

GENERAL SECRETARY'S ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

General Council 44 Annual Meeting

2 Corinthians 3:12 "Since we have such hope, we act with great boldness..." (NRSV)

As we begin the journey of commemorating the centennial, we continue to pray, "God propel us into your future rooted in the richness of our past" (Prayer from Call to Purpose). As we lean into the future, we continue to be in a season of discernment and experiment to catch a glimpse of God's action in the world and how we might partner with God in God's action. We yearn to live into the *deep spirituality* of Isaiah 58: 6-12, to care for those marginalized by political actors, economic policies and identity politics. We seek to be a people flourishing who are like "a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail," committed to rebuilding ancient ruins, the raising of foundations to repair the breach of exclusion and the restorers of communities.

The Call and vision invite us to explore the opportunities that lead us to *bold discipleship* as we engage in *daring justice*. Across the church we are becoming aware of communities of faith who are beginning to lean into these opportunities. Exciting experimentations are happening through the growth initiatives, over the coming months we will be sharing some of the stories. We are coordinating and interpreting the data points that are readable available to us, with the aim of developing strategies for how we continue to strengthen the whole. Indeed God is at work, propelling us into God's future.

As we remember the richness of our past, we grieved and celebrated the life and witness of the Very Rev. Hon. Dr. Lois Wilson, we are reminded of her bold discipleship and her tireless commitment to the call of justice by engaging with people of goodwill in the mending the world. With gratitude for her witness, and for the great cloud of witnesses we journey to the new. We also grieve the loss of Rev. Brenda Fawkes, a colleague and friend who has contributed to the nurturing of leaders for the church.

This report gives a bit of the overview of the work of the General Council.

2024 Annual Strategic Plan: As our overall strategic plan has completed its first year, we published the [full year report for 2023](#). Included in your package for this meeting is the first and second quarterly report for 2024, that highlights the progress on the first two quarter of our second year. A streamlined reporting process has meant more consistent reporting processes, showing an operational planning, implementation and reporting cycle better integrated within the organization. Also better integrated is the budget to the whole of the operational plan. We continue to support the development of annual work plans for staff, so that as we strengthen annual performance reviews there is a "what" as well as "how" of staff work to assess in the review process. As we have full reporting and budget integration in place, we will be turning our attention to the quality of our plans, integrating stronger evidence with the help of our new research and development (data) team, and strengthening our strategies.

We have a full staff complement, with all Strategic Plan positions filled. We are already feeling the increase in capacity as the dreams of the early planning process, such as those related to strengthening existing congregations or growing new congregations, are beginning to be realized in initial steps. All the Growth Animators are now in place, working actively with regions on their strategies for renewing and creating communities and inviting strong participation in The United Church of Canada. In January and February alone, Growth Animators met with 71 ministry personnel, 37 governing bodies (phone, online or in person), 16 communities of faith (CoF) and facilitated 31 conversations about Growth to some form of regional body. The focus of these meetings has been visioning, collaboration with other communities of faith (CoF), exploration of neighbourhood profiles, creation of renewal or growth strategies, and exploring practices of discipleship and invitation. Staff continue to develop possibility in 40 potential sites of new communities of faith (CoF) amongst migrant and diasporic and Francophone communities; close to ten are sufficiently developed to have leadership contracts to support their continued progress.

In looking at opportunities to more confidently invite people into The United Church of Canada, we are both shifting existing tools and developing new campaigns. A recent e-newsletter project is using research to assess the scope and focus of national church e-newsletters, considering where there might be possibilities to strengthen and focus content towards broader constituencies. As well, we are working with external partners to strengthen the visual identity (look and feel) of the United Church in communications and, pairing with the Centennial commemoration, to launch a public relations and media project that would raise the profile of The United Church of Canada in the general public. A recent opportunity tested this concept by engaging with the Stars on Ice Tour, where a 30 second video aired to all audiences throughout April and May inviting people to find community within The United Church of Canada. Our goal was to ensure that we are both known and offering confident welcome to those who share our values in action, or are seeking spirituality, purpose, and community.

Financial Planning: “Church financial management continues to involve managing greater variability and uncertainty in the current results as well as projecting potential future scenarios in support of an emerging strategic plan.” This would likely have been true without the pandemic but has been exacerbated by same. The financial management of the Church has faced significant challenges due to variability and uncertainty in current financial outcomes and future projections.

Historically, the General Council Office of the United Church of Canada has managed annual budgets by implementing cost reductions and tapping into reserve funds in response to the ongoing decline in Mission and Service revenues and rising expenditures in a high-inflation environment. As part of the implementation of a new funding model in 2019, the Executive mandated a commitment to 'live within our means'. This remains a key guiding principle for the Church's ongoing financial planning. This principle emphasizes the need for a sustainable long-term financial strategy that not only guides our ongoing work, but also aligns with our strategic priorities.

