

## GENERAL SECRETARY'S ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

**Origin: General Secretary**

### Executive Summary

I am grateful for the opportunity to account for the work and leadership I have offered as I have engaged my responsibilities as *“the senior staff and administrative officer of the General Council, its executive, and its sub-executive”* (The Manual, 2025, section D.4.2.3).

In this report I seek to provide a high-level overview of the work of the General Council Office as well as providing some insights on the broader life of the church from my perspective as the General Secretary. There are three parts to this report. This first section offers a perspective on the work of identifying a preferred future for the church, as well as reporting on Centennial Commemoration, the future of the National Office of the General Council, how we are managing finances and the ecumenical life of the church, the framing of some of the work of the office and an appreciation of staff and volunteers. Sections B and C are addenda to this report, providing accountability with regards to the Strategic Operational Plan and the global partnership program of the church.

### Working Towards a Preferred Future

The Permanent Committee for Mission and Ministry in its report—*Toward 2025: A Justice Seeking/Justice-Living Church*—to the 41st General Council, Ottawa, 2012, in a section entitled “A Real Change of Heart and Institution” drew on the words of the General Secretary to the Executive of the General Council, from May 2010:

“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 United Church of Canada faces both an uncertain and yet hopeful future. The church has been engaged in conversation about its future since the 39th General Council in 2006. Today, we are at a critical moment. There is no doubt that the number of people attending on a regular basis is declining—the latest statistic (based on 2023 data) places attendance at 110,000, and membership at 321,000. Starting with this 45th General Council, we will be inviting the church to engage in a churchwide conversation on a process called Towards 2035. Even as we engage in this conversation, a denomination-wide Strategic Operational Plan, Vision 2035, will be rolled out. Decline is not the last word!

We are aware that God is doing a new thing among us—we hear the voice of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 49:18–19),

“Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.”

In fact, with the General Council’s prioritizing of growth and leadership, supported by the work of our Growth Animators, we are beginning to see glimpses of the future. A few weeks ago, I visited Plymouth-Trinity church in Sherbrooke, Quebec. The service was in four languages—Swahili, French, English and Malagasy. It was a powerful and transforming space. The presence of migrant francophone and English communities are beginning to bring new life and transformation across the country. There are several initiatives with migrant communities that are being seeded in different parts of the country.

We are observing growth in several congregations; congregational and ministry leaders are imagining new ways of being the church and are reaching out to regional councils for assistance. We have invested in supporting leaders through the (Re)Generate program. Work is being done on cooperative ministry models and conversations with ecumenical partners; all signs of the new that God is creating, and it's exciting!

As the church continues to find its way to its future, the questions raised in the *Towards 2025* report are still relevant.

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?

As we answer these questions and become clear about our call to discipleship, we will be mid-wives of the new church and “restorers of streets to live in” (Isaiah 58:12).

### **The Indigenous Church**

The remit to establish the autonomous Indigenous church was approved and enacted by the church. The implementation and planning for the new structure have been delayed as challenges within the leadership are resolved. In late November, a special National Indigenous Spiritual Gathering (NISG) was held in Winnipeg to discern a way forward. The National Indigenous Elders Council (NIEC) has committed to assuming the role of leadership for the

church, until such time as an appropriate governance structure can be put in place. In the meantime, the Elders are working to set up a visioning group and develop a plan for consultation with the Indigenous communities of faith. It will be important that the settler church recognize that the communities are engaging in their work, and it will take as long as it takes.

Over the course of the triennium, I have met with the Elders Council along with the Moderator to gather wisdom and direction. I have also met with several of the circles to understand some of the challenges. Staff in Indigenous Ministry and Justice have begun to develop strategies to support and strengthen the communities of faith and plan for real property repair and development.

On the continuing journey of reconciliation, the Executive of the 44<sup>th</sup> General Council has approved a proposal to set up a Task Group to review the church's ongoing journey of reconciliation and to identify what necessary action might be needed including the possibility an updated apology, particularly in relationship to the unmarked graves.

