

PCPMM 16 Toward 2025: A Justice Seeking/Justice-Living Church

Origin The Permanent Committee, Programs for Mission and Ministry

The Permanent Committee, Programs for Mission and Ministry proposes that the Executive of General Council:

Receive the report “Towards 2025: A Justice Seeking/Justice Living Church” as an integrative report of the work of the PCPMM and make it available to the commissioners to the 41st General Council to inform their work and reflection on the identity of The United Church of Canada.

Background

The Permanent committee, Programs for Mission and Ministry, in reviewing its work through the 2009-2012 triennium discerned a common thread that linked each aspect of its work. Given its mandate to ensure that work comes before the Executive in an integrated manner it undertook and offers this report as one means of fulfilling that direction. The report will continue to serve as a working document for the PCPMM. It also believes that it can assist the General Council and its Executive I in their deliberations on the identity of the church.

A. Executive Summary:

Why an Integrative Report?: A Contribution to Discussions about United Church Identity & Preparations for the Church’s Centenary

This report being presented provides an integrative framework for four areas of work mandated by previous General Councils: Becoming an Intercultural Church, Commitment to Inclusion, Indigenous Justice and Right Relations and Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire. They have been knit together in an integrative framework because they relate one to the other, the

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completion of one is linked to another, and progress in one area strengthens work in another. Taken together they contribute to a unique and more holistic understanding of this area of the work charged to the General Council Office and other courts and ministries of the church, an area which could be named the challenge of being a “justice-seeking/justice-living church”:

Woven together these areas of work produce a new vision of a diverse justice-seeking–justice-living church engaged in the world for love, justice, and the integrity of creation, transformed from the inside out and from the outside in. It’s a compelling vision of a church willing to risk discipleship in today’s world and seeking to embody the transformation it has already proclaimed, open to and inviting others to join in and change the journey. It unites areas which have defined the United Church as a denomination—the apology to Aboriginal peoples, the honouring of diverse sexual orientations, and social justice, with new and growing areas of challenge for the church such as becoming an intercultural church, honouring all gender identities and our commitment to inclusion... It is justice-seeking in that it seeks to become a different kind of church in the future; it is justice-living in that it takes concrete actions to change and begin to live into that reality now.

The Covenanting for Life Working Group of the Permanent Committee for Programs for Mission and Ministry understands the development of this integrative framework report as being a key step in living out the church’s commitments made at the 2006 and 2009 General Councils to live faithfully in the midst of empire. It pulls together key areas of work necessary for the church to live out this commitment. As part of the church’s declared commitment to live faithfully in the midst of empire, they offer this integrative report as

- 1) a contribution to the church’s discussions of its denominational identity and

- 2) a proposal that being and becoming justice-seeking/justice living be part of an intentional plan to prepare for and celebrate the church's centenary in 2025.

B. 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.

("A Song of Faith" 2006)

From its inception, the United Church has believed that God cares about the world around us and calls us to promote love and justice in it. For example, in 1934, in the midst of the massive unemployment, poverty, and hunger of the Depression, The United Church Board of Evangelism and Social Service produced "Christianizing the Social Order." United Church ministers and members were urged:

"to put forth every effort to study and understand the existing social order... in the light of Christian standards; to arouse the Christian conscience when injustice and intolerable conditions are discovered; to seek through study and conference measures which appear most likely to alleviate the evils and prevent their recurrence."

The United Church has also been marked by a struggle to embody God's love for all within its own structures and life. These

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struggles have mirrored the struggle for full life within wider society by minoritized¹ or discriminated groups. As well, a growing awareness began in the 1960s about the ways in which humans' inherent "right" to dominion over the Earth was an environmentally destructive concept. New theological understandings emerged of our responsibilities to live as partners in Creation and to do advocacy for ecological justice. These areas of struggle within the church and engagement with the public sphere have been marked by a commitment to ecumenism since the founding of the church, and to interfaith dialogue and action that intensified after the appointment of the first full time interfaith position in the 1970s.

In 2006, the General Council approved "A Song of Faith" as a statement of faith [that] seeks to provide a verbal picture of what The United Church of Canada understands its faith to be in its current historical, political, social, and theological context at the beginning of the 21st century. It is also a means of ongoing reflection and an invitation for the church to live out its convictions in relation to the world in which we live.