The plan to achieve financial sustainability unfolds in three phases:

Phase 1: Streamlining the Budgeting Process - In 2024, an integrated program budget framework was introduced, which consolidates all existing programs under one strategic plan. This enhances efficiency, transparency, and accountability. The implementation of this framework marks the completion of phase 1.

Phase 2: Comprehensive Financial Assessment - Currently, the General Council Office is in the midst of Phase 2, which involves a thorough assessment of the current financial situation. This phase includes assessing various financial reserves, understanding revenue assumptions, identifying trends, evaluating risk factors, and analyzing the implications of various expenditure categories. The goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current finances and set the foundation for optimizing the budget structure and spending, thereby aligning it more closely with our strategic objectives.

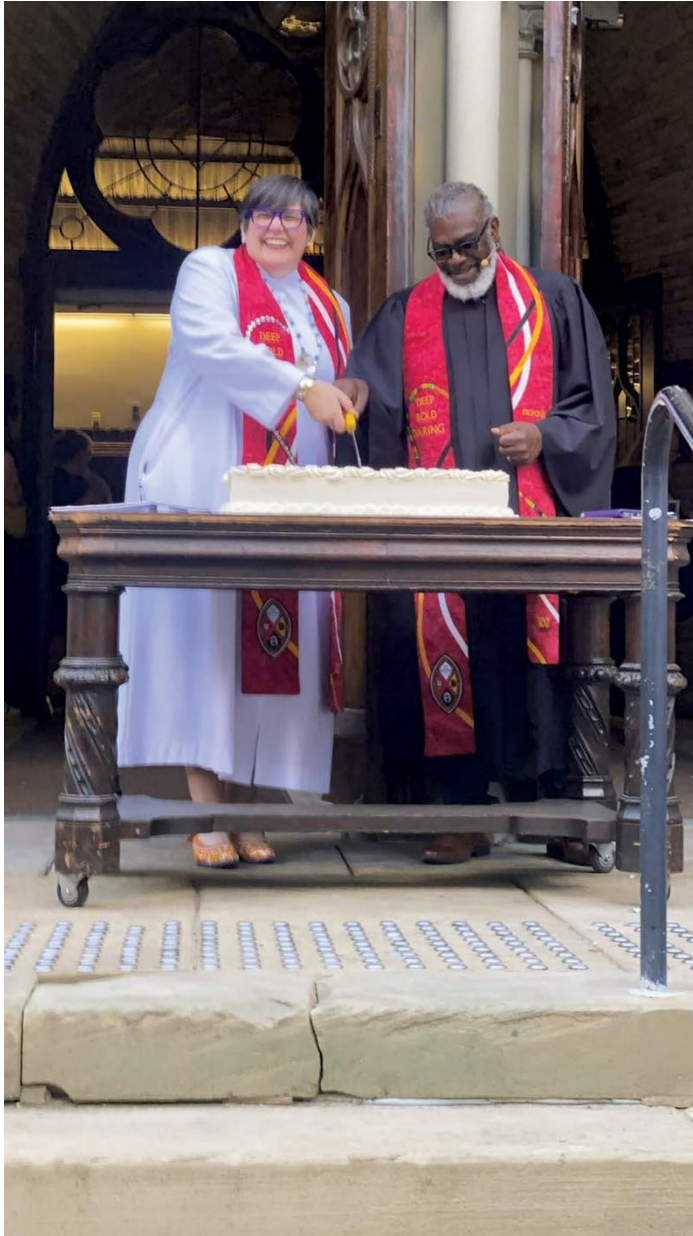
Phase 3: Expanding the Time Horizon of the Budget Cycle -The future Phase 3 aims to extend the budget cycle to a triennium basis. This shift will enable the Church to focus more on long-term outcomes rather than merely measuring current financial performance. Expanding the budget cycle will also promote greater efficiency and allow the Executive and management teams to better plan in alignment with strategic priorities.

The 2024 budget, ratified during last November's GCE meeting, marks the introduction of a fresh budget framework aimed at enhancing the alignment between the strategic plan and financial resource planning. As management progresses towards the final stages of operationalizing the 2024 budget and implements procedures to promote better financial stewardship, discussions concerning the financial plan for 2025 and beyond have already commenced. The overarching objective is to attain long-term financial sustainability, ultimately serving to best support the Call and Vision of the church.

We are grateful to the Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) for their valuable insight and support both for the work of Management and the General Council Executive. The members of the FAC: Jane McDonald (chair – member of the Executive), Michael Caveney (member of the GCE), Beth Symes, Jayne Brooks, Randy Manikel, Rob Stapleford, Shawn Bausch and Cathy Rushton. Harry Li and Mary Worrall are staff resource.

