

Dialogue with the Board of Vocation and United Church Foundation at the February GCE



Posted on:
February 26, 2024
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The General Council Executive (GCE) met on Feb. 23-24, with an emphasis on generative and strategic conversation. Each day, the GCE began by committing to [Equity Aspirations](#) (About Anti-Racism webpage > Downloads).

Friday

On Friday, following a land acknowledgement offered by former Moderator, the Very Reverend Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, the Moderator facilitated a virtual talking circle that introduced all members and corresponding members. The GCE welcomed two corresponding members, Leeann Shimoda and Rev. Kimberly Roy, from the Indigenous Church; a new member of the Executive, Rev. Alcris Limongi, and Elder Evelyn Day.

Worship included prayers from *Act Fast: Spiritual Practices for a Climate in Crisis*, this year's Lenten devotional and a video, [By Any Greens Necessary](#), featuring Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Rev. Samuel Dansokho led a session on decolonizing governance, centred on the West African concept of [Sankofa](#), the idea that it isn't taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot. We should retrieve things of value from our knowledge of the past. Sankofa also refers to the [Bono Adinkra symbol](#) represented by a bird with its head turned backwards while its feet face forward carrying a precious egg in its mouth.

Highlights from the first day of the meeting include the following:

Pastoral Relations Equity Report (GS79)

Following up from a prior learning session in January, the GCE broke into smaller groups to discuss the proposal, and to answer the question: What principles would you name to guide the plan for this work moving forward?

The Pastoral Relations Equity Project was jointly supported by Adele Halliday, the United Church's Anti-Racism Equity Lead, and Rev. Marlene Britton, the Director of Policies & Programs for Ministry Personnel, in the United Church's Office of Vocation. The research was led by Marcie Gibson and Kimiko Karpoff.

The overall research project is one of three different but interrelated research projects that address equity for ministry personnel in The United Church of Canada. The two other inter-related projects are:

- *Leadership Counts*, which is a voluntary identity survey of United Church ministry personnel (as well as staff of General Council and Regional Council Offices, and General Council committee members) to gather identity-based demographics, and,
- *Equity in Compensation*, a task group that is engaging experts in statistical analysis of compensation policies and practices paid to ministry personnel in communities of faith and in the General Council and Regional Council offices, in order to examine the impact on ministers who are Indigenous, racialized, women, Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+, and persons with disabilities.

There was an expressed wish by Executive members that action happen quickly, while still ensuring that the conversation around barriers and solutions be ongoing and widespread.

“Even though the experience is particular to equity-seeking ministry personnel, the responsibility is everyone’s,” said Kit Loewen, “so the approach must be educational and comprehensive.”

An interim report will be prepared for November’s GCE meeting. GS79 was carried.

Board of Vocation

Rev. Marlene Britton, Director of Policies and Programs for Ministry Personnel, Theology and Ministry Leadership, and Rev. Norm Seli, Chair of the Board of Vocation, joined the meeting to present the Board and Office of Vocation accountability report (commons.united-church.ca > Governance > General Council Executive > GC44 Executive (2022-2025) > Meeting Documents > 2024-02-23-24 GCE).

Most of the discussion centred on the admissions process. In 2022, 200 ministers were on a wait list to enter the process, leading to the development of an admission matching pilot program. This program has had some success, including one minister who unsuccessfully tried to find a church for eight years now planted a new Community of Faith, but further progress is needed.

Rev. Britton also noted the importance of volunteers for the various roles related to the Board of Vocation. Currently, 169 volunteers are needed to work with the Board.

Saturday

The Moderator's opening worship remembered Rev. Alison Etter, chair of the Theology, Inter-Church Inter-Faith (TICIF) committee, as well as Rev. Karen Hilfman Millson—both passed away recently with funerals happening that day.

The reading of Holy Manners in French and English was shared among members of the GCE and prayers were offered for the church across the country, drawing from concerns raised by regional councils. A moving video of [Plowshare Prayer Song by Spencer LaJoye](#) served as the closing prayer.

Accountability Reports

The Moderator gave a verbal report on her leadership in the church. She highlighted the very successful first residency of the *ReGenerate* program, part of the Flourishing Initiative, which endeavors to support ministers in developing leadership skills at the highest level to align with the changing needs of communities of faith and the church in the world. She shared her concerns regarding the stresses and challenges experienced by local communities of faith, including conflict from a sense of scarcity of resources, hoping this might be a future topic for exploration.

The General Secretary began his report with the concern that only 45% of pastoral charges have sent in remit responses. The deadline for the [Remit 1: Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization](#) is March 31 and all pastoral charges are urgently requested to arrange for a vote by their board.

