

GCE summary, Nov. 16-18, 2023

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Isaiah 43: 18-19

The General Council Executive (GCE) met in person in Mississauga, Ontario, on November 16-18, 2023. Each day, the GCE began by committing to [Equity Aspirations](#) (About Anti-Racism webpage > Downloads), and Holy Manners. The meeting was grounded in worship led by the Moderator.

The meeting wrapped up a week of meetings with Regional Council Executive Ministers, General Council Executive Ministers and other General Council Office (GCO) staff. The meetings were punctuated by worship, prayer and reflection, and guided by Elder Evelyn Day of the Tahltan, Gixtsan, and Tlingit nations, who received tobacco and a medicine bag of sacred medicines from the Moderator. Elder Evelyn offered elements of food and water, creating a sacred centre for the gathering.

Highlights from the meeting include the following:

THURSDAY EVENING

Members of the GCE joined with staff, particularly Regional Executive Ministers, to reflect on the church across the country, sharing what they are seeing and hearing, and reflecting on opportunities for deepened partnership.

FRIDAY

Budget

Erik Mathiesen, Executive Officer, Finance, and Harry Li, Controller, presented a thorough overview of the budget forecast, addressing both 2024 and 2025. They noted that 80% of the budget is funded by congregations, and if congregational revenues are struggling, it has direct impact on programs and services offered by the national church. Mission and Service contributions have also trended downwards, with some stabilization this year, and purchasing power adjusted for inflation has also decreased.

The good news is that 500 congregations are becoming more sustainable by 2025, having accessed nearly \$5 million in grants through [Faithful Footprints](#). The United Church of Canada (UCCan) has committed to an 80% reduction in carbon footprint by 2030, and the efforts at the local level are key to meeting the target. In further positive news, the creation of United

Property Resource Corporation/Kindred Works is bearing fruit. Kindred Works has broken ground in their first affordable housing initiative, and will begin contributing back to the church in the next year. The church's self-insurance initiative, with an initial investment of \$3 million, is already beginning to meet its goal of saving congregations across the country \$1 million a year in insurance.

Mathiesen spoke of the need to find a way to balance "living within our means" with the need to invest in the strategic plan, changing the narrative from one of loss and decline to one that is more hopeful. "Living within your means shouldn't just mean balancing the budget," he said.

A GCE learning session will be convened in February to engage in a robust conversation about "living within our means," including appropriate use of the reserve funds, with a goal of beginning to build a framework for the 2025 budget.

The 2024 budget using the budget principles approved at the September GCE meeting, which includes a \$2.3 million deficit was approved

Pension Board

Anne Soh, chair of the United Church Pension Board, presented an accountability report. She noted that the church has two pensioners who are over 100 years old! There are more retired members than active members, which means the church pays out more pensions than it collects in contributions into the plan; this means investment funds supplement the shortfall. However, from 2019 to 2022, more new members joined the Plan than retired. The number of new members joining the Plan was markedly higher in 2022 at 409, up from 243 in 2021.

"We have faithful stewards managing the plan and our investments," said the Moderator. "They are looking seven generations into the future."

Other highlights of the presentation include:

- The number of inactive members will increase in 2024;
- The Sustainable Investing Working Group (SIWG) was formed in 2023 to engage with investment managers, invested companies and policymakers on Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) issues; oversight is provided by the Investment Committee.
- Through its engagement with SHARE, which advocates sustainable, inclusive investment through shareholder engagement, advisory services, and cutting-edge research, the Pension Board had 37 engagement initiatives with 28 companies on climate change, sustainable finance, decent work, racial justice and Truth and Reconciliation. One success included advocating with Toromont Industries to invest in Indigenous economy; 90% voted yes at the company's AGM.

- UCCan has a defined benefit pension that guarantees income, one of the only organizations in Canada that does.