Centennial Celebration: Planning for the centennial is underway in accord with the direction given by the General Council Executive in November 2023. There are three streams:

a) *Commemoration:* The Centennial Committee, chaired by the Very Rev. Richard Bott, is helping shape the direction of these events. The launch of the centennial year (online and in person) began on June 9, 2024, with a worship service at Metropolitan United



Church, Toronto, a site close to the inaugural gathering at the former Mutual Street arena. An adaptable form of the service was announced on social media and available through the website in mid-April. A Centennial page for the website has been developed. The page includes a portal for ministries to share their centennial plans in a way that serves as both invitation and inspiration. Every month, since June 2024 until June 2025, a key moment will be highlighted on social media to mark and share our history. The goal is to curate twelve moments when the life of the church intersected with or reflected broader social themes which will enable this to serve as part of the second stream also. The 2025 calendar will note historic moments and include centennial stickers. While these may overlap with the historical moments noted above, this will also allow for more distinctly United Church memories. The date for the Centennial service itself has been set for **June 8, 2025, in St. John's, Newfoundland**. This will be the celebration to which we invite international guests. We have, in consultation with the Finance Advisory Committee, identified \$500,000 to be taken from reserves to cover the

expenses of the commemoration (2024-2025).

b) *External-Focused Communication and Action Plan*: A few possibilities have been discussed with concrete plans still being developed. The goal of this campaign is twofold: to introduce the distinctiveness of the United Church to those who have only a broad umbrella definition of “church,” and to reconnect with those who claim United Church identity but have lost connection.

c) *Fundraising/Capital Campaign*: The United Church of Canada Foundation has been researching possibilities.

Then Let Us Sing! The Sampler pilot period is ending and the building of a bilingual digital hymnal platform with over 1,300 hymns in multiple languages and musical styles has begun. This new online hymn resource reflects the diversity of God’s people and will be ready for you to use later this year. *Then Let Us Sing!* is also a proud recipient of the Calvin Institute Vital Worship Grant this year, with a focus on faith and identity formation through congregational song.

300 Bloor Street: The agreement with the Presbyterians and Anglicans has been signed. The expected date of occupation will be sometime in 2026.



Emergent Work:

Human Resources: A new human resources information system (HRIS) implementation has been completed and over the next few months it will be fully operationalized. 360 reviews were completed in the spring for General Council executive ministers and in the fall for regional council executive ministers. A 360 review of the General Secretary was completed. Manager and Director training were held on our refocused performance management program. It is designed to help us align staff performance with our strategic goals and objectives.

Ecumenical and Full Communion Update: In late November 2023, we met with our two full communion partners, The United Church of Christ (USA) and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ in the US and Canada) in Cleveland. The two-day hybrid meeting was graciously hosted by United Church of Christ colleagues in their newly renovated office space. Some staff from each communion met in-person for the two days, while other staff joined remotely for portions of the meeting. The heads of communion had met virtually earlier in 2023 and identified four key areas for further conversation and potential collaboration. These included: Korea Peace Accord and Palestine-Israel, Anti-racism and decolonization work, Ministry and lay leadership and Fundraising, stewardship, and property development

Staff with responsibility for ecumenical and full communion relationships in all three denominations were part of this initial meeting and developed a plan to involve key national staff from all three communions in the November meeting. One staff person from each communion organized the smaller staff groups, based on staff expertise in the four key areas. These smaller staff groupings met virtually a few times in the fall to build relationship, identify areas of shared work, possibilities for further collaboration, and existing resources that could be shared. The four staffing groups joined the meeting online over the course of the two days to share their work, invite questions and conversations, and potential direction for future collaboration.

The conversation also identified the need for some more intentional check-in and evaluation around how things are working – e.g. mutual recognition of ministry process – what are we learning from this, what could benefit from testing again? Also noted was the question of bilateral accountabilities – how we will continue to be accountable to each other, particularly as noted in our full communion agreements? The heads of each communion agreed to meet again early in 2024 to make some decisions about next steps for these four areas of shared ministry.

The relationship between the United Church of Christ and the UCCan is quite developed. One of the things we identified was the need for a bilateral relationship development with the Christian Church Disciples, especially in light of the bi-national nature of the Disciples.

Conversation with the United Methodist Church: We have begun a conversation with the United Methodist Church, particularly as it relates to the developing work with diaspora communities. One of the options we are considering is a formal Memorandum of Agreement. We will be engaging in further dialogue with the Council of Bishops.

The responsibility for maintaining our existing full communion relationships has shifted from Jennifer Janzen-Ball, Executive Minister for Theology and Ministry Leadership, to Japhet Ndhlovu, Executive Minister for Church in Mission, as part of the earlier restructuring of the General Council Office.

