church to create processes and support systems for racialized ministry personnel who often experience personal and professional isolation in their service, as well as for racialized ministry candidates as they go through various church processes.

### **Partner's Report**

The Moderator welcomed Charlie Ocampo, the global partner who is serving as a corresponding member of the Executive through this triennium. Mr. Ocampo shared insights from his mission work in a presentation titled "Emerging Geopolitical Trends in Asia." With examples from Manila to Kashmir, he demonstrated the breadth of the Christian Conference of Asia's work restoring peace, supporting microcredit programs, and supporting territorial sovereignty in natural resource claims. Mr. Ocampo reinforced that the role of the United Church is important in his work, including our prayers and support for the people affected by environmental instability and political incursions.

### **Omnibus Crime Bill**

The Executive directed the General Secretary to work with other organizations concerned with the potential negative effects of Bill C-10 -- the Canadian government's Omnibus Crime Bill -- on Canada's Aboriginal people.

### **Task Group on the Basis of Union and Crest Interim Report**

The Task Group on the Basis of Union and Crest presented a new version of the United Church crest that includes the Latin phrase “Ut Omnes Unum Sint” (“That all may be one”), and the “Akwe Nia’Tetewá:neren (“All My Relations” written in Mohawk). The Executive celebrated the newest iteration, which the task group revised after receiving feedback from the Executive in May 2011. The task group is continuing to consult with Aboriginal groups about the crest before finalizing its report for General Council 41.

### **Truth and Reconciliation**

Justice Murray Sinclair, the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, asked all parties to the Agreement to respond to the question “What is reconciliation?” and to offer expressions of reconciliation at the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Executive of the General Council explored this question with the purpose of building a common understanding of “reconciliation.” After the session, the Executive adopted a motion recommending The United Church of Canada engage the question “What is reconciliation?” using the same process.

### **Consultation with the Francophone constituency and Ministries in French Network**

The Executive reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening and expanding Francophone ministries within the United Church, and directed the General Secretary to consult with representatives from the Francophone constituency and Ministries in French Network about this work.

### **41st General Council 2012 Proposal Task Group**

The Executive approved the creation of a Proposal Task Group of the 41st General Council Planning and Agenda Committee. The new task group will work with the General Secretary to prepare, create and implement measures to facilitate the proposal and decision making process prior the 41<sup>st</sup> General Council 2012.

### **Manual Simplification**

The Executive is forwarding a number of proposals regarding simplification of *The Manual* to the 41st General Council 2012. The proposed changes are intended to create balance in the by-laws between regulation for the church to function in a fair and orderly way, and flexibility so that courts and people are free to carry out ministry. Also, the Executive directed the General Secretary to continue to consult with the wider church on the simplified draft by-laws, and that any simplified draft by-laws, with any revisions resulting from the consultation, be submitted to this Executive in March to consider for possible submission to the 41st General Council.

### **Transitional Leave and Salary Continuance for Immediate Past Moderators**

The Executive approved a motion from the Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services to offer immediate past Moderators transitional leave and salary continuance for up to four months at the conclusion of their term. This leave and salary continuance will allow immediate past Moderators the opportunity to reflect on their role as the Moderator of the United Church, review and archive their records and correspondence appropriately, and make a transition back to their former positions and/or discern a new vocation.

### **Pension Board Update**

Charles Black, Chair of the Pension Board, presented their accountability report to the Executive of the General Council and discussed the health and sustainability of the Pension Plan. Low investment yields have been affecting most plans, including ours, while ours is also pressured by a high age of entry. The Pension Board has made substantial progress in its review of the Plan's design, funding, and investment strategies from a sustainability perspective and will be considering several options for securing the sustainability of future benefits. Any changes, which may result, would not be effective until January 1, 2013.

### **Investment Policy**

The Executive adopted an updated investment policy that will provide clarity to the church's investment decisions, and make decisions based on good stewardship and responsible investing principles. The new investment policy clarifies the parameters under which professional investment advisors can select investments, as well broadens the responsible investment mandate beyond screening to include corporate dialogue and advocacy.

### **Permanent Committee Appointments**

The Executive appointed the following individuals as Chairs of their respective permanent committees:

- Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry, Mary Royal (OM, Bay of Quinte);
- Permanent Committee on Finance, Brian Cornelius (OM, Montreal & Ottawa);
- Permanent Committee on Governance and Agenda, Shirley Cleave (Lay, Maritime);
- Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services, Tracy Murton (Lay, Saskatchewan).

These appointments begin August 2012 and span the duration of the 41<sup>st</sup> triennium.

### **Executive of the General Meeting Dates 2012-2015**

The Executive agreed that the meeting dates of the Executive of the General Council for the 41st triennium are:

- November 17-19, 2012
- May 4 to 6, 2013
- November 16 to 18, 2013
- May 3 to 5, 2014
- November 15-17, 2014
- March 21-23, 2015

# JANE ARMSTRONG RESEARCH ASSOCIATES



## INTERPRETIVE REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF THE UNITED CHURCH *IDENTITY SURVEY* 2011

The results of the recently completed United Church of Canada *Identity Survey* are remarkable. They paint a portrait of the church that may be familiar to the people who inhabit the pews on Sundays, but that will surprise many others—especially those who doubt the depth of United Church people’s commitment to their church and to their faith. The results reveal a seeking people whose identity and vision are both deeply rooted and in full bloom. The United Church of Canada may well want to celebrate and loudly proclaim these findings.