National Indigenous Council

The National Indigenous Council (NIC) held meetings simultaneously with the GCE, but joined GCE in a joint session on Friday afternoon. LeeAnn Shimoda, chair of the NIC, introduced the Council, including its youth members, and with Murray Pruden, Executive Minister, Indigenous Ministries and Justice, fielded questions about Remit 1, which would create an autonomous Indigenous Church.

To date, only about 10% of congregations have responded to the remit vote, which requires a vote from all governing councils of pastoral charges and regional councils. All of the regional councils have voted. Each pastoral charge's governing body is [urged to conduct a remit vote](#) at the earliest convenience as the deadline of March 31, 2025, is fast approaching.

A yes vote on this remit would take away the constraints of the remit process for decisions the NIC will make in the future regarding its own processes and structure. "The remit system does not work for the Indigenous Council," said Shimoda. "The timing and deadlines for the remit system do not work with Indigenous ways of doing things."

Two breakout times created space for discussing questions prepared by Pruden, Shimoda and the General Secretary centred on relationship-building and a shared understanding of the relationship.

Decolonizing Governance

Working again as the GCE, the chair of the Governance Committee, Kit Loewen, led a generative discussion about decolonization focusing on the following:

- What can we learn from the NIC that will help us to build strong and trustworthy relationships?
- What does it mean to have voice in dialogue and decision-making, and what do we mean by "voice"?
- What does it mean to be "data-informed" in a way that honours our commitment to decolonizing our work? What does "decolonized data use" mean to us?

During this time, the GCE also voted on a proposal the Theology Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee to reduce, and use carefully, the word "mission." The positive vote followed a presentation by Teresa Burnett-Cole on the origins of the word, and the negative association of the word with damaging missionary efforts. While constraining use of the word does not

resolve the devastating legacy of colonizing efforts to convert whole populations to Christianity it does recognize the power of words, both to harm and contribute to learning and unlearning.

“We need to educate ourselves and divest ourselves of colonization,” she urged the GCE. “This is decolonial work of the settler church.”

Jennifer Janzen-Ball, Executive Minister of Theology and Ministry Leadership, highlighted the need for ongoing work, adding, “The church needs to engage in further dialogue to more fully understand ‘mission’ in The United Church of Canada.”

SATURDAY

The second day of GCE opened with worship led by the Moderator, including a few moments of silence were spent reflecting on the names of those who have passed in the past year, including those where contributions were made to Mission and Service by their estates or through “in memoriam” honouring.

The day’s proceedings included:

Benefits

Alan Hall, Executive Officer, Shared Services, and David Dawrant, Director, Pension and Benefits Administration, presented on Group Benefits Plans, with all three proposals being approved. Of particular interest is the motion that addressed age discrimination in benefit plans, which have historically applied age maximums to reduce or eliminate coverage for active employees. The other two proposals facilitate exploration of administrative expenses funding, and will terminate a significantly underutilized program — LifeSpeak.

Strategic operational plan

A short presentation by Jennifer Henry, Executive Minister for Organizational Development and Strategy, and Cameron Fraser, Director of Growth and Ministry Development, highlighted the exciting opportunities for growth. Fraser told the GCE that change is possible, with growth enabled through evangelism and fellowship. He noted particularly that growth in diaspora communities of faith is moving quickly including emerging Hong Kong, Filipino, Pan-African and Malagasy communities.

Some discussion in groups centred on the pillars of the [strategic operational plan](#): climate, justice, common good, Indigenous pathways, leadership and growth.

Public registry of ministers

Norm Seli, chair of the Board of the Office of Vocation (BOV), joined the GCE session to provide background on the proposal to ratify the decision by the Board of Vocation to make the Discontinued Service List (disciplinary) available to the public.

Making this list available to the public follows precedent set by other institutions and denominations, and allows communities of faith to perform due diligence on prospective minister. Where relevant, it also contributes to resolution for victims. The motion carried.

Regional Council membership

At the annual meeting of the 44th General Council, held October 21, 2023, the Council approved a proposal that encouraged regional councils to review their practices with a view of making lay members who retired as designated lay minister members of the regional council, as well as granting sacramental license.