Emergent Work (Common Good):

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE): Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) online course – A 6-week SOGIE-PSRP online course is under development. The course is designed to provide United Church communities of faith a solid introductory understanding of the Canadian PSRP's Rainbow Refugee Assistance Partnership (RRAP) and an awareness of the international context in which the RRAP-PSR program operates when it comes to offering protection to 2SLGBTQIA+ refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) through resettlement.

Love, Faith & Bold Action Campaign: The 2SLGBTQIA+ program is planning to launch a campaign – **Love, Faith & Bold Action in 2024**. This multi-tiered campaign is aimed at garnering increased support from affirming ministries, global and ecumenical spaces, global partners and the Canadian government towards achieving tangible advancements in 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, including support for refugees. The campaign will include advocacy initiatives and strengthening refugee sponsorship and support, collaborations and partnerships on global 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, including addressing religious induced anti-2SLGBTQIA+ momentum.

2024 Climate Motivators: With Canada Summer Jobs funding we gathered young people from across the church to support the vision of climate justice and youth involvement of the UCC. Each motivator will work on a climate justice project related to a personal passion of theirs in partnership with a sponsoring community of faith. Motivators will choose a project within one of these four UCC climate response areas: Raising our Spirited Voices; Responding to Climate Impact; Getting Our House in Order; and Reconnecting with the Earth. The program and employment ran from July 8th until August 30th, 2024.

Mission and Service:

Mission and Service is tracking as expected for this point in the year. With a slightly quieter summer we have focused on strategy and plans for the remainder of 2024 and into 2025. For example, the Thanksgiving campaign has been launched, and the Advent and Christmas appeal is mostly ready. In terms of strategic directions, we are working in collaboration with the Regions to increase Mission and Service presence in annual meetings and other gatherings. We are revamping Gifts with Vision to be leaner and more focused in 2025 and have strong plans for engagement with donors who use Gifts with Vision to encourage increased Mission and Service givings. We are also planning to highlight the Centennial in our 2025 fundraising in a number of ways.

Stewardship: The discipleship work of financial and resource stewardship continues with strong enrolment in the Called to Be the Church: The Journey program. Deepening the work, the new program *Delving into Discipleship* is a collaborative pilot project between the Growth team, Philanthropy & Northern Spirit Regional Council. Five United Churches from south of Edmonton are putting together teams to engage in a year of learning. It is our hope that by the end of the year together, participants will experience transformation in their personal faith life, have a better understanding of the fullness of discipleship, and make an impact on the spiritual life of their communities of faith through deep engagement with the practices of discipleship. The first gathering will be in person. After that the full cohort will meet monthly over Zoom.

Special Campaign: Many of you are aware of and contributed to the special campaign to fund a retreat for Indigenous ministry personnel, particularly those serving in remote communities. The response to this campaign was phenomenal and we raised double the goal for a total of more than \$45,000. This means we will not need to draw on the Healing Fund to support this event leaving more grant monies available for other healing programs and projects. Thank you for your support of this crucial work.

Centennial Legacy Campaign: Preparations for the launch of the Centennial Legacy Campaign are well underway. We have scheduled two sessions for the Executive of the General Council which will also have the Foundation board of directors and the campaign Advisory Committee participating. The expectation is that the sessions will provide crucial information as well as the capacity to invite Communities of Faith to participate. The sessions will be held virtually and staff, including the campaign consultants, will be available to answer questions and provide support.

Risk Management: There are several risk factors that we are monitoring and managing which can have impact on the sustainability of the ministries of the church.

With the recent fires in Jasper and Kamloops we are monitoring the impact claims might have on The United Church of Canada Protect (UCC Protect).

One of the most significant risk factors is the ongoing post-COVID shakeout of congregational finances and their ability to call ministry personnel and maintain property. We are already noting the rising number of communities of faith who function without ordered ministry. Additionally, the post-COVID fallout presents a risk to both Mission and Service and assessment revenue. Financial sustainability is a constant challenge. This is mostly out of the hands of management. Monitoring the emerging issues and seeking ways to mitigate some of the challenges is the best course of action at present.

A related risk, with the loss of full-time call opportunities for ministry personnel has raised curiosity as to whether we are at the end of an era, and whether bi-vocational and collaborative ministry opportunities will become the norm.

The aging workforce, retirement of long-term employees and the loss of institutional memory, coupled with the hybrid working environment, and the need for more robust upgrade to technical skills poses a significant risk to the organization. Management is intentionally working on a succession plan for staff and exploring ways to build staff capacity.

The move to 300 Bloor and possible challenges with the current office lease and the timing of construction will require careful attention of the management team. Management is considering a number of options and will keep you informed.

The forthcoming Centennial commemoration provides opportunities to tell our story in new ways, and at the same time we need to monitor any reputational risks related to policies or actions of ministry personnel.