### **Centennial Commemoration**

The commemoration of the Centennial provides an opportunity for the church to both open the treasures of the richness of its past and to begin to imagine its preferred future as communities of disciples. The national commemoration with the theme of “Deep, Bold, Daring” began formally with a service at Metropolitan United Church, Toronto (the site of the first General Council) on June 9, 2024, and will conclude on June 8, 2025, at Gower Street United Church in Newfoundland. The communities in Newfoundland joined the United Church before the province became a part of the new emerging Canada. With the recommendation of the Centennial Planning Committee, established by the Executive and chaired by former Moderator Richard Bott, communities of faith were invited to find the best way to mark this moment in their context. [Their creativity has been inspiring!](#)

There are three strands to the Centennial: commemoration, public presence, and a capital legacy campaign. As part of the public presence, two initiatives have been launched. The first is a provocative photo initiative and website—*A Place at the Table*—launched on Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2025. This is intended to invite Canadians to explore the United Church anew and find their place among our communities. The second campaign, *100 Tables*, will highlight the ministry of at least 100 congregations, featuring a table situated outside their church buildings which shows that community of faith's unique incarnation of the table fellowship of Jesus.

The capital legacy campaign is being rolled out and will invite people to consider legacy gifts to support the community of faith they love and the ministry of the United Church.

As a way of engaging the church and inviting new imaginative engagement, each month of the year, a [Centennial newsletter](#) has been prepared, focusing on a theme that has run through the

life of the United Church. After June 2025, the remaining months are turning to lesser-known stories of the United Church.

In this Centennial year, we continue to pray in the words of the prayer from the 2006 *Called to Purpose*, “God propel us into your future rooted in the richness of our past.”

### **Reimagining the Work of the General Council:**

As the staff leaders met for their annual retreat in November 2022, they made three commitments: (a) to lead from the future, (b) to be harbingers of hope and (c) to make data-based decisions. These commitments, coupled with the [Call](#) to “Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, Daring Justice” have shaped how staff have engaged in the work of the Council during the triennium.

Over the course of the triennium, the Executive approved a restructuring of the staffing structure of the General Council. The change in structure was to enable a more efficient and streamlined operation. Our Strategic Operational Plan has been the north star for the work of the office. The 2023–2025 Strategic Plan has reshaped the work and imagination of the staff and the church. Through the plan we have reorganized how we report the budget. Each objective has been allocated a percentage of the operational budget and can report on how the resources are being used and their impact. [Part B](#) of my report on the Strategic Plan provides a report on some of the ways we have lived under the plan. You can also find the annual reports of the plan on the new [www.generalcouncil.ca](http://www.generalcouncil.ca) website. This new site will eventually completely replace the formerly used Commons, and will be where governance documents related to the General Council and its work will be housed.

The Strategic Plan, and especially the work of the Growth Animators, has enabled us to be clear about the work of the Council. The staff presented a data-based research project to the Executive which compared data from 1992, 2023, and a projection to 2035. The research project identified a need for an urgent strategy of intervention to ensure a sustainable future for the ministries of the United Church of Canada. As it was a refocusing of the current Strategic Plan, it was named Vision 2035.

The Executive has directed that the efforts of Vision 2035 be a priority. Vision 2035 is the updated Strategic Operational Plan for the denomination. The 2023–2025 Strategic Plan approved by the Executive (in 2022) was for the work of the General Council office, and although regional councils were invited to participate, they were not required to do so. Vision 2035 is a churchwide plan for the staff and executive of the General Council Office and the regional offices. At its heart, Vision 2035 is to enable the church to live into the call to be a gospel people, a community of disciples seeking to embody the presence of Jesus in the world. It will draw on the Methodist understanding of connexionalism, requiring intentionality and a strengthening of the episcopal oversight of communities of faith by regional councils. New

investments will be needed, and a culture of experimentation and holding lightly processes which hinder nimbleness.

As part of leading from the future, the Global Partnership Program staff working with the United Church Partner Council began to reimagine how to develop a sustainable relevant program moving into the next century. Mutual radical accompaniment promotes Bold Discipleship, Daring Justice, and Deep Spirituality in global partnerships. A process for framing the next chapter of the program has begun with elected members, staff, and the Partner Council. A detailed report of the Global Partnership program can be found in [Part C](#) of my report.

