

Invitation to Conferences from the Comprehensive Review Task Group

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

—1 Corinthians 12:4–7

Dear Friends in Christ,

In February 2014, the Comprehensive Review Task Group shared [“Fishing on the Other Side.”](#) a discussion paper that sets out a vision for The United Church of Canada and some structural concepts that could help the church serve God in new ways. We invited presbyteries, districts, and equivalent bodies—of which many of you are members—to explore the concepts in the discussion paper between February and June 2014 and share their wisdom with the task group. We are delighted that nearly all of them have already had, or plan to have, these conversations. We are also grateful other groups and individuals across the church have taken the time to engage with and respond to the ideas in the discussion paper.

As Paul’s first letter to the people of Corinth reminds us, we are called to use our diverse gifts and strengths to build up the body of Christ in the world. “Fishing on the Other Side” reflects the task group’s belief that strong and vibrant communities of faith—both congregations as we know them and new kinds of communities—will be at the core of our church. The concepts in “Fishing on the Other Side” speak to strengthening individual communities of faith, calling out their autonomy, and respecting their wisdom. They also reflect our belief that church structures should build up the body of Christ by supporting and enabling the gifts of individual communities of faith, while nurturing relationships and connections between them.

Borrowing Hamilton Conference’s 2014 theme, “Trust God; Trust the Body,” the following material invites your Conference to consider how, in a renewed structure, The United Church of Canada could best use the varieties of our gifts, services, and activities to build up the body. You will be asked to consider how our resources would be shared to strengthen one another and to be more than the sum of our individual parts. You will be asked to consider how we would establish standards for communities and be accountable to one another. You will be asked to consider how we would come together to speak against injustice and work together for wholeness both at home and around the world. You will also be asked how regional priorities could best be lived out in a new structure. As you gather in community, we invite your Conference to explore the concepts in these materials and share with us your experience and wisdom in these areas.

Other key areas, such as ministry leadership, membership, and theological education, are already being capably addressed by other committees and task groups. We are in close contact with these bodies to share information, research, and thinking, and to coordinate our work wherever possible. We are also journeying with the Aboriginal Ministries Council and the Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools Committee as they discern principles, processes, and structures that affirm the future of ministry in their contexts.

As Paul tells us, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12).

Your conversations, along with wisdom we hear from presbyteries and others, will help build the foundation for the work we will do this summer and fall as we develop the draft recommendations we will share with the Executive of the General Council in November 2014. Based on that conversation, we anticipate offering our final recommendations in winter 2015 so there is ample time for the church to explore and consider them before the 42nd General Council gathers in August 2015 to make decisions.

Thank you for your time, wisdom, and prayers.

In Christ,

The Rev. Cathy Hamilton
Chair, Comprehensive Review Task Group

I. Funding a New Model

How we gather and use our volunteer time and financial resources has been a central discussion for the Comprehensive Review Task Group and will be a key part of the recommendations the task group will prepare for the 42nd General Council. This material focuses only on financial resources, and outlines

- how the life and work of the United Church are currently funded
- the issues and concerns the task group has heard about the current model
- proposed principles the task group wants to test with you that may point to a way to address the issues that have been identified

Context

The life and work of the United Church are funded in a variety of ways, including voluntary givings, mandatory assessments, bequests, investments, other sources of income, and using up the reserves. Currently, the four courts of the church receive income from the following sources:

Church Court	Funding Sources
Pastoral Charges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary givings • Investment income • Bequests • Other income, such as rental fees, etc.
Presbyteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments of pastoral charges • Other income
Conferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments of presbyteries¹ • Grants from General Council Office • Investment income • Bequests • Other income, such as sales of property
General Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voluntary givings to Mission and Service Fund • Investment income • Bequests • Other income, such as retail sales, etc. • Recovery of costs from self-funded programs (group health insurance and pension plans)

In 2012, the most current year in which statistics are available:

- Communities of faith generated \$400 million, including
 - \$254 million from congregational givings
 - \$ 13 million from United Church Women
 - \$133 million from other sources

¹ In Toronto Conference, communities of faith pay one assessment to the Conference, which distributes a portion of that money to its four presbyteries.

