

DRAFT:

Strengthening United Church Advocacy and Engagement

Determining Advocacy and Engagement Foci for the next Triennium

*We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.
For the sake of the world,
God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.
In the church,
some are called to specific ministries of leadership,
both lay and ordered;
some witness to the good news;
some uphold the art of worship;
some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering;
some build up the community of wisdom;
some stand with the oppressed and work for justice.
To embody God's love in the world,
the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship
of all believers.*

-A Song of Faith

The people of the United Church continue to be, in concert with others, a contributing force for social justice in Canada and globally. When convinced of a cause United Church people raise awareness, join with others and contact members of parliament to ask for policy change. They are persistent in asking for change. This is a gift of the church to be honored, strengthened and supported. Given this capacity, the General Council Office has a responsibility to ensure that its advocacy and engagement programs and activities are faithfully and effectively designed.

Public witness has been defined as

“our way of raising our voices for justice, peace, and the healing of creation. Individuals and faith communities may speak out on behalf of ourselves, with our partners (Canadian, global, local), and/or in support of causes we stand with to participate in God’s transformative work of justice, peace, and love.

As a church, we can publicly and prophetically witness to God’s love by expressing our faith through prayer, vigil, art, song, contacting elected officials, presence, and accompaniment, among other ways.” -Live Justice Project

The Discipleship and Witness Cluster has the responsibility for coordinating at the national level the church’s advocacy with the federal government and coordinating engagement with people and faith communities in the United Church on social justice issues. As such, advocacy and engagement work from the cluster and different parts of the church, Canadian, ecumenical, interfaith and global partners nationally generally flows through the cluster if a broad cross section of the United Church is to be engaged.

Advocacy and engagement on issues of reconciliation and Indigenous justice are coordinated by the Indigenous Ministries and Justice Circle. Staff from that Circle liaise and collaborate with and Discipleship and Witness staff in this work. As the new self-determining Indigenous Church establishes its governance structures in August 2019, it will also establish its own justice priorities. While this report stands now as a reflection of Discipleship and Witness work, it seems likely that future reports might address the direction of advocacy and engagement undertaken by the Indigenous Ministries and Justice Circle.

Work for social change in Canada and globally must embody the church's commitment to becoming an intercultural anti-racist church through a continuous struggle against racism (The All May Be One, 2000). Critical questions include:

- How is the United Church intentionally intercultural in its movements, forms, ways and who is engaged in public witness? How are differences in power addressed?
- How do these actions embody the norms, principles and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples?
- How does the way in which the church engages in social change dismantle structures that entrench, sustain, maintain, perpetuate and create systemic injustice including white normativity?
- How does our work of justice become an act of justice itself?

Developing a Plan

At an operational level within the Church in Mission Unit, a clear process is needed for developing a plan to implement General Council Directions and General Council Executive priorities that enables effective and engaging advocacy and integrates:

- ongoing work assigned and in process from previous General Councils
- emerging advocacy arising from global and Canadian partnerships and opportunities at the federal level that fit within existing policy.
- constituent demand for advocacy and engagement on particular issues
- realities of staff and constituent capacity
- discernment of the unique 'voice' of the United Church
- an anti-oppression lens

As the new self-determining Indigenous Church establishes its own justice priorities, the above list and process would reflect this new reality and need for collaboration.

The plan will name 3 major advocacy and engagement foci per General Council Triennium.

The Church in Mission Unit across clusters will seek to engage holistically these foci drawing on the skills and resources of the unit across portfolios. The Unit will collaborate across Units with Indigenous Ministries and Justice, Communications, and other Units as appropriate. The foci will:

- Involve strategic discussions around outcomes, audience, messages, messengers and tools and/or
- seek to engage people from a variety of different engagement
- include worship materials, special days, stories about partner work, and advocacy options
- Use a story and rights-based methodology that draws on peoples' passions and deeply held values and moves people toward action worthy solutions
- enable networking and connecting of people across the United Church who are working on the issue
- make connections where appropriate between the local, regional, national, global
- seek to involve the diverse constituency of the United Church
- involve cross unit collaboration with Indigenous Justice and Ministries, Philanthropy and Communication

Non-focus areas will be still responded to on a secondary basis. This will involve:

- preference to communicate using social media vs. developing web content
- preference to refer to other organizations/partners where possible
- reflection on whether the United Church really needs to respond
- Resourcing with existing resources and/or partners rather than the creation of new resources
- Limited effort – in terms of creation of resources, audience, time spent responding and how we respond

This model will be evaluated at the end of this Triennium

Process

A small task group made up of 2 staff from Discipleship in Witness and 2 staff from Church in Partnership and the Executive Minister meet to develop criteria for determining the foci areas and a draft proposal to be reviewed by Cluster Leaders at their May meeting. The proposal will then be considered by Senior Management.