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Jane Armstrong Research Associates is pleased to present to The United Church of Canada this brief interpretive overview of the major findings of the *Identity Survey* that we conducted on the church’s behalf in 2011: an online/mail survey of 7448 regular worshippers from a representative sample of United Church pastoral charges across Canada. Our comments are interpretive, but they arise out of a careful and comprehensive examination of the data in all its complexity. For more details on the methodology and specific findings of the study, please see our full report. Please also consider reviewing our full report on two companion studies that we conducted for The United Church of Canada in 2011 and that we refer to briefly at the end of this paper: an online survey of the views of 501 people who say they are United, but rarely or never attend services; and a study of 493 United Church youth, based on an online survey of youth aged 13 to 29, combined with the above *Identity Survey* findings for respondents, aged 11 to 29.

### *Faith Itself: Is there a void at the heart of the United Church?*

There is in some quarters an image of United Church people as little more than a loosely bound collection of individuals who are, among other things, diffident about their Christian heritage and more concerned with social gatherings than with faith. Given the strength and consistency of the data, we think this image is inaccurate. Indeed, even when we take into account the argument that respondents to our survey, like those who respond to any survey, may be among the most engaged to start with, we still believe that the data confirm that United Church people as a whole are engaged and committed.

If participation in the life of the church is a measure of commitment, there can be no doubt that church is central to the lives of the United Church people who completed our survey and who generally represent people in congregations across the country. Despite some observers' claim that church for churchgoers is a once-a-month habit, our survey results show that a majority of United Church people go to church weekly and through all the seasons of the year, and many report that they participate in worship as ushers, communion assistants, readers of Scripture, and in other roles. They are busy with "church" on other days of the week too: they attend fellowship and fund-raising events; do odd jobs around the church; pitch in to help with outreach projects; participate in meetings; serve on committees; and attend adult study groups.

But does this buzz of activity in United Churches in fact signal a community of faith or merely a community centre by another name? We think the answer lies in the former because the activity, which is almost always carried out in groups of people presumably enjoying each other's company, is an expression of community, and community is actually at the centre of their faithfulness.

For United Church people, the importance of community, which includes living in "right relationship" with all people and striving for healing and social justice, is connected to their interpretation of Jesus' message to "love one another" and to their commitment to honour the Christian story even if at the same time they claim that Christianity is not the only path to God. Indeed, for United Church people, there is nothing contradictory about this way of thinking. Although some observers outside the church might think that openness to other paths suggests a lack of commitment to Christianity, most United Church people reject this idea. United Church people's respect for other paths to God is a theological stance—not a symptom of uncertainty about their own path. The research shows that a commitment to ecumenism is one of the attributes of a church that United Church people want to belong to.

There is more evidence that United Church people are anything but diffident. For example, although United Church people are not evangelists in the sense that they try to increase their numbers by "converting" people, surprisingly two-thirds report that they have talked about their faith to a non-churchgoer!

Respondents to the survey also say that church shapes their values and how they live their lives. This recognition of the importance of church has grown considerably since the last time it was investigated (Unitrends Survey, 1994). Answering a related question put a different way, United Church people say that attending worship services and making financial gifts are fundamental to their faith. And when asked to name the level of connection that they feel to

their church, they respond with a resounding voice. Two-thirds say they feel “very” connected and the remainder say they feel at least “somewhat” connected.

On the matter of belief in God, we find that United Church people put a high value on belonging to a church where God’s presence is felt. They see themselves as travellers on a spiritual journey in which the transformative power of prayer, however that might be defined, is a significant factor.

As for the language of faith, the survey finds that although some groups (notably the younger generation) are considerably less adamant about this than others, a majority of United Church people think it is important for Jesus to be named in worship and for the United Church to continue to express its understanding of God as Trinity.

### *Too Big a Tent? Unity of purpose in the United Church*

And what does the survey say about the notion that the United Church is a tent so big that there is little unity of purpose and therefore limited potential for the denomination to make a difference in the world on a larger scale?

First, it is important to acknowledge that the life of the United Church is, to a great extent, lived locally. United Church people tend to feel a greater sense of membership in their local church than in the national church, and presumably the idea that the wider church is heterogeneous or loosely organized does not trouble them. Indeed, although we did not test this hypothesis directly, we think that many would probably say that the big tent, with all its heterogeneity, is a strength, not a weakness.