- The total income for presbyteries and Conferences was \$16.1 million, including
 - \$10.3 million in assessments
 - \$ 4.4 million in grants from the General Council
 - \$ 1.4 million in other income
- The total income of the General Council Office was \$37.7 million, including:
 - \$26.9 million in givings to the Mission and Service Fund
 - \$ 2.4 million in bequests to the Mission and Service Fund
 - \$ 2.1 million in investment income (including unrealized gains)
 - \$ 6.4 million from other sources, including retail sales and recovery of costs

The audited 2012 General Council Office financial statements showed an operating deficit of \$7.1 million for the General Fund of the national office, which had to be funded from the reserves.

In spite of these resources, many parts of our church are experiencing scarcity as membership continues to drop, givings and assessments decline and are further eroded by inflation, givers choose to share their financial gifts with a range of organizations in addition to the church, and the investment environment continues to be challenging.

What We Heard

In conversations with communities of faith, elected members, committees of the church, global partners, and staff, the task group heard clearly that

- the cost of the current governance structures of our church beyond congregations is not sustainable
- too much money is being spent on governance and denominational administration, and not enough on mission and ministry
- more transparency and accountability are needed around how the money is spent

Between 2002 and 2012, United Church membership declined by 26 percent, average Sunday attendance dropped by 38 percent, church school membership plunged by 53 percent, and givings to the Mission and Service Fund declined by 11 percent. Over the same period, the number of congregations declined by 565, or nearly 16 percent. Communities of faith across Canada told the task group that 27 percent of them expect to lose or need to update their building in the near future, and 31 percent expect to either close or enter a cooperative ministry with other communities of faith in the near future.

These trends are having profound financial consequences for both communities of faith and the larger governance structures they support. Based on past experience, congregational givings will fall by 1 percent to 3 percent a year, affecting both communities of faith and the capacity of local and regional bodies of our church to do their work.

Meanwhile, donations to the Mission and Service Fund, which is the primary source of funding for our denominational life, including governance, denominational administration, and mission, have recently been falling at a rate of 3 percent to 5 percent a year, and the General Council Office is spending more than it receives, resulting in it rapidly using up its reserves. This rate of decline in the Mission and Service Fund may increase given the aging demographics of its supporters.

As an interim measure, the Executive of the General Council approved a 2014 operating budget for the General Council Office that removed more than \$5 million in costs. This

reduction was reached through a range of measures, including a 17 percent reduction in grants to global partners, Canadian mission support grants, and Conference operating grants; a 15 percent reduction in grants to theological schools; and a 17 percent reduction in staff at the General Council Office, or more than 25 positions.

Significant cost reduction is required whether we make structural changes or not. If change does not happen, a further \$10 million in savings will need to be found in the work of the General Council Office and Conferences. Finding savings on this scale without reworking the current structure of the church would require major additional cuts to grants and staff layoffs on a significantly larger scale than experienced previously. Although staff layoffs are inevitable, a restructuring has the potential to maximize the resources directed to mission.

The downsized version of our current model that is focused on denominational administration and governance would not support the clear yearning the task group has heard for our church to respond faithfully and energetically to God's call to reach out to our communities, our partners in Canada and around the world, and our ecumenical and interfaith relationships to enable God's mission in the world.

The task group has also heard confusion about our current funding model, and a desire for more transparency around the Mission and Service Fund's role in funding both denominational administration and governance, and ministry and mission.

Proposed Principles and Assumptions

Based on what we have heard, the task group is seeking the advice of Conferences on a number of issues related to funding the structural concepts it has set out in "Fishing on the Other Side." The principles below are meant to address concerns the task group has heard about the cost of the current structure, the desire to spend more of our money on ministry and mission, and the need for more transparency.

