

MODERATOR'S ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

General Council 44 Annual Meeting

Siblings in Christ,

In answering the theme question for GC44, "Who do you say that I am?" – I love this image of Jesus as pioneer and perfecter of our faith from Hebrews chapter 12:

Hebrews 12:1-2 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..." (NRSVUE)

In the months since we kicked off the commemoration of our upcoming [Centennial](#), I feel very much like our church is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Elders who have gone before us watch with curiosity, joy, and perhaps some pain and guilt, as The United Church of Canada remembers its first one hundred years at the same time as we turn our faces towards the horizon of God to our next one hundred years and beyond.

Some don't believe there will be a next one hundred years of the church. The narratives of decline that have plagued us since the 1960's weigh on us like the potential of looming failure. Many communities of faith have closed their doors. Most regions of the church still struggle to support their communities of faith by staffing all of the former accountabilities of presbyteries. We are becoming an increasingly congregationalist denomination in ways that are both good and challenging.

Through the past two years, I've had the opportunity to travel across the country from (West) coast to (East) coast (not having been north of Whitehorse, yet I won't add the Northern coast of the country). I see the lingering malaise resulting from our restructuring accompanied by fear about what the decline of the church could mean for us and for our country. I also see many sparks of innovation, creativity, joy and new life. In fact, the church is a metaphor of the realities of immanent life and the ways we are languishing or flourishing in everyday life. In many ways, that feels appropriate.

It's within this context that the idea of running with courage came to me as a framework for this report. We are truly in a marathon of change management, working in God's eschatological time. Many of you might know that one of my greatest joys in this role has been walking alongside a group of 30 ministry personnel from across the church. This month at our third [\(Re\)Generate](#) residency, we learned from the fabulous [Mimi Gordon](#) about the infinite power of 1%. That is: 1% is 100% better than 0%. If we start with 0% change and we accomplish 1% change that that is infinitely better than nothing happening at all.

Rumbling with Mission and Evangelism

I want to start my reflections with an acknowledgement that I see the church rumbling with the concepts of mission and evangelism in a way that warms my heart more than you could know.

Many people in The United Church of Canada (at least in my circles) looked at me like I was crazy twenty years ago when I said that I wanted to study mission and evangelism in my post-graduate work.

I saw at once the devastating outcomes of the church catholic when the transformative power of the Gospel is put aside and the institution of the church gets co-opted by worldly powers. This is my view of what happened with the churches running residential schools, but we are also seeing a resurgence of this in both Canadian and American politics. There are some in Indigenous circles who are (rightly) calling for us to stop using the word mission altogether. And because of the way the church has historically been coopted by the settler colonial mindset (which predates the 'conquest' of the Americas and actually started with the Christian reconquest of the Iberian peninsula in the 1000's), we have wanted to distance ourselves from the idea of mission and evangelism over the past 50 years. A way I've talked about it in the church is that we wanted to throw out the evangelism baby with the destructive mission bathwater.

Last spring I heard the Very. Rev. Jordan Cantwell speak in their new role as growth animator. They talked about the good news of the gospel being like cake: When we enjoy a piece of delicious cake but we fail to offer it to those around us, that's just rude. And, when we enjoy a piece of delicious cake, and we decide everyone else should also enjoy it and so we try to force feed it to them, that is also rude. While the latter might be the colonial/supremacist/proselytizing historical practice of mission & evangelism, our former context of just not sharing is also problematic in living out our call to deep spirituality and bold discipleship. How do we talk about our faith in a way that is bold and invitational, without being coercive.

And – I think both because of that history, and the fact that many folks who grew up in The United Church grew up at a time when Christianity was normative. We largely didn't have to practice invitation. Our neighbours likely went to church – it was often just a matter of *which* church. If they weren't UCC then they were likely Anglican or Roman Catholic or Presbyterian or Lutheran, or evangelical.

A colleague and friend, the Rev. Dr. John Thatamanil at Union Theological Seminary in New York posted on social media this fall: "When Christianity is working, what we care about is the neighbour. When Christianity is not working, what we care about is Christianity."

Where I see this playing out in the church, is that communities of faith, ministry personnel, and regions who are primarily focused on solving the challenge of "How do we not close our doors so we don't have to close?" The places where I see growth and vitality in the church is where our ministries either remain focused or turn their attention back to "What is God doing in God's world and in the community around us, and how can we be an expression of how God loves God's world?" Italian economist Mariana Mazzucato says that we are most innovative and creative when we are trying to achieve a goal; that we are doing the things we've always done

when we try to solve problems. Thinking about solutions to problems means that we have already prescribed the box of tools we have. Trying to achieve a goal helps us to scan the horizon of infinite possibilities that God's blessed us with... it allows our love to colour outside the lines, and God takes us into places we've never seen before, and opens doors.... You know the tune.

There is a full spectrum of ecclesiology (our theologies of what it means to be the church), and the fact that these are conversations where we're rumbling gives me great hope. And it's not easy work. Mission and evangelism have both been weaponized throughout Christian ministry to establish norms defined by those in power, and to make marginal whole communities of people. They also, inconveniently, tend to deal theological with the heart of our faith and what it means to be disciples and to do Christian formation. And so I continue to hold the church and all of our ministries in prayer as we do this important work. My prayer is that we come up with ways to talk about these concepts and to practice ministry that is uniquely ours and embodies the best of who we aspire to be.

Ministry vacancies & creative solutions

In a recent discussion with the chairs/presidents of our Regional Councils, I was pleased to hear that there is more and more openness to different and creative forms of collaborative ministry. To be clear, I'm not pleased that the genesis of many conversations about collaborative ministry is generally coming from the need created from a context of crisis. But one of the regional presidents mentioned that the *openness* to collaborative ministry, ecumenical shared ministry, and even circuit ministries. While it comes from a context of challenge and/or crisis, it's exciting and hopeful to me to see the church finding (or returning to) creative solutions and dreams of how to be the church in this time and place.

