



General Council News

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Large Numbers Gather for the Opening of Council

by Christine Johnson

Record numbers of young commissioners and Moderator nominees will be among the more than 350 delegates gathering on August 11, 2012, for the 41st General Council of The United Church of Canada at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario.

There will be more than 50 commissioners under the age of 30. In addition, 15 names will appear on the ballot for Moderator, six more than the previous record. General Secretary Nora Sanders says, "Sometimes we hear people questioning, where are the leaders? They're all there, the full face of our church, and I'm really excited about that."

Over the next seven days, over 130 proposals for action will be considered by delegates, known as commissioners. The proposals come from different parts of the church across the country and from the Executive of the General Council. They deal with church matters, such as changes to the doctrine section of the Basis of Union, and social justice issues, such as the Northern Gateway Pipeline, Canadian mining in the Philippines, and Israel/Palestine. Topics related to church life will also be considered, including the situation of rural churches and how to fund General Council in light of diminishing financial resources.

All of the work before the General Council will be framed by the theme "Seeking Loving Walking/ Rechercher Aimer Cheminer" inspired by the passage from Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Moderator Mardi Tindal says this General Council will be a time for prayerful discernment, "listening to where the Holy Spirit is active in the world today and doing our best to align our decisions with God's Spirit in the world."

The church may be in decline financially, she says, but not spiritually. "Every time the General Council gathers there is a great deal of anticipation and excitement and a sense that what we're doing here matters because God so loved the world," she says.

For Sanders, this Council meeting is a time of change. "I think it's a time for us to think and pray about what's most important to us," she says. She cites "The State of the Church 2012" background paper as she acknowledges widespread discouragement about

General Council News Goes Green

Actually, *General Council News* will be going into red folders—but only one copy per table group.

Every day during General Council table stewards will deliver the latest edition of *General Council News* and place it inside the red folder. Commissioners are asked to not remove the red folder or its contents from the table. These single copies of *General Council News* are meant for everyone to share.

General Council News will also be available online in PDF format at gc41.ca for those who wish to print copies when they return home.

the financial situation of the church. However, she says, "I'm hard to discourage. Change is going to happen. That's not a choice. It frees you up to discern what changes might be wonderful!"

A highlight of General Council will be the election of a new Moderator, the United Church's spiritual leader. A record 15 nominees will be on the ballot: seven from Ontario, two from Quebec, and one each from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. The election is scheduled for Thursday, August 16, with the Moderator's installation service to be held on August 18. (Visit www.gc41.ca for an updated agenda.)

Also on Thursday, the commissioners will be invited into Open Space, a time in which all who participate can bring their own topics of conversation forward. It will be organized around the question "God has created and is creating. What movement is God creating in us today?"

For Tindal, all the work of this gathering is rooted in prayer, worship, and discernment. To that end, and as a way to personally keep healthy and whole, she says she prays not only daily, but more often, and remembers "that this is God's work."

In addition to commissioners, close to 300 guests, observers, youth, children, global partners, staff, and volunteers will be present. To fuel all those attending 42 churches from Ottawa Presbytery will be supplying muffins and cookies, says Barbara Reynolds, Co-Chair of the Local Arrangements Committee.

A mid-week break comes on Wednesday afternoon, August 15, when commissioners will have the option of participating in learning opportunities in and around the nation's capital. This includes an event in which the Moderator will join with Youth Forum participants for a vigil on Parliament Hill to pray for Canada's Parliamentarians and civil servants.



The United Church of Canada

Commissioners at General Council 40

Tips for New Commissioners

by Mary-Frances Denis

General Council News asked three commissioners who were veterans of three or more General Councils for advice to first-time commissioners. They had lots to say.

"There was a point, particularly at the first two General Councils I attended, where I had a complete sense of 'I don't belong here,'" comments Catherine Stewart Savage of Hamilton Conference.

"It is important that you remember that you were sent here for a reason. God was part of choosing you for this role," she says. "And once things get going, you will become too busy to feel this sense of loneliness. Remember that many of the people here are new, too, and that is part of the richness of The United Church of Canada's processes."

Table Group Tips

"Be prepared to listen for many voices," suggests Linda Parsons of Toronto Conference. "You may agree and you might not, and there are times you have to hold your tongue and not dominate the conversation [with] your opinions, which is hard to do sometimes."

- Don't assume we are all the same. Keep in mind that you cannot see many disabilities, economic levels, and facets of spirituality. Honour differences and treat others with respect.

- Take time to hear everyone in your table group, and share your views with them. Honour the confidentiality of the others.
- Try to be in your group when you are expected to be there, and let them know if you have something else you must attend to so they don't worry if you are not there.
- Pay attention to your fellow travellers at the table. It is fun to get to know people and their opinions. Find out how they are doing each day. If you have concerns about the issues or process, this is a good group to raise them with.

What to Look Forward To

"What I look forward to the most is the energy from everyone and meeting folks from across our church," says Bronwen Harman of Bay of Quinte Conference.