That said, even on a national basis, the United Church might be more cohesive an organization than many people assume. There is considerable consensus around the kind of church United Church people say they would like to belong to. Interestingly, the attributes that people hold dear do tend to be among the same ones the church first articulated just over five years ago when, as part of the Emerging Spirit initiative, the church was thinking about how to have a conversation with a younger generation of non-churchgoers. In other words, the current research shows that people in the pews of the United Church agree not only with each other but with what was then identified as an appealing church. They all put a high value on a church that is welcoming and supportive, where faith is translated into action, and where belief is not a matter of dogma but rather a journey of questioning, debate, doubt, and ongoing discovery.

Moreover, there is significant attachment to the denomination itself—as well as hopefulness about what the church and its people might be able to accomplish in the world. When United

Church people are asked about their views on renewal of The United Church of Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most opt for a prophetic role for the national church. On top of this, although some have argued that the national church's positions on social and political issues do not reflect the views of the actual members of the church, there is no evidence that people in the pews do not trust the denomination to speak and act on their behalf. Indeed, not only do United Church people feel that the church represents them, they also seek to represent the church: one in ten have advocated on behalf of the church by writing to an elected official about a church-sponsored issue. (Although one in ten may not seem like a large proportion, when measured against the proportion of the population that exhibits that level of political engagement it is impressive.) Admittedly, there may be some divergence of opinion on some topics but this does not seem to detract from the perceived legitimacy of church leaders and their voices. Moreover, our hypothesis is that those who disagree with the church on some issues are still committed to the church for the long term. This could be partly because they trust that their views will be respected and partly because they actually like the way the church stimulates--and perhaps even changes—their thinking from time to time.

#### *Who's in the pews? Aging and cultural diversity*

There is much good news in the results of this very significant piece of research that The United Church of Canada has commissioned. At the same time, it is clear that there are also some challenges in the road ahead.

For example, the church has made an official commitment to become intercultural and diverse, and the demographic profile of the survey sample suggests it has made a good start in this regard; in other words, although there is much homogeneity in the faces of United Church people, this may be changing and the extent to which people from varied backgrounds are joining the church is notable.

However, we must also point out that of all the attributes that might be considered important in a church, those that have to do with promoting diversity are ranked lowest by United Church people. Besides this, there are hints in the data that not all members feel equally at home in the United Church yet, and not all are full participants in decision-making and governance. It is notable too that when one considers the sometimes traditional attitudes and values of different sub-groups of people in the church, there are some paradoxical tensions that exist. These and other tensions will eventually need addressing if they don't readily resolve themselves, as people become more exposed to and familiar with diversity in their midst.

Finally, what to make of the age of United Church people? The survey findings show that respondents are older, and no doubt this response pattern is likely similar to the actual

demographics of the church. To some, this signals the end of the church because they think it is inevitable that the church will disappear as the ranks of the faithful thin. We offer a couple of responses to this, given our reading of the data.

Most importantly, we do not think that the demographics of the church necessarily signal an end to its existence. The people of the United Church may be older, but they are in the full bloom of mature adulthood. They are at a point in their lives when they may be able to truly step outside themselves and attend to the needs of others - in other words, actively live out that commitment to community and social justice that is so central to their faith. Further analysis of the demographic data points to another significant finding: people in the 30 to 39 age cohort - the “young middle-aged” - are the most likely age group to have joined the church in the last few years. This trend, which may be partly related to the church’s Emerging Spirit initiative (which was actually aimed at people in the 30 to 45 age group), is a positive development that should not be under-estimated.

Moreover, in the results to a companion study we conducted with youth of the church – an examination of the views of 493 people in the 11 to 29 age cohort - we find great promise. There is a small but highly engaged and active group of young people who are coming of age in the United Church. Like their peers outside the church, they are dedicated to a search for meaning in their lives and are profoundly progressive and open. Their energy, combined with the strength of their values, may serve to propel the church into a new level of commitment to interculturalism, diversity, and inclusion.

One last note: although United Church youth may be more comfortable with institutionalized religion than many people outside the church, including those who say they are United but never go to services (our online survey of 501 people in this latter group confirms this), young people in the United Church are amenable to non-traditional forms of church and to expressing and living their faith in contemporary ways that may or may not include worshipping within the four walls of a church.

Thus, just as we anticipate that United Church youth may play a significant role in making the church truly open and welcoming to all, we also think that this thoughtful younger generation may be the creative force that ultimately provides a new way for the United Church to evolve and become “church” in the 21st century. Presumably, this could have a very positive impact on the church’s appeal to non-churchgoers who are seeking meaning in their lives, as well as ensure that the church has a future, whatever shape or form that may take!

### *Conclusion*

We want to thank The United Church of Canada for allowing Armstrong Research to conduct this very important research into the identity and vision of the people of the United Church. As we have said, we think the findings are most interesting. They speak of a people who are dedicated and engaged, not without faults or troubles, but poised to continue their faithful journey as Christians. In the words of the 2006 United Church document entitled *A Song of Faith*, the members of The United Church of Canada represent a “community of broken but hopeful believers...a church with a purpose.” The results of this research suggest that the United Church is navigating changing realities, but for its members -- the people in the pews as well as those active and faithful younger people who may be worshipping beyond the pews -- the church’s purpose remains in clear sight.

Jane Armstrong,  
November 2011