Further consultation with the Manual Committee revealed that while the ability to grant sacramental license was clearly up to the regional council, granting membership required a change to the Basis of Union, section IV, 6.2.

Subsequently, GCE passed a motion to halt the extension of permissions to retired DLMs until General Council can address the discrepancy with the Basis of Union.

Global partnership

Staff of the General Council Office had facilitated an internal review of the Global Partnerships' program resulting in a proposed framework of "Radical Accompaniment," as well as suggesting areas of greater focus. While partnership grants in 2024 are being reduced by 25%, as approved in the budget, the partnership doesn't end, said Japhet Ndhlovu, Executive Minister, Church in Mission (CIM). UCCan maintains relationships and the partners continue to share their stories, prayer and advocacy. GCE passed a motion affirming the framework of "Radical Accompaniment" with its objectives and components and initiating a consultation process building on this review and recommendations, led by elected members, to envision and propose a global partnership framework to guide the witness of The United Church of Canada into its second century.

General Secretary and Moderator's accountability report

The General Secretary highlighted some key issues while inviting questions regarding his accountability report including:

- Urging GCE to engage with the strategic plan, holding staff accountable for progress towards the objectives through the implementation of the operational plan;

- Sharing concerns on the structural issues within the church that work against making change (“you become what you pay attention to,” he said.);
- Inviting the church to ask questions for better understanding rather than immediately laying blame or assuming ill intent.
- The challenges of budget constraint and the cyclical process of reductions;
- And the critical importance of leadership, including engaging in active recruitment. “We need to take leadership on inviting others to become leaders, not waiting for people to come seek us out,” he said.

The Moderator also shared her accountability report highlighting some of the changes to her [Flourishing Project](#) and the positive experiences she has had engaging with young people in the church. The Flourishing Project—with its congregational workshops, leadership program, book club and public events—is being well integrated with the strategic plan, particularly the work of the objective areas of leadership and growth. The Moderator concluded her comments by affirming Michael Blair’s dedicated leadership as General Secretary. Elder Evelyn Day blessed and prayed over the General Secretary and the Moderator.

Governance Committee

The Governance committee invited the GCE to reflect on the recommendations they had accepted from the Workflow Task Group, noting the need to continue to prioritize the governance renewal action plan pillars: purposeful, visionary, trustworthy and decolonizing leadership.

Letter to the Prime Minister

The GCE spent time reviewing the General Council Office’s response to the Israel-Hamas War and considering a drafted letter to Prime Minister Trudeau. The General Secretary outlined for the group some advice from government officials about the importance of collaborative advocacy, both with other churches or more broadly with other faiths or civil society, as well as the power of individual letters from United Church members. In-person meetings with government officials indicated that they appreciated ecumenical visits, such as the trips the Moderator made with the faith leaders of the Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches earlier this year on the issues of the illegal occupation and the siege on Gaza.

The [strongly worded letter](#) is signed by the members of the NIC, and the members and corresponding members of the GCE, was prepared in response to requests from partners in the Middle East.

The Centennial and General Council 45

The last session of the weekend focused on plans for the Centennial year, and General Council 45, which will be held in Calgary, AB, August 7-12, 2025. Some time was given to brainstorm

ideas to celebrate the Centennial, celebrations for which will begin in June 2024 and culminated in an official national service on June 8, 2025, before passing a framework resolution.

To prepare for GC45, the GCE must constitute the court ahead of time using a procedural motion. GC45 will be in-person with an online option; the manual requires full participation of all the commissioners at an in-person meeting or by electronic means; it will be the responsibility of the commissioner to accommodate the structure if they're not attending in person.

Regional Councils must have commissioners appointed/elected by late summer 2024, so there is time for them to be oriented.

To review the proposals and reports provided for the GCE for this meeting, go to commons.united-church.ca > Governance > General Council Executive > GC44 Executive (2022-2025) > Meeting Documents > 2023-11-17-18 GCE.