It speaks of a church with a purpose. The preamble of A Song of Faith also asserts, quoting the 1940 "Statement of Faith," that "The church's faith is grounded in truths that are timeless. These truths, however, must be embraced anew by Christians of each generation..." The Song of Faith also clearly calls us to discipleship in the face of the injustice present in the world: As followers of Jesus, who believe that:

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign—
a commonwealth not of domination

¹ Describes social groups who have, based on economic, social, or other criteria, been defined as minor or in a subordinate position by social processes that benefit the dominant group.

but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.
He healed the sick and fed the hungry.
He forgave sins and freed those held captive
by all manner of demonic powers.
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.
He preached and practised unconditional love—
love of God, love of neighbour,
love of friend, love of enemy—
and he commanded his followers to love one another
as he had loved them .

Finally *A Song of Faith* sings of “God of the Spirit” “faithful and untameable” that moves the “human heart”, transforming us and the world. The church is to embody “the loving Spirit of Christ”.

In 2025, the United Church will celebrate its centenary. This will be an opportunity for the church to celebrate its history. It will be a time to assess what we have become and are becoming, how well we have embodied the call of the Spirit to be a church with a purpose and how our understanding of God’s mission has evolved. The time between General Council 41 2012 and the 2025 centenary offers a unique opportunity for preparation. This report outlines how a cross-cutting focus on becoming a justice-seeking/justice-living church could contribute to preparations for the centenary.

C. The Call and Context:

1. Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire

The report to General Council 39, “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire,” documents how economic globalization continues to destroy the environment and increase the pain and misery experienced by the vast majority of God’s people. The experience, analysis, and theological reflection of global and ecumenical partners describe the creation of a “civilization of inequality.” The destruction of, and continuing threat to, all life

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means that we are at a critical time for the discernment of the gospel as followers of Jesus. At issue is the liberating good news the church professes.

The term ‘empire’ is used to describe the ways in which power is exercised unjustly and causes suffering and disempowerment through interconnected systems that benefit a minority of people. Empire can be found in relations between states, international trade agreements, and institutional governance, including within the church as well as interpersonal relationships. It affects all levels of human relationships, and all people participate in empire in some way. “Empire” helps us understand that injustice is often caused by different systems working together in interlocking ways. It helps us to see how power is used, abused, or concentrated to benefit the minority through these systems. An empire lens helps us broaden our understanding and analysis, so that our actions, strategies, and solidarity contribute to transforming systems that oppress ourselves and others.

For example, when the case of a particular woman who has been beaten by her husband is viewed through the lens of empire, we understand that it is not only a personal act by an individual, but that it is made possible by a number of factors which could include: cultural norms that cast men as superior to women and normalize violence as a response by men, unequal access to well-paid jobs that may place women in a position of economic inferiority, the historical lack of response by legal systems to protect women, and the idea that what happens at home is a private matter and not a matter of public interest, among other factors.

General Council at its 2006 meeting confessed its explicit complicity in empire. The last Council meeting declared that:

- reflection and action for living faithfully in the midst of empire is integral to the ongoing discernment of the vision and purpose of the church
- The United Church of Canada seeks a renewed vocation for engagement in God's mission, justice seeking, and transformative ministry that will enable the people of the United Church to live faithfully in the midst of empire

The "empire" work calls us to "be nonconformist and transformative communities because life is not possible unless we undertake transformation that addresses the roots of injustice" (p. 48, "Living Faithfully," Ofelia Ortega.) We are not only called to become agents of transformation, but, as church, to be a space of transformed non-empire-like relations.

2. *Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools*

Transformation includes our Church's relationship with the First Peoples of this land. The 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples by The United Church of Canada confesses that "(W)e imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel" and concludes with: "(W)e ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed." To walk together in the Spirit of Christ requires a renewed relationship of respect, equality, trust, and justice.

The journey of living into that new relationship is broadening and deepening the understanding of the United Church not only of the damaging impact of the Indian residential school system on families, communities, and cultures but of the other forms of dispossession, domination, and injustice that have marked the colonization of North America. Most of those issues, such as unresolved land claims, unfulfilled treaty rights, social inequities, and racism, remain largely unaddressed. A renewed relationship of respect, equality, trust, and justice will require that the church

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stand in solidarity with those who struggle against the continued imposition and impacts of Empire.