In "Fishing on the Other Side," staffing would be reduced, but less so than if we do nothing. Second, in "Fishing on the Other Side," the focus of staff would shift from governance and denominational administration to providing advice and services. Third, under "Fishing on the Other Side," if the current level of givings to the Mission and Service Fund remain the same, then programs, grants, and staffing for ministry and mission could increase. As we go forward, are the following the appropriate principles?

Proposed Principles for Financing

1. The size and nature of the activities of denominational staff, whether located at the national office or in the Connectional Space, should depend on revenues received.
2. The Mission and Service Fund should retain ministry and mission activities and be separated from governance and denominational administration to enhance the ability of Mission and Service to be a strong destination for donations while increasing transparency.
3. To increase accountability, funds for governance and denominational administration should be generated through assessment-based contributions from communities of faith based on their total revenue, excluding bequests and monies received for the Mission and Service Fund. The rate of assessment should be based on the funding requirements for the operations of the Connectional Space and the Denominational Circle. If the church were to adopt the concepts in "Fishing on the Other Side," staff have estimated that communities of faith would need to contribute 4 percent of their total revenues (less bequests and money raised for capital projects and for Mission

and Service) to fund the governance and services needed. Financing models with additional courts would be more expensive.

4. As we walk into right relationships with First Nations, we must develop a process for funding Aboriginal ministries. Discussions with Aboriginal ministries have begun and must continue.
5. Some presbyteries and Conferences have significant investments. These monies should continue to be used to finance activities in those regions.

Transition Costs

Fundamental change is difficult. Change will require information, new skills, and more technology. The task group acknowledges that the church must invest sufficient monies during the transition period to ensure that everyone is equipped to make the needed changes. Such an investment in the costs of change will ensure that our church will thrive.

Discussion Points

1. The size and nature of the activities of denominational staff, whether located at the denominational office or in the Connectional Space, should depend on revenues received.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

2. The Mission and Service Fund and ministry and mission activities should be separated from governance and denominational administration activities to improve transparency.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

3. To increase accountability, funds for governance and denominational administration should be generated through contributions from communities of faith based on their total revenue, excluding bequests and monies received for the Mission and Service Fund. The rate of assessment should be based on the funding requirements for the operations of the Connectional Space and the Denominational Circle. If the concepts in "Fishing on the Other Side" were adopted, staff have estimated that communities of faith would need to contribute 4 percent of their total revenues (less bequests and money raised for capital projects and for Mission and Service) to fund the governance and services needed. Financing models with additional courts would be more expensive.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

4. As we walk into right relationships with First Nations, we must develop a process for funding Aboriginal ministries. Discussions with Aboriginal ministries have begun and must continue.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

5. Some presbyteries and Conferences have significant investments. If these bodies no longer existed as courts, these monies should continue to be used to finance activities in those regions.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

6. Please identify any missing principles.

Your reasons/wisdom:

II. Relationship of Communities of Faith within the Denomination

The Comprehensive Review Task Group believes the future of the church lies in communities of faith recapturing the vitality and energy of the early church at the time of Pentecost. Restructuring is important not only to meet the current financial realities, but also to simplify processes, avoid duplication, and free up the time and energy of members and staff for the vital spiritual and mission work to which God calls us.

In reviewing research from around the world, EDGE, a United Church network for ministry development, has identified the following characteristics of vital and growing ministries:

1. Spiritual vitality and practice (openness, groundedness, discipleship, evangelism)
2. Awareness of and responsiveness to the new socio-cultural context (new forms of worship and ministry, engaging younger generations)
3. Awareness of and engagement in God's mission of justice, healing, transformation, and love in their community (outward-focused, partnerships, collaboration, missional)
4. Clear vision
5. Adaptive leadership and organization

Placing greater responsibility and authority as close to the membership of the church as possible would contribute to the vitality of communities of faith.