### **Antiracism and Antiracist Denomination**

We continue to attend to systemic and behavioural challenges that impact the life of the church. Resourced by Adele Halliday, Antiracism Lead, the Antiracism Common Table has contributed to helping the church fulfill its commitment. For a full report of the work in this area and some of the outcomes, see the [report](#) in this workbook.

### **The General Council Office**

In 2012, the Executive of the General Council made the decision to partner with Bloor Street United Church in its redevelopment and relocate the national office to the site at 300 Bloor Street West, Toronto. Under the leadership of Nora Sanders, General Secretary from 2006–2020, conversation began with the leadership of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada about the possibility of sharing the office space. In 2024, the Principal Clerk of The Presbyterian Church, Victor Kim, the General Secretary of the Anglican Church of Canada, Alan Perry, and myself as General Secretary signed the legal agreement to share the 300 Bloor Street space as the headquarters of our respective national offices.

Construction officially began at 300 Bloor Street in 2023, and it is anticipated that the offices will be able to relocate by the fall of 2026. The current lease at 3250 Bloor Street West, Toronto will end in the winter of 2026, and with the uncertainty of the moving date to 300 Bloor coupled with the inflexibility of the current landlord, the Executive of the General Council approved in its March 7–9, 2025 meeting, the temporary relocation of the national office to 50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, the present home of The Presbyterian Church of Canada. This move will result in about a \$500,000 savings to the operational budget for 2026. We will vacate the current office at the end of 2025.

In addition to the offices, all three denominations' archives will also be relocating to the 300 Bloor Street site. The cohabiting of the three denominations will provide opportunities for partnerships and collaboration.

**Finances**

Managing the finances of the church continues to be both a challenge and an opportunity. We are grateful for the generosity of the people of the United Church for their continued faithful commitment and contribution to the work of the church.

In 2015, when the 42nd General Council made the commitment and directed the church to live within its means, it was clear that assessments were to support the governance function of the work of the Council (both General Council Office and regional offices) and the Mission and Service fund was to support the mission and ministry activities of the church. Several things have become clearer over the years, and perhaps impacted by the COVID pandemic, the work of the church requires more resources than what is available through assessments and Mission and Service.

There is a perpetual deficit on the governance side, which has led to ongoing discussions among the management team about how to reduce governance work. The assumptions of the costs related to the work of the Office of Vocation in 2015 was based on the proposed structure of a College of Ministers. The decision made by the Council created a more robust structure that had significant additional costs.

This triennium, we have explored whether living within our means involves both the checking and savings accounts. With the approval of the Executive and the support of the Financial Advisory Committee, we were able to draw from the reserves (about \$2M annually) to ensure that we had the runway to implement the Strategic Plan. Management, Executive, and the Financial Advisory Committee all agree that this is not sustainable.

Managing the finances of the church is a bit like playing Jenga; it is very precarious. The financial health of communities of faith, the decline in the number of congregations, compensation of ministry leadership including the annual cost of living economic adjustments (COLA), decline in Mission and Service giving, and the investment markets are some of the issues impacting building a stable Jenga tower.

The assessment rate has stayed consistent since it has been initiated. At this upcoming meeting of the 45th General Council, we will initiate some conversation with the church about the advisable challenges of adjusting the rate of the assessment. We will continue to work at addressing some of the challenges as we will be proposing to the Executive a triennium budget in September 2025.

As we continue to imagine new ways of engaging the work and seeking to remove duplication from the system, the Executive has approved a proposal to move the fundraising related to the Mission and Service fund from the church to the Foundation. Conversations and negotiations are taking place with the Foundation.

Internally, we continue to work at fine-tuning and reporting on the financial statement and budget expenses, and are thankful to Harry Li and his team for all the hard work on this.

