



General Council News

Ottawa, Ontario

Wednesday August 15, 2012

Vol. 41 No. 5

No Decision Yet on Israel/Palestine

by Kevin Cox

A contentious motion that includes a call to boycott products from Palestinian areas settled illegally by Israelis has been refined by the United Church's 41st General Council, but no decision was reached after a three-hour debate on August 14, 2012.

Commissioners heard impassioned pleas from leaders on both sides of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict before making changes to the wording of the 11-part motion, which will come back for consideration today.

Council received the report of The Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy after hearing from working group members David Giuliano, Thom Davies, and Barbara White describe their three years of work. This included a visit to Israel and to the occupied territories of the West Bank.

Their report was released in May and can be seen on the General Council website www.gc41.ca.

White acknowledged that there were early disagreements in the working group, whose report recommends the boycott of products from the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and also calls for Canada to show leadership in trying to broker an end to the occupation.

She said she was initially opposed to the boycott because she felt it wouldn't be effective.

"I am still somewhat uncomfortable, but I have been challenged in the group to ask myself the question 'How else can our church convey to Jewish and Israeli colleagues that something has to happen to

allow justice for Palestinian people and a healthy unfolding of a Jewish state for Israelis?" White asked.

Victor Goldbloom, Chair of the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation, told commissioners that the settlements in the occupied areas are not the only obstacles to peace in the Middle East. He decried the hatred of Jewish people that has been expressed in some schools and mosques.

He said peace in the region could be achieved if a Palestinian leader with authority offered to end the teaching of hatred and the suicide bombings and rocket attacks on Israel by Palestinians.

Goldbloom concluded that the working group's recommendation of the boycott would not achieve anything on the ground.

Ramzi Zananiri, Director of the Department of Service of Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches, told commissioners that the growing number of Israeli settlers in the 124 settlements on the West Bank are also demonstrating hatred towards Palestinians by denying them access to water and farmland and terrorizing families.



The United Church of Canada

Barbara White, David Giuliano, Thom Davies

He pleaded for the church to support the boycott of products from the settlements.

"It is time for the churches to voice their concern through other means than verbal solidarity... towards an active solidarity towards righteousness and justice for both peoples," Zananiri said.

General Council spent several hours wordsmithing the proposal. But the process speeded up after British Columbia commissioner Gerald Hobbs warned his colleagues that they were altering wording that had been carefully put together and balanced by the working group.

"We are spending a vast amount of time improving their words rather than debating the issues themselves," he said.

Some commissioners expressed impatience with the lengthy debate. But in an interview afterwards, Bruce Gregersen, General Council Officer for Programs, said the report has prompted a widespread debate on the Palestinian situation.

"This has opened up the conversation in the country. There are those who will say you should not have this conversation, that there's no legitimacy to any conversation that would undertake any criticism of the legitimacy of the settlements," he said.

"I think what we've done as a denomination is to say very directly that yes, it is appropriate to talk about this and we believe it's vital to talk about this."



Résolution sur Israël-Palestine : pas de décision pour le moment

Stéphane Gaudet

Les 350 délégués au Conseil général de l'Église Unie du Canada ont consacré la matinée de ce jour 4 au rapport du Groupe de travail sur la politique concernant Israël-Palestine. Aucune décision n'a encore été prise pour le moment.

Le président du Groupe de travail, l'ex-modérateur David Giuliano, ainsi que les deux autres membres Bar-

bara White et Thom Davies – tous deux de l'Exécutif du Conseil général – ont présenté aux délégués une résolution qui contient neuf recommandations, dont le boycottage ciblé des produits en provenance des colonies de peuplement israéliennes dans les Territoires occupés. David Giuliano a affirmé que l'occupation israélienne était « le principal obstacle à la paix et à la justice en Terre Sainte ».

« Ce rapport est le fruit de deux ans de travail. Nous avons rencontré plusieurs personnes afin de connaître leur point de vue. » Giuliano a ajouté que le Groupe avait fait appel au savoir d'experts en droit international avant de rédiger son rapport.