Communities of faith could not do everything alone, but would need to be in relationship with other communities of faith and with the larger church body. Hence, a new decentralized structure would need to have in place mechanisms that would preserve the good things that already are happening and encourage and support movement toward greater vitality. This goal could be accomplished through a covenant that would spell out the roles of communities of faith and the denomination, mutually agreed-upon standards by

which communities of faith would operate, a reporting system that would indicate compliance with these standards, and a process for resolving difficulties and/or disputes.

The development of such a covenant would require significant work, but a preliminary thought is that if there were only “community of faith” and “denomination,” the responsibilities might look something like this:

Roles and Responsibilities

Community of Faith

- Determining the needs of its members and its community
- Organizing and carrying out actions to meet these needs
- Engaging with other communities of faith and community partners to address issues of mutual concern
- Generating income and other resources to support these activities and its share of the costs of the activities of the denomination
- Establishing a legal structure for the community of faith in which these actions would happen

Denomination

- Establishing the overall mission, doctrines, and policies of the United Church
- Facilitating with representative communities of faith standards for the operations of communities of faith
- Providing the infrastructure, education, and support systems required by communities of faith to carry out the mission according to the policies and standards of the church
- Engaging with other denominations and world partners on behalf of the denomination and its communities of faith
- Being the public voice on issues of common or national concern

Some Possible Standards for Communities of Faith

- Being in essential agreement with the doctrine of The United Church of Canada
- Committing to Christian service to one another and to people beyond the community of faith, including having links to a local and a global United Church partner
- Carrying out strong, theologically grounded stewardship
- Allocating a portion of ministerial staff time for activities of the United Church beyond the community of faith
- Supporting the operating costs of the denomination based on its income
- Maintaining a committee of trustees to manage the property and other major resources in accordance with the direction of the community of faith and the requirements of the United Church
- Operating within the employment standards, human rights, charitable standards, and other statutes of the local community, province, and Canada, and the personnel policies of the United Church
- Providing the information required by the United Church to indicate performance in regard to the standards
- Agreeing to comply with the dispute resolution mechanisms established by the United Church and the decisions reached

Reporting

Many organizations have developed quality review processes, the most effective of which are self-study and reporting as is required by professional accreditation bodies in human services areas such as health care, education, and child welfare. We believe a simplified version of such a process could be developed within the United Church to allow communities of faith to regularly track their activities against the agreed-upon standards. Ministers in covenantal relationships with communities of faith might file their own assessment. This information could be shared with the denomination as part of the annual statistical reporting used currently. Trend reports with some analysis and future plans could be prepared at set times (e.g., every five years), which could be reviewed with denomination staff for discussion and determination if some broader denominational or other support would be helpful.

Resolving Difficulties and/or Disputes

The best way for individuals or organizations to resolve difficulties is to self-identify them and seek assistance in dealing with them. Genuine loving concern by others can help with this identification process, but only if it is done in a way that does not try to direct or take over control of the situation. Individuals and organizations have the right to make mistakes and learn from these mistakes unless others are placed in serious jeopardy. This understanding would emphasize support and assistance rather than oversight, a concept we will be hearing about from presbyteries as they comment on “Fishing on the Other Side.”

Hence, if difficulties are self-identified, or if the data from the reporting process or concerns from other sources should identify difficulties in regard to a community of faith, we believe those difficulties should be addressed by denominational staff located in the regional Connectional Space. We believe that, in the vast majority of situations, this process would allow for the difficulties to be resolved.

If there were no resolution of the dispute or if the issues were significant and the community of faith disagreed or refused to take any action, the matter would be referred to an entirely separate denominational decision-making process in which an independent person would investigate and his or her report would be brought to a formal hearing committee, whose decision would be final.