## **Staff**

The United Church has been blessed with a committed, competent and resourceful staff team, both in the national offices and in the regional council system. I am privileged to work alongside these folks. I am grateful for their professionalism, sacrifices, passion, and collegiality. I want to take this opportunity to honour them and invite the church to celebrate them. With the approval of the Executive and the support of the Finance Advisory Committee, we have been able to maintain the staff team and, in some cases, add to the team. We have not had any reduction except for retirements. The stability afforded has allowed us to implement the Strategic Operational Plan.

The following are the members of the national staff leader team:

*Regional Council Executive Ministers:* Eric Hebert-Daly (East Central Ontario, Eastern Ontario Outaouais and Nakonha:ka); Treena Duncan (Pacific Mountain, Chinook Winds); Shannon McCarthy (Prairie to Pine, Northern Spirits and Living Skies); Peter Hartmans (Shining Waters and Canadian Shields) Faith March-McCuish (First Dawn Eastern Edge, Bermuda-Nova Scotia, Fundy-St. Lawrence Dawning Waters); and Mark Laird (Horseshoe Falls, Antler River Watershed, Western Ontario Waterways).

*General Council Office:* Sarah Charters (Executive Officer, Philanthropy and President of the United Church Foundation); Jennifer Janzen-Ball (Executive Minister, Theological and Ministry Leadership); Jennifer Henry (Executive Minister, Organizational Development and Strategy); Harry Li (Executive Officer, Finance); Alan Hall (Executive Minister, Shared Services); Japhet Ndhlovu (Executive Minister, Church in Mission); Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa (Senior Governance Support Lead); Adele Halliday (Anti-Racism and Equity Lead); Nicole Treksler (Senior Legal Counsel); Angelica Benalcazar (Director Human Resources and Payroll Services); Springwater Hester-Meawassige and Lori Ransom (interim Executive Ministers for the Indigenous church).

Over the course of the triennium, we had several retirements in the General Council Offices. These staff colleagues have been serving the church for a significant number of years: Shirley Welch, who began her work at the General Council in stewardship and latterly as administrative support to the Executive and General Council (39), Sheila James who served as receptionist from the days at St. Clair (35), Erik Mathiesen who served as Executive Officer, Finance (16), Patti Talbot serving the Global Partnership program (30); Ann Yohan (35), Diana Hacker (28) and Ric De Leon (34) who served in Finance (35), and Chris Dumas (35) and Claudia Kutchukian (22) who served in the Communications unit.

At the end of 2025, Alan Hall, who has served both as a volunteer on the Permanent Committee Ministry and Employment and as staff, and Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa, who has served as Conference Executive Secretary and Regional Council Executive Minister will be retiring.

We give God thanks for these faithful servants.

### **Volunteers**

The work of the Council is enriched by the dedication of volunteers. The Executive of the General Council has invested significant time this triennium, wrestling and discerning some difficult decisions. You can find out more about their work in their [Accountability](#) report which is a part of this workbook.

### **Ecumenical Engagement**

In the absence of an ecumenical officer, we have developed an ecumenical team made up of staff; each carries responsibility for maintaining the relationship with particular Canadian and global ecumenical partners. We have people of the United Church supporting the ministries of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Methodist Council (WMC), and the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), and relationships with the United Church of Christ, Christian Church Disciples of Christ (both in Canada and the United States), the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, and the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

We have been working to deepen and strengthen our relationship with the United Methodist Church. One of the impetuses for the relationship with the United Methodist is our engagement with Methodist migrant communities. We have also initiated a new relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM).

I continue to contribute to the global ecumenical community. In 2023, I was appointed by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches to be the Moderator of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). In that capacity I work closely with the program executive and chair the meetings of the Commission. In my role as Moderator, I also serve as a member of the Reference Group of the Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity, the group with a mandate to integrate the work of the Council.

For more accountability on the work of the General Council Office for the triennium of the 44th General Council, please see my reports to the Executive of the General Council and the two Annual Meetings of the 44th General Council at [www.generalcouncil.ca](http://www.generalcouncil.ca). You can explore the outcomes of specific pieces of work on the Tracking Sheet found [here](#).