Barbara White a avoué avoir changé d'avis sur la question du boycottage. « Je pensais qu'un boycottage n'aiderait pas, et encore aujourd'hui, je suis un peu mal à l'aise, mais je me suis demandé : qu'est-ce que l'Église peut faire d'autre ? ».

Le troisième membre du Groupe de travail, Thom Davies, a relaté les injustices dont il a été témoin lors de son séjour de trois mois dans un village palestinien de 64 habitants, « entouré de trois côtés par des colonies de peuplement très hostiles ». Il qualifie la résolution de « modeste, ciblée et non violente », en précisant que celle-ci ne remettait pas en cause l'existence d'Israël ni sa reconnaissance comme État juif.

« Je ne peux imaginer que les membres de l'Église Unie veuillent acheter des produits fabriqués sur des terres volées », a-t-il conclu en faisant référence aux colonies de peuplement.

Deux invités, l'un juif, l'autre palestinien, ont été invités à donner leur avis sur la résolution et ses recommandations. Victor Goldbloom, président de la Consultation canadienne chrétiens-juifs, a d'emblée précisé que son désaccord ne portait pas sur le but (la paix), mais bien sur les moyens d'y arriver. Selon lui, l'occupation israélienne est certainement un obstacle pour la paix, mais ce n'est pas le seul, mentionnant entre autres les attentats-suicides et le refus du Hamas de reconnaître Israël. Il a argué qu'« un boycottage, même limité, demeure un boycottage », et que le document n'était pas réaliste. « Il n'y a pas d'alternative à des négociations directes. »

Venu de Jérusalem, Ramzi Zananiri, du Conseil des Églises du Moyen-Orient, a plaidé en faveur du texte. « Il y a 124 colonies en Cisjordanie. La confiscation des terres élimine la solution de deux

États : la Palestine est comme une tranche de fromage suisse. » Il a évoqué les les points de contrôle, les problèmes d'approvisionnement en eau et les inégalités économiques entre les habitants des colonies et les Palestiniens. Pour Zananiri, le but d'initiatives du type BDS (boycottage, désinvestissement, sanctions) vise à « humaniser » Israël, rappelant que des Israéliens approuvaient ce type d'action non violente. « C'est un geste de solidarité et de justice pour amener la sécurité pour les deux peuples et permettre un avenir meilleur. »

Après ces interventions, les délégués ont proposé des reformulations pour améliorer le texte de la résolution (et non des amendements modifiant le contenu). Les travaux ont pris fin pour la pause du midi avant que ne puisse commencer le débat de fond, si bien qu'aucun vote n'a eu lieu jusqu'à présent. La résolution concernant Israël-Palestine reviendra plus tard dans la semaine.



Moderator Nominees Speak to Council

by Derek Carlisle, Kevin Cox,
Christine Johnson

On August 14, 2012, the nominees for Moderator addressed the General Council at three different times in five-minute speeches. Here is an overview of what they had to say presented in the order in which they spoke.



John Lawson, a minister serving Rising Spirit Ministry in Guelph, Ontario, bookended his speech with the words "we are not alone" from A New Creed.

He called commissioners to prayerful discernment in choosing the new Moderator. Several times he asked the question, "Are we alone?" to which the answer "No" could be heard from the plenary floor.

Lawson said the church has been "broken open" by

women, gays and lesbians, and First Nations people, and "now we're being broken open to be an intercultural church." He spoke of being unencumbered by rules and regulations, of being less an Encyclopedia Britannica kind of church and more a Wikipedia church in which gifts are shared.

He said his dream for the church is to "fall in love with God again." Lawson suggested, "We might think we're too old for hot romance on the shores of the Rideau Canal in Ottawa." But, he countered, God is passionately in love with all people, and when Jesus asks "Do you love me?" our answer is "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."



Barry K. Pridham, a minister at Sydenham Street United Church in Brantford, Ontario, used the image of leaven, or yeast, which causes bread to rise, as an image of God's kingdom.