The commitment to live out its apologies and into "right relations" will be a long term challenge and defining characteristic of the United Church for decades to come. Such a change in relationship may well challenge, at a fundamental level, the church's traditional role, self-image and understanding of the gospel. Is the church willing to wean itself from the benefits of privilege that come with being part of the dominant culture so that it can truly stand with the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed?" Can our acknowledgment that our understanding of "mission" has too often been imbued with a sense of spiritual and cultural superiority, and resulted in the domination, dispossession and destruction of others, provide the impetus to move us beyond words to actually change our behaviour while exercising greater caution in assuming that we are privy to God's "mission"? Can we use the term "mission" at all, given the historical baggage the word carries for those who have borne its negative impacts, and when the past understanding has not been fully unpacked, and there has been no inclusive process by which the word is "reclaimed"?

These are difficult questions for the church to risk asking as it looks towards 2025. Further, what lessons from our work on right relations with First Peoples can we carry over as we work to build right relationships with other diverse communities that have also experienced historic injustice?

3. *Becoming an Intercultural Church*

In 2006, The United Church of Canada made a commitment to becoming an intercultural church. The commitment was offered as a vision of transformation:

God is calling us to transformation as individuals, as communities, as church, with all the traditions and

cultures we have been gifted with. Not one thing will be left untouched in God's transformative power, including our culture that is the intersection of our beliefs, our values, our worldviews, our language(s), our customs, our traditions, our ethnic heritages, our memories.

The vision of transformation was offered for the whole church. Initially, however, leadership for developing the intercultural vision was given to cultural and linguistic minority communities, understanding that insightful leadership can come from those who have been marginalized.

In 2009, at the 40th General Council, a report was offered called "Intercultural Ministries: A Process of Church-Wide Transformation." In this report, the importance of transforming church structures and systems was re-named, and cultural dominance was identified as a challenge to becoming a transformed intercultural church. This report also offered reflections on transformation:

The anticipated transformation is such that it will change some of our ways of being church together. The church's processes, policies, and procedures will all be examined through an intercultural lens; this will, in turn, affect how we articulate theologies, how we make decisions, and how we proactively create spaces for diverse cultural groups to participate fully in decision-making processes within the church.

Becoming an intercultural church is a call and renewed commitment to transformation. To truly be a transformed church, based on justice, equity and the re-dress of power, several areas of the church will be affected. Becoming an intercultural church is both a vision of what we hope to become, and the process of our faithful response to this call.

Because our understanding of culture is broad—culture is often the shared and unspoken understandings in a group—our understanding of what intercultural means is also broad.

To become an intercultural church is to respond to the call to live together in intentional ways that engage in mutual recognition, respect, and understanding of difference; and, through intentional self-examination, relationship building, and equitable access to power, we as the church seek to be fully committed and faithful in our response.

Intercultural has to do with deepening our understanding of difference. It is grounded in commitments that the church has made—around racial justice, inclusion, equity, and as a justice-seeking church. It also brings us back to the very beginning of our faith. It is much broader than race and ethnicity alone; instead, it calls us all to change as we try to faithfully be the church.

Becoming an intercultural church moves us back to the very beginning of our faith. The Bible was written in the context of racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, and the early church was born in a space rich with multiple layers of difference. Diversity is central to our faith, and central to what it means to be called to be the church.

One expression of this is the "A Vision for French Ministries in The United Church of Canada," which was approved at General Council 40. In this report, in 2009, the United Church declared "that Francophone ministries are an integral part of the identity, mission and the vision for the future of the United Church" and committed itself to strengthening and expanding Francophone ministries.

4. **Commitment to Inclusion**

General Council 40 declared that in matters respecting doctrine, worship, membership and governance, The United Church of Canada is opposed to discrimination against any person on the basis of age, ancestry, colour, disability, ethnic origin, gender identity, language, marital status, place of origin, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other basis by which a person is devalued. (Commitment to Inclusion, General Council 2009)

And committed The United Church of Canada to journey to where there will be no discrimination in any aspect of church life and strongly urge each court, congregation and other ministries to embrace this commitment. (Commitment to Inclusion, General Council 2009)

By embracing this commitment, The United Church of Canada is affirming that it has heard and recognized the cry of groups historically marginalized and minoritized by church and society. It is a decisive step further into our commitment to live faithfully in the midst of the empire: we are committed to announce the good news of the Gospel of equality of all human beings and that all are invited and have a place at the table. To embody this call for equity and respect for differences within the body of Christ is foundational to our identity as a denomination. It moves us to transform systems and attitudes that produce injustice within the church and broader society and is part of our commitment to becoming an intercultural church where there is full participation for all peoples and all relate to each other in mutuality.