As a starting point the small group will consider the existing 2019 Advocacy and Engagement Plan prepared for Senior Management and determine foci within it.

Criteria for foci may include as a first lens, broad criteria such as work related to General Council [priorities?] or General Council Executive resolutions, within existing staff capacity and expertise, response to Canadian and global partner requests, among others. More specific criteria or second lens criteria could consider unique United Church voice/niche/role, timeliness, or impact.

Outcomes

- Focused communications to constituency and opportunity for engagement more deeply in a clear “basket of work”
- Increased ownership and clarity within Church in Mission of the Unit’s advocacy and engagement plan
- Increased response times
- More focused, integrated [rights-based?] advocacy and engagement initiatives that offer more entry points for constituents
- Possibilities for increased innovation and evaluation due to clearer focus
- Increased ability to “triage” work as it comes in and respond to evolving circumstances

Proposed Criteria for Determining Church in Mission Advocacy and Engagement Foci

Faithful: Does it embody (inspire us to live out) God’s call to be “a church with a purpose”?

*We sing of God’s good news lived out,
a church with purpose:
faith nurtured and hearts comforted,
gifts shared for the good of all,
resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,
fierce love in the face of violence,
human dignity defended,
members of a community held and inspired by God,
corrected and comforted,
instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ,
creation’s mending.
We sing of God’s mission.
-Song of Faith*

Imperative: What would it say to us about the church if we did not act on this? Is it an act of prophetic witness or critical solidarity to which we are called? In which case, we may seek partners to work with How important is this problem to partners/ those who are advocating with? Have they themselves identified it as a priority? Do they want/need our advocacy? Does it meet partners’ strategic (for example timing) as well as practical interests. (Lead with this!)

Unique contribution: Is the United Church well placed to take on this issue? Does it fit with United Church goals, objectives, vision and mission? Does the church bring unique values, perspective, or partners to a broader table? If lots of organizations and people are already working on the issue, does the United Church have anything to add? If no one else is working on it, would the United Church have impact working alone? Does the United Church have expertise and a good reputation in this field already?

Timeliness/Ripeness: impact/ effect/influence. Are there ways in which people of the United Church (as a part of an existing or forming coalition) could influence the situation? Is there a way in which they can have an effective impact on key decisions. Is the time right? (Note: this doesn't mean the church should only campaign on easy issues – the solution may be a long term prospect but ultimately it needs to be possible)

Inspiring How communicable an issue is this? Are community leaders interested in it? Is there reliable evidence as well as access to stories and visuals that draw in participation and communicate the case effectively? Will people be motivated by it? Does it plug into passions and deeply held values? Or conversely will it challenge deeply held passions and values?

Shared vision and goals: Are the advocacy partner's vision and goals consistent/complementary to the United Church's goals of systemic justice?

Constituent Engagement: Does this problem/opportunity offer opportunities for vibrant and active engagement of the United Church constituency? Does broad constituency interest and leadership exist? Do networks, or clusters, areas of regional activity exist? Is there capacity to liaise with and/or support this interest when it is no longer a Unit focus/priority? Is it realistic to expect an independent United Church network to form out of this engagement? What support would be needed?

Deepening and strengthening the United Church's commitment to becoming an intercultural church: Does this offer opportunities for engaging diverse faith communities engaged in advocacy? Does it deepen understanding and practice of what it means to decolonize solidarity? Does it challenge/broaden dominant understandings of what it means to do advocacy?

Staff resource: What capacity is needed to undertake this focused advocacy and engagement within this timeframe? Is there expertise to undertake this focused advocacy and engagement within this timeframe? If not, do we have the ability to acquire it? Even with focused advocacy and expertise there is still demand for responsive advocacy and engagement and ongoing programming.

Opportunities/risks: Does the United Church want to raise its profile in this area? Will it strengthen its ability to raise funds? Conversely does it present particular risks? Is the United Church able to plan for and address/mitigate the risks, eg risk to reputation? What is the risk of not acting