He also spoke of the Centennial commemoration, which will be launched on June 9, 2024, at Metropolitan United Church in downtown Toronto, and livestreamed across the country, and the lease for 300 Bloor St. that will be signed this week. This Bloor Street United Church location will include office and archive space for The United Church of Canada, Anglican Church of Canada and The Presbyterian Church in Canada, as well as a condominium development.

Rev. Blair highlighted the vital role of Leadership in the work towards Growth, both identified by the Church's Strategic Plan, and suggested a high-level group be identified to reflect on the many aspects of leadership development for the present and future

church. He flagged areas where polity is getting in the way of decision-making that is nimble and adaptable.

“There are things that fit in 1925, but not in 2025 and they’re holding up our processes,” he told the GCE.

The General Secretary suggested we look again at moving away from The United Church of Canada Act to the Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act. He urged engagement with the GCO Strategic Plan, and its vital link to financial planning, saying, “It is the GCE’s responsibility to ask the questions about whether we’re investing in the things we should be investing in.”

The Foundation

Jim Simpson, [United Church of Canada Foundation](#) chair; Craig Bater, vice chair, and Sarah Charters, president reported on some of recent successes of the Foundation, in the first intentional conversation between the GCE and the Foundation. “I’ve been on a lot of boards over the years, and this is one of the healthiest boards I’ve been on,” said Simpson, noting the nature of the Foundation – without the polity constraints of the church – allows a significant ability to adapt or pivot, depending on the situation it’s facing.

Simpson explained that in 2006, the Foundation’s total grants were a total of \$654,000 for all gifts, and that the amount has multiplied 21 times since then. He noted that impact investing is making a difference, and has become an important focus of investment for the Foundation, along with the assurance of financial return.

Centennial Fundraising (GS 80)

Sarah Charters, also in her role as Executive Officer, Philanthropy, outlined the findings of the preliminary feasibility study for a fundraising campaign built around the Centennial. The study included donor interviews, focus groups and senior staff interviews and suggested a campaign focused around celebrating the Centennial through legacy and planned gifts. The campaign, led by the Foundation, would be donor-centric and support local congregations, in addition to the possibility of broader church contributions. A motion enabling this approach to the fundraising campaign passed.

Correspondence

GCE members reviewed a letter received that was critical of the recent General Council’s decision about Designated Lay Ministry (DLM) and confirmed a response.

GC45

Rev. Taylor Croissant, chair of the GC45 planning committee, presented a general outline of timelines and format for the 45th General Council at the Telus Centre in Calgary, AB, in August of 2025.

The theme will be *Visions and Dreams*, based on Acts 2:17: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young shall see visions, and your elders shall dream dreams.” The installation of the new Moderator will be at Knox United Church in Calgary on the last day of the General Council.

Prior to August in-person gathering, there will be two June listening and discussion sessions held online (currently proposed for June 14 and June 22, 2025). Listening and discussion for the most challenging of proposals will happen in person during GC45. A new proposals template and guide is being developed. Rev. Croissant noted that the new template encourages proposals that are not too prescriptive, enabling the General Council a greater breadth of possibilities in addressing the presenting issue.

Strategic Plan

Rev. Jennifer Henry, Executive Minister for Organizational Development and Strategy, reported on the Strategic Plan. The GCO has just completed the first year of its operational plan, flowing from the strategic plan. A detailed fourth-quarter 2023 operational report is available on the Commons (commons.united-church.ca > Governance > General Council Executive > GC44 Executive (2022-2025) > Meeting Documents > 2024-02-23-24 GCE). Also available is a [dashboard](#) highlighting the current state of progress. About 30% of the activities fully met their planned key results for this quarter with 100% completion. Overall, the average completion of key results in activated areas is 67%, which is the same as Q3. A 2023 full-year report on outcomes is in development.

Rev. Henry noted that the denomination is still in a development process in using a strategic planning framework with this year’s focus on improving meaningful use of data, increased alignment of identity and messaging, and developing the “strategic” in planning, including bringing the six strategic objectives into one overall strategy. She offered a possible way of seeing each of the strategic objectives (related to Leadership, Common Good, Justice, Climate Integrity) as contributing to the leading priority on Growth, with its focus on renewing existing communities of faith, creating new communities of faith, and inviting new participation in The United Church of Canada.

An opportunity for breakout sessions on the presentation and the report explored three questions: What resonates? What's missing? Where should we invest more?

Mission and Service

Sarah Charters gave a quick overview of 2023 Mission and Service giving, which, while declining by 1.5% year-over-year, is a strong result in comparison to other charitable organizations. The 2024 focus for donations to M&S will be on PAR – encouraging people to join PAR or, for those who already donate through PAR, to consider increasing their amounts. She also showed a [video](#) about a micro-loan program for women in Kenya.