"It creates fermentation," he said, "a mysterious, uncontrollable, and powerful process through which things can change."

He noted that while leaven may seem insignificant, it's dangerous, and a little bit has the power to expand and completely transform the more stable dough. He said these "little bits" are what happens in the United Church in the work of United Church Women, the Mission and Service Fund, the church's efforts to be inclusive and intercultural, and environmental stewardship. When we ask the question, "Where is God?" Pridham suggested that God "makes things bubble and fizz and grow in our measure of flour."

Pridham told commissioners that he offers to the position of Moderator a life of deep conversion "within this faith community, the United Church, and my interaction with people of other faith communities and God's awesome, awesome, awesome world."



Ross Bartlett, a minister in interim ministry at Knox United Church in Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia, and a lecturer at the Atlantic School of Theology, told commissioners, "I am tired of despair because it freezes us in the past. It makes it impossible to imagine a future that will be better than where we were."

He said even the people of Israel wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt because it was what they knew, yet that's not possible because God calls us into the infinite mystery of what might be.

Bartlett said his theological students wonder why there is so much despair in the church when they see so many exciting new initiatives. "Instead of spending so much time sifting through the ashes of despair, you might celebrate the places where there's new life and new light and new fire because those places are all across our church," he said.

As Moderator, Bartlett said he imagines bringing forward "the embers of a fire of a church that believes that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for anyone who wants to hear it..."

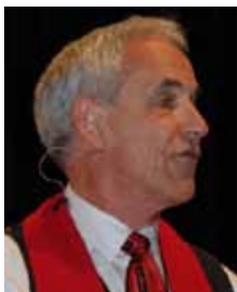


Paul Reed, a minister at Cambridge Street United in Lindsay, Ontario, spoke on the theme of strength in our unity and in Christ.

He told the commissioners that even in communities of abundance, church gatherings are experiencing isolation and fear. "We need to change," he said, adding that change will come from our relationship with God, a relationship that gives us meaning and strength.

Reed suggested that the church needs to engage its own youthfulness: "It's more than a Twitter account. It's a willingness to risk all for the sake of justice," he said. "It is believing in the goodness of this world."

When we give up our own self-interest, he said, we seek the well-being of the whole by honouring and valuing each person's gifts. "The role of leadership is to quicken our hearts to the sense of God as revealed in Christ... that we might not continue to be problem solvers, but that we will be vision builders." As Moderator, Reed said he would commit to sharing the stories of faith so the church will become stronger and will grow to be the church it is called to be.

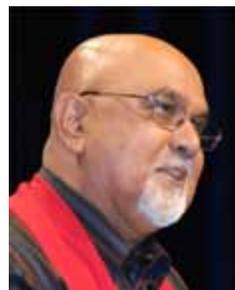


Gary J. Paterson, a minister at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, told commissioners that the church is living in Babylon, a biblical reference to a time of exile. "Our church is in trouble and we know that," he said.

Paterson noted that from the prophet Jeremiah we learn that God is an integral part of everything that is happening. Just as the Jewish people lost their buildings and discovered the power of synagogue, Paterson told commissioners there are new and exciting ministries already emerging in the United Church.

Paterson proposed two strategies for concrete action. The first would be a national every-congregation consultation about the state of the church, perhaps happening in the same six-week period. The second would be the need to continue to strengthen our prophetic ministries with vulnerable people.

"Times past we were really worried that no one bothered to listen to us when we spoke up. Nowadays, they're telling us to shut up," he said, adding that we cannot be silenced because we will be unfaithful. "Our prophetic voice is needed more than ever because we are in Babylon."



Moses Kanhai, former President of Saskatchewan Conference, said he sees the role of Moderator as conducting the business of General Council and its Executive and being moderate, maintaining balance in both calm and turbulence.

He called for an inclusive church based on the conviction that God is "the God of every single human on earth."

Kanhai said, "Until we really see everyone as fully equal in God's eyes, inclusivity will only be a vision, not a reality."