- Fellowship, discussion, and getting into the meat of the issues.
- Conversations that happen after the plenary. Also the work that you do within commissions.
- Reading the material and realizing how important your work is.
- Worshipping together.
- A chance to see other people with a commitment to the United Church.
- Hearing from all parts of the church, and not just what is affecting churches in your area.

How to Stay Awake

"If the conversation is enlightening, you don't want to nod. If you do, get up and excuse yourself for a few minutes," advises Parsons.

- Take a break when you need to; that is not being disrespectful. Or you can pinch yourself or drink a glass of cold water.
- Doodle on your pages with pictures and comments about what's going on.
- Eat well and take walks. Try to get a good night's sleep.

Time Management

"Read all the material ahead of time, but don't worry about making any decisions," comments Stewart Savage. "God will move in the court, and you will find that hearing from others as you pray for guidance makes decision making much more Spirit-filled than you might ever expect."

- Keep in touch with your Conference folks and your Executive Secretary, as they will help you feel at home and stay connected to things.
- Remember that people can be energized through many things, including times of worship, times of visiting with others, and times of personal reflection. Try to balance all of these in a way that suits you best.

Challenges

"The toughest challenge is definitely keeping up the pace. I seem to do that better now [that] I'm older and have become one of those young seniors I once envied for their staying power," says Harman.

- Business has a tendency to jump around a lot. Try to keep notes that will refresh your memory when Council comes back to an item.
- Remember that you are not an elected official required to vote as your constituency would like. You were elected to discern, in your own way, God's will for the church.
- It can be hard to get the folks in your congregation excited about General Council, to help them understand the issues and how important and life changing the decisions are going to be for all of us.
- Being heard and invited to share your experiences. It is an awesome feeling when you arrive at General Council and realize how important this work is and that you will be involved even after it is over.





Marilia Schüller

Global Partners, Ecumenical Guests Enrich Council

by Jim Hodgson and Pat Elson

United Church global partners and ecumenical guests are a lively part of every General Council. They bring their experiences of struggles for peace and justice into the Council's work. As corresponding members, they add their voices to table groups, commission deliberations, and plenary reflection, but they don't vote.

There will be eight global partners and six ecumenical guests at the 41st General Council.

"The inclusion of global partners is a part of United Church commitment to the principles of mutual respect and accountability," says Omega Bula, Executive Minister of the church's Partners in Mission Unit. "We value the opportunity to have global guests walk with us as we reflect on the past few years' work and deliberate on the future."

For global partner Johnson Mbillah, Muslim-Christian dialogue is the practice of peacemaking in conditions that are sometimes dangerous. In June, Mbillah—who works with the Program for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)—was in Jos, Nigeria, when a suicide bomber destroyed a church.

"PROCMURA is actively involved in Nigeria," he wrote in a text message, "and this is the second time this year that I am in Nigeria for building bridges of understanding. Each time coincided with bomb blasts. I have been in the thick of things this time round."

Like Mbillah, Marilia Schüller is returning for her second General Council. Schuller works with Koinonia, an ecumenical group in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Among her tasks has been oversight of a food security project sponsored by the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) and the United Church in rural communities near Rio.

Other global partners attending General Council include

- **Miguel Tomás Castro**, senior pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Salvador, El Salvador. Castro attended the 36th General Council in Camrose, Alberta, in 1997. His church also recently implemented a CFGB food security project in rural El Salvador.
- **Jennifer Henry**, Executive Minister of KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives—a global partner that works among churches and civil society networks in response to God's call for respect for the Earth and justice for all people.
- **Sunita Suna**, Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary of the World Student Christian Federation. Originally from India and based in Hong Kong, Suna works among 18 national Student Christian Movements across Asia and the Pacific.
- **Ramzi Zananiri**, the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches. He is a member of the Local Reference Group to the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel.

One other global partner will participate in Youth Forum at General Council:

- **Karla Mercado**, General Secretary of the Federation of Christian Youth in the Philippines and attending on behalf of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines.

In addition to global partners, Canadian ecumenical guests will be attending General Council. These guests "help us to see the work of General Council from the perspective of our commitment to whole

world ecumenism for the sake of mending the world," says Gail Allan, Program Coordinator for Interchurch and Interfaith and Ecumenical Officer. "They witness to our call to celebrate God's Spirit in people of different religions and ideologies."

Ecumenical guests attending are

- **Jonas Abromaitis**, representing the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Abromaitis serves the Conference as Senior Advisor for Ecclesial and Interfaith Relations. As part of that role, he supports the Roman Catholic–United Church Dialogue.
- **Jim Champ** of the Salvation Army, representing the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC). Champ is the recently elected President of the CCC.
- **Terence Corkin**, representing the Uniting Church in Australia. Corkin is General Secretary of the Assembly of The Uniting Church in Australia.
- **Victor Goldbloom**, representing the Canadian Christian Jewish Consultation. Goldbloom has long worked in the area of Jewish–Christian Dialogue.
- **Khadija Haffajee**, representing the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, a member organization of the National Muslim Christian Liaison Committee. She has much experience of interfaith dialogue, community activism, and global engagement.
- **Bruce Myers**, representing the Anglican Church of Canada. Myers is Coordinator for Ecumenical Relations for the Anglican Church. As part of that role, he supports the Anglican–United Church dialogue.