As part of this work, a national consultation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirited people in the church and allies is currently underway to identify the ways in which

heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia still exist as current barriers to full participation. This process will produce a report and specific recommendations to General Council 41 2012. In addition, the Trans/Gender Diversity Task Group is assessing the reality of this community and will present significant proposals at General Council for courts of the church to ensure the full membership of peoples of all gender identities.

D. **“A Real Change of Heart and Institution”**

“As followers of Jesus, we believe the church does not exist as an end in itself, but is a community of people that is invited to see glimpses of the work God is doing in the world and called to give it meaning and help it happen. We believe that God’s mission is about seeking and sharing abundant life for the whole world. As Jesus says in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

“Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action: The General Secretary’s Advice to the Executive of the General Council for Consideration May 1–3, 2010”

At this moment in our history we are being invited to reflect on the core elements of our denomination’s identity. The denomination is being challenged to explore questions such as:

- What is it that so defines us that unless we follow its leading, a core sense of who we are is undermined?
- What are those elements that make us distinctive as a denomination?
- What are those elements of our identity that invite participation from secular society?
- What are those elements of our identity around which we are able to build a movement of passion and energy to live out God’s call to us as disciples?

Indeed, the results of the United Church identity survey conducted by Jane Armstrong Research Associates in 2011 indicate that constituents identify faith translated into action at a local level as a key part of what it means to be United Church and see hope for the renewal of the denomination in the 21st century at the national level in a prophetic role. One in 10 United Church survey respondents indicated that “they had advocated on behalf of the church by writing to an elected official about a church sponsored issue, a rate much higher than that present in the wider Canadian population.”

As the General Secretary stated in her report “Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action,” the United Church faces a “profound moment in the life of our church.” The challenge is to refocus the church away from institutional survival, protection, and control and toward greater openness for movements in support of God’s mission. It invites us to “let go of structures and processes that do not advance, and may even hinder, God’s mission” and invites us into “into new ways of being and acting together.”

The report “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire” critiqued a United Church tendency to practice resolutionary theology in which justice is felt to be accomplished by the church by the passing of resolutions. It called for a “real change of heart and institution” a sustained new re-formation of the church energized by the Spirit and embodied in, among other things, the living out of resolutions already approved throughout the church and in our lives.” It argued that the path of transformation needed to live faithfully in the midst of empire could not be marked by resolutions passed, but what was needed was the living out and embodiment of these resolutions.

As a church we may feel that success has been accomplished once a resolution has been passed. However, especially in areas which

require us to change accepted practice, beliefs, and ways of being church, the hard work begins with efforts to implement the resolution. Transformation in the direction of God’s call of love and justice can be difficult, requires institutional will, an examination of root causes, and a vision held firmly during the years of effort it takes to achieve.

Preparations for the church’s centenary in 2025 offer an opportunity for us to live into this change of heart and institution, to refocus from institutional survival, let go of structures that hinder our discipleship in today’s world, and find new ways of being and acting together. It is an opportunity to be intentional about the changes we want to see between now and 2025 and the steps we need to take to get there. Key elements of becoming the church we want to celebrate in 2025 include working toward the commitments the church has made to be a justice-seeking and justice-living church as part of

- living faithfully in the midst of empire
- building right relations with indigenous peoples
- becoming an intercultural church
- eliminating discrimination within the church

E. Toward 2025: Justice-Seeking/Justice-Living Church

The different areas of work outlined above in this report present us with threads that are interconnected, that support each other. As stated earlier, the completion of one is linked to another; progress in one strengthens work in another.

The work of living faithfully in the midst of empire requires us to understand the forms and manifestations of systemic oppression in our day, to attend to the voices of those who are suffering including that of creation. It calls us to follow the example of Jesus’ resistance to the Roman Empire and resist, challenge, and build alternatives to today’s forms of empire. Consequently, as The United Church of Canada, a critical piece of the church’s

struggle to live faithfully in the midst of empire involves the continuing construction of a new relationship with Aboriginal peoples in Canada that calls the church deeper into the struggle for justice for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. “Living Faithfully” also calls us to embody life giving alternatives within the church itself, to transform ourselves. A key element of this call to embodiment in the church today includes the transformation into an intercultural church where the intercultural dimensions of ministries are a denominational priority in living out its commitment to racial justice, where there is mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation of all, and where racial and cultural power imbalances are re-dressed. In addition, progress to live out the commitment to inclusion made at General Council 40 2009 in order that we may reach a time when no discrimination exists in any aspect of church life is also a critical part of the church’s embodiment of a space that is an alternative to empire.