He said he supported the idea of the transformative vision of an intercultural church that also would seek partnerships with other religions and with people of no religion.

"We have a lot of work to do to bridge the gaps among many parts of the church, to rebuild trust among each other. I do believe that if we take ownership of the issue of our relationships, individually and collectively, then maybe we can become more united," he said.



Gary V. Clark, a minister at Blyth United Church in Ontario, told the Council he offered decisive and forward-looking leadership.

He said people in the

church are looking to General Council for hope as they struggle with withering congregations and closing churches.

"New hope has to be found this week so we can give it away," he said.

Clark deplored what he called "sinful competition" that pits different levels of the church against each other and against other denominations.

"That means we must go deep and commit to radical structural and attitudinal change in the church," he said.

Clark also rejected "remnant theology" that says the church can be better by being smaller.

He added that people in the church want to trust that they will have leaders in desperate times in the same way that the Israelites trusted their leaders in the desert as they fled slavery in Exodus.

"I know this is uncomfortable stuff to talk about, but if we don't talk about it this week, when will we talk about it, and will there be anybody to talk to?" he asked.



Jeff Cook, a minister at Transcona Memorial United Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, stressed the unseen and the unknown in his address.

He said that the church is aware of what statistics, charts, and graphs say, but there are many things that are not seen.

"God is up to something," he said.

He said the church may be called to be "a healing presence in a dysfunctional world."

Cook added that Jesus' disciples asked questions and frequently were given no answers, and the church today faces the same dilemma.

"How will we know if we can be successful and we can fix the church and fill the pews? You can't know," he said.

He called on the church to live out its vision of God's creation. "...It's God's soil, and air, and creatures, and that means it is the business of the church how the human creature interacts with the earth," Cook said.

He added that being a good leader means being a good follower. "If I am discerned as Moderator it would be my intention to invite us to live creatively in the good news/bad news times," he said.



Orville James, a minister at Wellington Square United Church in Burlington, Ontario, said the church is called to answer a spiritual yearning in the Canadian population and can answer that by proclaiming and sharing Jesus.

He said every Christian is called to be an environmentalist and a prophetic activist.

"My mission and spiritual leadership has been and will be to encourage and inspire and coach and lead Jesus' team towards faithful service and gentle witness," James said.

"I believe this is the direction our United Church is called to go, striving for traditional excellence and innovation in our worship and willing to experiment to reach new generations, stretching to alleviate poverty and homelessness in our world."

He added that he would love to travel the country as Moderator, "encouraging and empowering our congregations and all of our servant leaders to be this kind of church—that prays, that values its diversity and has Jesus at the centre of all its vision and ministry."



Tom Sherwood, a minister who is a former ecumenical chaplain at Carleton University in Ottawa, spoke of his roots in Ottawa as a metaphor for helping people find their way.

"I live in the here and now, with the Bible in one hand and a keen awareness of our dynamic social context in the other," Sherwood said.

He added that his ministry is to help others find their spiritual way in the challenging religious and social landscape of Canada in 2012.

"The United Church of Canada has been most effective when we express the timeless and eternal gospel in the specifics of our generation in society. But in this generation we struggle to be here and now."

Sherwood said moving forward with new ministries will mean letting go of past practices. He noted that change in society is accelerating.

"As a Christian I feed on change and I am nourished by it," he said, adding that he is also a reformer who knows the world needs the church.

"If we are not here, we are nowhere, and if we are not now, we are never," he said.



Arlen John Bonnar, a minister at St. James United Church, Montreal, told commissioners there is a vital need to continue sharing the meaning of biblical stories.

"We do need to tell our stories to hand on traditions," he said. "We do need to tell them to understand our place in the world. But we also need them to help us discern what our future will look like," he said.

Bonnar said the United Church is rich with the sharing of stories by individuals and groups, such as the United Church Women, Affirm United, youth and young adults, and "those on the cutting edge of our societies who are working for us in the two-thirds world."