If the denomination determines that the functioning of a community of faith is ineffectual, a commission could be appointed to carry on the functions of the community of faith, as is currently the case.

Discussion Points

7. Do you agree membership of communities of faith in The United Church of Canada could be defined through a covenant?

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

8. Do you agree the following are an adequate basis for such a covenantal relationship?

- Determining the needs of its members and its community

- Organizing and carrying out actions to meet these needs
- Engaging with other communities of faith and community partners to address issues of mutual concern
- Generating income and other resources to support these activities and a share of the costs of the activities of the denomination
- Establishing a legal structure for the community of faith in which these actions will happen

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom (including anything you think is missing):

9. Do you agree a covenantal relationship would maintain the accountability of communities of faith that is currently vested in congregational oversight and would free up time and resources for enhancing the vitality of communities of faith?

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

III. Social Justice

Doing justice is a critical part of the DNA of The United Church of Canada. Broader than its position on social issues, the church's justice commitment is rooted in a commitment to dismantling systemic issues of injustice and oppression. Our commitment to doing justice has given shape to the church's involvement in global, ecumenical, and local partnerships, and we have lived out our commitment through our voice, accompaniment, advocacy, service, and prophetic action. At the 41st General Council, the global, local, and ecumenical voices of our Partners Advisory Council called on the United Church to stay the course and do justice, speak the truth, and fear not.

Foundational to our commitment to do justice is partnership, a concept that is articulated in the first line of A New Creed, "We are not alone," and in the following affirmation in the 1997 report *Mending the World*: "Life in the 'whole inhabited earth' (*oikoumene*) is life in relationship. We are bound up with one another and with the world of nature—not just our kinfolk, or our kind." Therefore, key to our partnership is right relationship and mutuality. These relationships are built and sustained in a number of different spaces globally, ecumenically, and locally, and by different parts of the church.

The General Council Office maintains a number of global, Canadian, and ecumenical partnerships. Some Conferences also maintain global, ecumenical, and Canadian partnerships (for example, Bay of Quinte Conference has a relationship with Emmanuel Baptist Church in El Salvador), as do some presbyteries and communities of faith. Each part of the whole has engaged the partnership through actions (e.g., food banks, meal programs), advocacy (letter-writing, campaigns), or engagement. As our church moves into its new future, we want to imagine how we can continue to live out our commitments in a new context. How can we, as diverse communities of faith and as a denomination, engage through voice, accompaniment, service, advocacy, and prophetic action?

Partnership and Participation in Mission: Engagement

Based on this valuing of partnership and commitment to justice, much of our global and social justice engagement has come to rely on staff expertise to support and maintain these mission partner relationships.

We believe there are significant opportunities for engagement by communities of faith with church partners. Much of our work at home and around the world excites communities of faith. Therefore, we wonder in what ways communities of faith might be interested in engaging with partners (travel, listening, learning), and what the denomination could offer to support this work.

Looking ahead, we see two parts to building global relationships:

1. Working nationally, denominational staff would continue to be responsible for developing and maintaining relationships with partners in specific international geographic areas of the world.
2. Working more locally, communities of faith would connect with one another around common interests, facilitating direct contact with mission partners.

The priority would be for our engagement to promote mutual learning and deeper partnership. Global needs, and hence projects, would be determined together between partners and funded in part by Mission and Service and in part by the communities of faith as they see fit. There would continue to be a central point that communicates plans for fundraising for emergency relief. In addition, a communication network would share information and prayer among communities of faith.

The vision is of a new church structure that would empower individuals and communities to live into the church's justice commitments. Justice connections would be created for children, youth, and young adults to promote learning opportunities that would provide meaningful ways to experience faith and justice in the world. For example, a network of year-long internships could be established to provide work opportunities for young adults in a variety of areas, such as the environment, economic and global issues, music, and the arts. (The Episcopal Church in the USA and the Mennonite Church both have strong models for these kinds of internships.) Participants could bring these experiences back to their local communities of faith, offering transformative experiences for these communities.