Likewise, other areas of the work outlined above are linked to one another. It is hard to imagine a church that is truly intercultural in the Canadian context that does not develop a new relationship with Indigenous peoples that addresses the dispossession and domination that they have suffered within Canada. The church’s commitment to inclusion: i.e. the elimination of “discrimination against any person on the basis of age, ancestry, colour, disability, ethnic origin, gender identity, language, marital status, place of origin, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other basis by which a person is devalued” is an essential element to becoming intercultural church and a key part of living into right relations with Aboriginal peoples.

Woven together these areas of work produce a new vision of a diverse justice-seeking–justice-living church engaged in the world for love, justice, and the integrity of creation, transformed from the inside out and from the outside in. It’s a compelling vision of

a church willing to risk discipleship in today’s world and seeking to embody the transformation it has already proclaimed, open to and inviting others to join in and change the journey. It unites areas which have defined the United Church as a denomination—the apology to Aboriginal peoples, the honouring of diverse sexual orientations, and social justice, with new and growing areas of challenge for the church such as becoming an intercultural church, honouring all gender identities and our commitment to the inclusion of all peoples. It is justice-seeking in that it seeks to become a different kind of church in the future; it is justice-living in that it takes concrete actions to change and begin to live into that reality now.

Some elements of an integrated vision of the United Church as a justice-seeking/justice-living church are:

- With others, the United Church seeks to construct relations that produce life, in systems, institutions, and practices. It challenges and seeks to reverse historic and still present relations of domination and oppression globally, within Canadian society and within the United Church. It connects those across the country and around the world involved in this struggle.
- With others, the United Church seeks to build systems and practices that honour and protect the gift of creation. It challenges exploitation, oppression, and destruction of creation locally, nationally and globally.
- Locally and nationally, the church struggles openly with the fact that we both benefit from and are oppressed by forms of empire. We seek to create alternatives and challenge exploitation, heeding the call of partners and those marginalized locally, nationally, and globally
- The United Church constructs new ways of being church so that all may shape and have a place at the table. It eliminates current practices that replicate relations of domination and

disfavour historically underrepresented groups and First Peoples.

- Equality among diverse groups within the church is produced through the church's lived practices of equity, respect, and justice. The full contribution and participation of those who have been historically underrepresented and minoritized in the church, including Aboriginal peoples, is part of the day to day workings of the church.
- Our practices and being as a church embody the respect for difference and foster true interchange among people of diverse identities—linguistic, cultural, racial, gender, sexual orientation, disabled/abled, deaf and hearing, settler/immigrant/Indigenous, members/adherents, and partners.

As noted earlier, the United Church has come to a moment when it is facing profound change which calls on us to draw deeply from the faith that runs through us and invites the church to risk boldly:

To locate ourselves in spaces of hope is to begin working beyond Empire. It is to create life-giving alternatives for everyone.... But for this faith to become reality we cannot wait for time to pass and for the governing powers to fall by themselves. It is necessary to begin to demonstrate in our perceptions, relationships, and communities that another world is possible; that other ways of living bring dignity and plenitude...through the extension of alternate symbols and lifeways, of which we are heirs.

Nestor Miguez, "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire," General Council 2006

It is important that the elements of a justice-seeking/justice-living church do not remain as ideals that we ascribe to and claim as part of who we are, but rather that we seek to define concrete steps necessary for us to live out these characteristics. In this time and

place, with who and what we are, with an understanding of the root causes of injustice in the world and our complicity in them as well as the barriers that those who are historically underrepresented and minoritized in the church encounter, what steps can we take to embody this vision? We do this, knowing that manifesting God's abundant love by becoming an agent of transformation in the wider world and by transforming ourselves, will not be easy. But we also know, as stated by the "Song of Faith," that God is the source of love and grace for this journey:

Yet evil does not—cannot—
undermine or overcome the love of God...
God transforms,
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,
to pray for deliverance from evil,
to work with God for the healing of the world,
that all might have abundant life.
We sing of grace...