He said if he were elected Moderator, French ministries inside and outside of Quebec would have his total commitment.

Bonnar outlined his plan to intentionally lead and join with United Church members through a comprehensive review.

"It is time that we started talking and listening to one another....," he said. "We do it not just to hear ourselves speak, but rather that we as a church move forward in a spirit of trust, hope, and mission."



John H. Young, a minister who is an Assistant Professor and Chair of the Theology Program at the Queen's School of Religion, Kingston, Ontario, told commissioners the Ottawa location of Council prompted him to reflect back on when the gathering last took place there in 1958.

"We are not the same church now," said Young.

Using photos from the 1958 Council and reflections from his late father, who was a commissioner, Young remarked on how the prime minister of the day, the late John Diefenbaker, attended one entire evening.

Young noted that today United Church members cling to the assumption that Canadians know anything about the denomination.

"We need unapologetically to teach the basics of the Christian faith to seekers who come into our midst. We need to lose our fear of evangelism, of sharing our story," said Young.

In addition to citing theologians who have influenced him, Young showed slides of his four family dogs that have helped him "profoundly understand theological truths" he said.

"We live in changing, challenging times. But scripture tells us our ancestors have been there before, many times," he concluded.



Sally Boyle highlighted the importance of seeking better access to the "source" in her speech.

She told the story of a mother of 12 children in rural Saskatchewan who longed to be connected to the power grid when lines were extended to farming communities in the early 1950s. With the help of neighbours with horses, the woman eventually moved her house out to the road so that it could be connected to the grid.

Turning to today, Boyle issued a challenge to United Church members to make changes out of necessity in much the same way the woman without power altered her situation.

"The job of all of us is to transform our communities wherever we are, [including] those small little churches which, indeed, we may wish to hook onto and move a little closer to the source," said Boyle.

"It is our job to look outside our doors and see that which needs desperately to be changed. I am prepared to begin a revolution in the name of Jesus Christ. Will you come with me?" she asked commissioners.



David Fines, a minister at Grandby United Church, Quebec, started his presentation by having commissioners join him in English and French verses of the song "Rejoice in the Lord Always."

He said that rejoicing in the many gifts of the United Church inspired him to stand as a nominee for Moderator. One of the gifts embraced by Fines is the support for intercultural ministries dating back to the 39th General Council in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

"Let us rejoice because since... Thunder Bay, the United Church has affirmed our intercultural commitment in which God is calling us to transformation as individuals and communities with all the traditions

and cultures we have been gifted with, and particularly mine, the French constituency of the church," said Fines.

He referred to the many times when the United Church has been prophetic in the midst of society, including granting rights to ordained ministry for women, gays, and lesbians.

He concluded his presentation by asking commissioners to help make history by electing the first francophone Moderator.



Lisa Potter, a minister whose most recent charge was Pouch Cove/Bauline Pastoral Charge in Newfoundland, said a quest for greater religious understanding has taken her from her Christian roots into interfaith pilgrimages around the world.

Potter was inspired from a young age after observing all the children in her community head off to different religious-based schools in the former Newfoundland parochial system.

"There was many a fight that ensued over our different faith traditions," she said. "So in my young mind, I knew that something was deeply wrong with that. It sowed the seeds for what was to become my life's mission."

To seek out a greater understanding of Jesus' teachings, Potter began a pilgrimage of learning about other faith traditions, most notably Eastern religions and First Nations spirituality.

"As we touch one another at this deep level of the heart, we find ourselves moving from separation to unity, from contradiction to oneness, and from diversity to convergence," she said.

"Jesus tells...that we are not to put new wine into old wine skins, lest they burst. We need to be transformed, not merely changed," said Potter.

Task Group to Review How Church Works

by Christine Johnson

"Everything is on the table," General Secretary **Nora Sanders** said in her introductory remarks on August 13, 2012, before the 41st General Council approved a proposal to undertake a comprehensive review of how the United Church lives faithfully in God's world.