Forming a National Voice: Advocacy

In the feedback from our early engagement, we heard a strong desire for our church to continue to have a national voice. We suspect that the idea of a national voice has a variety of meanings across the diversity of the church. What themes would shape this voice? Who would speak for the church? And how would we develop a process for speaking nationally?

In our current system, one of the ways the voice of the church has been shaped is by issues of advocacy brought to the General Council.

So, what if every community of faith had the right to develop proposals that could contribute to, shape, and seek a national voice? Such proposals might require the support of nine other communities of faith and/or networks. Committees and networks within the church would also be able to bring forward proposals.

For the purposes of refining and endorsing particular proposals, a committee, accountable to an executive of the denominational council, could ask for further information and

clarification, provide advice to the originating body, and combine and integrate various proposals if there is overlap.

The criteria for forwarding proposals to the denominational council would need to be established. Such criteria would need to be general principles and guidelines that ensure proposals are appropriate and ready for discussion at the denominational council.

The criteria for a proposal might include:

1. Is this an issue of national or global concern that requires a response by the whole church?
2. Does this issue involve key social justice concerns that call the church to speak with one voice to “the world” (for example, human rights, social/economic policy, First Nations and right relations, environmental, and international partnership issues)?
3. Is it a question of theology that affects the doctrine of the church (for example, statements of faith or criteria for ordination)?

The action of the denominational council could be expressed in a variety of ways:

- The proposal could simply be an invitation to the church to engage in ongoing conversation and discussion.
- A specific decision could be made, directed internally to the various communities of faith; or externally to the wider community, specifically to elected, governing bodies.
- Ongoing action could be recommended, including further education, advocacy, and program implementation.

We recognize staff and resources would need to be available to do the work. Consequently, proposals would need to include an estimate of the financial and staff resources that would be required to implement the proposals to ensure the denominational council could assess them in view of the church’s overall mission, available resources, and other priorities. The denominational council could revisit at the end of its meeting proposals that are expected to require significant financial and staff resources to prioritize, and even reconsider them in view of the church’s overall capacity. These priorities would guide the executive of the denominational council in making budget decisions between denominational council meetings.

Discussion Points

10. For an issue to be one on which the United Church speaks nationally, it should be of national or global concern and involve key social justice concerns (e.g., human rights, social/economic policy, First Nations and right relations, environmental, and international partnership issues).

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

11. At times, there is division and disagreement within the church after a particular position is adopted on a contentious issue. A higher threshold for approval (for example, two-thirds of votes cast) would provide more support for, and solidarity with, the established position.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

12. With denominational staff continuing to provide a lead role in coordinating global and ecumenical relationships, priority should be given to linking partners with communities of faith both to promote mutual learning and to empower individuals and communities to live into the church's justice commitments. Connections could be created for children, youth, young adults, and families for learning opportunities that would provide meaningful experiences such as internships, work, travel, and study in faith and justice issues in the world.

Strongly Disagree 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7 Strongly Agree

Your reasons/wisdom:

IV. Regional Mission and Ministry

In many Conferences across the country, regionally specific programming and staff support are offered. Some of this regional ministry brings services close to the needs and provides locally based services. Some of these ministries are long-standing, established by our ancestors, while others have been created as new needs arise. Some are similar to ministries that exist in other regions of Canada. This discussion is intended to explore the ministries that must be managed regionally because of the nature of the work being done. The following questions are offered as a result of a conversation with Conference Executive Secretaries and Speaker, and senior staff of the General Council Office.

Discussion Points

In Conferences across the country, programming and staff support are based on regionally set priorities. If we had a model with Connectional Space instead of middle courts:

13. How can you imagine these ministries being accomplished?
14. What kinds of ministries would need to be managed regionally?
15. How would priorities be set to determine which supports were most needed, and where, to support activities in the Connectional Space?