Witnessing to Our Faith on Parliament Hill

Commissioners who have not made plans for the afternoon of Wednesday, August 15, are invited to join Moderator Mardi Tindal and about 100 United Church youth who will be visiting Parliament Hill to pray for Canada's Parliamentarians and civil servants.

The 45-minute service of prayer and song is scheduled to begin at 2:15 p.m. People will congregate near the Centennial Flame.

"This gathering is intended to demonstrate the United Church's strong support for all those who have committed themselves to serving the common good as politicians and public servants," says Tindal.

Originally scheduled for Wednesday evening, this event was moved to the afternoon due to scheduling conflicts on the Hill. Commissioners already participating in one of the local events planned for that afternoon are invited to join, not with their physical presence, but by taking a few moments wherever they are to pray for our Parliamentarians and members of the civil service.

Ottawa-area church members who are not already hosting afternoon events for General Council commissioners have also been invited to join in what is expected to be a rousing event.



Centennial Flame, Ottawa, Ontario





The United Church of Canada

Moderator Mardi Tindal

Moderator's Letter Addresses Lobbying of Commissioners

by Mary-Frances Denis

In addition to the usual preparations for a week-long meeting, many of the commissioners arriving on August 11 in Ottawa for the start of the United Church's 41st General Council have also had to deal with surprisingly intense lobbying efforts. These efforts were the focus of a letter Moderator Mardi Tindal sent to commissioners a few weeks ago.

Tindal's pastoral letter was written after she began hearing concern raised by some commissioners about the many messages and questions being directed their way following the release of the report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy in early May. This report will be one of many agenda items to be discussed by the Council.

In her letter, Tindal reminded commissioners that "our decision-making will be based on information received before and during the meeting and, most importantly, on our common discernment as we gather as the Body of Christ."

Tindal says she wanted to assure commissioners that while there's plenty of reading, praying, and

thinking to do while they prepare for making decisions, they should not feel the need to determine or state a "position" before coming to General Council.

"We rely on Spirit's leading in our time together to make faithful decisions on every matter," she wrote.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Bruce Gregersen, the church's senior staff person who assisted the working group in preparing its report, notes there has been a far greater intensity to the lobbying efforts directed not only at commissioners, but apparently also to every United Church clergy person, including retired ministers.

Gregersen said that ministers who contacted the General Council Office with privacy concerns were assured that the United Church had not shared their contact information with the Canadian Rabbinic Caucus, the group responsible for a mass mailing to United Church ministry personnel. Gregersen says it's unclear how the mailing to potentially more than 4,000 individuals was done, but it's likely that a mailing list was created using a copy of the United Church's annual publication, the *Year Book & Directory*.

Another more recent mailing to all United Church ministers was initiated by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA). The purpose of this mailing was to publicize the results of an online survey that the CIJA had commissioned of United Church members regarding their attitudes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The executive summary of the survey results suggests that "the proposals of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy are in conflict with the views of the majority of United Church members."

Gregersen says the church has no way of verifying the validity of these survey results, but more importantly he adds, "In the United Church there never is the expectation that everyone attending the United Church will agree with all of the church's policies."

He also notes that the church's national office received more than 2,500 e-mails from people who either supported the report or were opposed to it.

"A selection of these responses, many of them positive, has been posted on the church's GC41 website," says Gregersen.

He adds that the church is also aware of a number of online petitions launched by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, and B'nai Brith. He says that based on the reports received from two of these organiza-

tions, there were 4,800 people who indicated support for the working group's recommendations and 5,400 individuals who said they were opposed to the report.

What Gregersen finds particularly interesting about all these lobbying efforts is that he's not sure that many of the individuals who contacted the church or signed these petitions are aware of the General Council's decision-making process.

"It's particularly important for people to know that the United Church does not make its decisions based on popular opinion," he says. "That is why lob-

bying efforts like this, whether for or against a matter coming before General Council, may generate a lot of correspondence, but in reality, a flood of e-mails, phones calls, or letters is not the measure by which we make decisions."

The report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy will be discussed Tuesday morning, August 14.



Welcome To *General Council News*

General Council News is being posted daily on The United Church of Canada's 41st General Council website, www.gc41.ca. Individual news stories are being posted throughout the day. Each day a single printed copy will also be delivered to all table groups for commissioners to share. The final edition of *General Council News* will be available online within 24 hours of the closing of General Council on Saturday, August 18.

General Council News reporters will be covering the highlights and significant happenings of the 41st General Council, rather than recording everything that happens each day. All *General Council News* stories may be reproduced freely.

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