The overall task of this review will be to examine the vision and circumstances of the United Church and to develop a report and recommendations for the 42nd General Council in 2015.

Although the proposal passed, the reaction from the Council was mixed. Commissioner Anne Beattie-Stokes of London Conference expressed fear that the review would require more "navel-gazing" and that three years was too long because "it's pouring and we need to be building an ark now." The next speaker, commissioner Warren Vollmer of Bay of Quinte Conference, said that three years might be too short.

The last comprehensive review took place 10 years ago, noted Paul Stott, Chair of the Business Committee for this Council. He said that this is an opportune time to do some review and examine how we can do things better and more effectively.

The Executive of the General Council is directed to appoint a task group of five to seven people not later than its first meeting following this General Council.

Part of the task group's mandate will be to look at all significant aspects of the organization and operations of all United Church courts, including how they interact and connect. It will also be directed to prepare alternate models of program, governance, and staff structures as the basis for soliciting input from diverse voices across the church.

One revision that was successfully added to the motion came from commissioner Chris Ferguson, overseas personnel, who asked that current commissioners be directly included in the consultation process.

Dave Moors of Saskatchewan Conference asked if there would be a place for external reviewers. "We don't want to close doors to any possibility," Sanders responded. "Certainly in my mind that's one of the good possibilities."



The Manual Gets Simpler

by Christine Johnson

The Manual will now be simpler.

With the approval of the "Simplification of Church Processes" proposal at the 41st General Council on August 13, 2012, one dream of United Church of Canada staff lawyer Cynthia Gunn has come true.

"It's been a pet project of mine," admits Gunn. "When I applied to work as legal counsel 17 years ago, I boned up on *The Manual*," she says. "I thought it would just take an hour or two. I spent most of an entire weekend reading *The Manual* and I thought hmmm, I bet we could do better."

She got her wish to start working on the project in May 2010 when she became part of a five-member staff team mandated by the Executive of General Council to simplify *The Manual*. The team was directed to consult with the wider church to determine what processes of the church were frustrating. This led them to create a new framework to make the publication more user-friendly.

The proposal approved by General Council covered sections that are an updated redrafting of existing bylaws without any policy changes. More than 20 other changes require approval and are being dealt with in separate proposals before the 41st General Council.

One of the three guiding principles approved in this proposal calls for the bylaws to strike a balance between enough regulation for the church to function in a fair and orderly way and enough flexibility for church courts and people to be free to carry out ministry in ways that meet local needs.

Gunn says she's always been a big fan of plain language. "When I became a young lawyer I worked with a senior partner in a law firm who was one of the first proponents of plain language drafting for legal, business, and government documents and I learned a drafting style from him," she notes. It's something she tries to incorporate in all the documents she produces.

One of the issues with the previous manual, says Gunn, is the way it was added to over many General Councils, making it into a compilation of layers upon layers of information. The staff team worked on dissecting those layers and finding the policy at its most elemental level.

"We're very aware of making a distinction in the church between 'you must do this' and 'you should do it this way,'" says Gunn. This approach reflects the second principle approved in the proposal: bylaws must reflect the fact that mission is the church's focus and that policy exists only to support mission rather than as an end in itself.

To make sure the church's bylaws are consistent with general law practices, a law professor with experience in legislative drafting was consulted. The draft manual was also vetted by former Conference Executive Secretaries, theological professors, and other law colleagues. To view the draft manual, go to www.gc41.ca/background-material.



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.

General Council News is prepared by the following General Council staff and volunteer writers:

Reporters: Derek Carlisle, Kevin Cox,
Stéphane Gaudet,
Christine Johnson

Editor: Rebekah Chevalier

Designer: Christopher Dumas

Photographer: Dan Benson

Online edition: Bill Gillard

Video Producer: Kate Rodd

Video Reporters: Stéphane Gaudet,
Elizabeth Macdonald

Editorial Oversight: Dan Benson,
Bruce Gregersen

Newsroom Manager: Mary-Frances Denis