If you're a part of the *Mod's Book Squad*, you may have read *Maximum Canada: Toward a Country of 100 Million* with us this fall. One of the things I really appreciated about this book is it reframed for me the political history of this country as it relates to immigration and especially the colonial settlement of land here. It framed for me a wider context that put into focus why rural Canada has continued to languish, and brought into relief that some of the church's problems are really also Canada's problems: we in many ways a microcosm of larger social and political structures in our country. For me, it made it a little clearer that we are not alone in struggling with the rural/urban differences in experience in being church, seeking access to healthcare, education and access to economic development. Maybe that's not a solution, but it does reinforce for me the words of our creed that, in fact, we are not alone.

Flourishing

Things have been going well with the implementation of the parts of the "Flourishing" project(s) I've undertaken since my installation:

- [The Mod's Book Squad](#)
- [The \(Re\)Generate Leadership Development Program](#)
- [The Flourishing Workshop](#)

In order to flourish, we must have a vision for the future that we want to create. Developing a vision starts with hope. In the flourishing workshop, the Growth and Ministry Development unit qualify that hope is productive *WHEN* it:

- Teaches us to dream in a way that inspires tangible action
- Engenders bold ideas
- Strengthens social fabric and belonging
- Catalyzes daring connections
- Creates a sense of purpose

We like to teach this idea of hope as a productive action, rather than a feeling. We are working to create a sense of agency and determination in the church to help us create a future where we envision the flourishing of the world God loves, and where we take actions today to help prevent or mitigate the future we don't want to see happen: oppression, marginalization, division, inequity, and dystopia.

One of my favourite economists whose work I read is an Italian economist teaching in London named Marian Mazzucato. She argues that, “[t]o solve the massive crises facing us, we must be innovative... We need to think bigger and mobilize our resources in a way that is as bold as inspirational as the moon landing—this time to the most ‘wicked’ social problems of our time.”¹

This fall at our (Re)Generate residency, the Rev. Tim Bowman of Gladwin Heights / St. Andrew's Pastoral Charge said: “I think sometimes we try to solve the problems we know how to solve.” When we work at solving problems, we prescribe our solutions before we start. The Flourishing Project in all its iterations is about getting us to start to exercise our imagination muscles in service of the liberative potential of the Gospel and to reshape the future to help bring about God's kin-dom here on earth. I don't want us to solely focus on solving the problems we know how to solve. I hope and pray that we can stay in a place of imagine and play, creativity and innovation, because that's where we live into our best selves as the humans that God loves as part of God's created order.

Centennial and GC45

Plans are well under way for both the 100th Anniversary of the UCC and General Council 45. I chose the theme “Visions and Dreams” because of the outcomes I set for the Flourishing Project, and I'm hoping that we leave the first General Council at the start of our next century with a renewed and productive hope about what it means to be the church. Reports from staff and updates to websites will be the best sources of information as updates get posted.

¹ <https://marianamazucato.com/books/mission-economy/> as accessed October 8, 2024.

Israel, Palestine & War In the Middle East.

Just after the Labour Day long weekend, many of us in the church received a copy of a statement written by a long-time staffer of one of our Palestinian partner organizations. It was from someone I have known and worked with for nearly two decades. The statement was full of despair. To hear this friend speak as if they no longer had any hope for peace or for the liberation of Palestinians was shocking. It made real in one more way the failure of the international community to hold itself, the state of Israel accountable to end the military occupation of the occupied Palestinian territories. The man that wrote that letter was also the first person to write me “Happy Birthday” on September 11 – a testament to the resilience and generosity of those impacted by war and trauma and the deep love and care they show for the world even as the temptation to dehumanize others becomes greater over time as this conflict rages on.

As the war on Gaza has ebbed and flowed in levels of aggression and violence, and now as the war intensifies and regionalizes, several things have become clear to me. I don’t post on social media often about the war, because I believe what Raja Khouri and Jeffrey Wilkinson wrote in [*The Wall Between: What Jews and Palestinians Don’t Want to Know About Each Other*](#), that Israelis and Palestinians and the Jewish and Palestinian diaspora are currently living in highly activated trauma responses. Our solidarity and advocacy responses to the war also need to be trauma informed. As someone who grew up in a household where multiple family members have PTSD, I know deeply from lived experience, that yelling at someone in frustration when they’re nervous system is activated in trauma is not effective. Not that necessarily most of us are yelling – but some of us are. And, trying to approach this conflict from a “both sides” perspective, does a huge injustice to the legal context and lived realities for those living under military occupation.

It has been interesting and uplifting to see the ways in which the principles-based approach has already allowed us to be nimble and responsive. It is clear to me that some folks in the church are not aware of the shift, and are angry at the perceived moves away from a policy-based approach to this particular conflict and other justice issues. I have witnessed very good work at all levels of the church in discerning where justice calls us to costly solidarity.

It is also clear to me that the church is not clear on some of its own history. More than once I have been approached by folks who have been heavily involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue who will cite [*Bearing Faithful Witness*](#) (our statement on Jewish-Christian relations approved by General Council 38 in 2003) as the basis for objecting to statements we’ve issued in the past year since new rounds of violence broke out and intensified after the terror attacks on October 7, 2023. To cite *Bearing Faithful Witness* as a reason not to take a stance of costly solidarity is in contrast with the document itself; the FAQ section of the [GC44 website](#) states:

The document notes that critiques of policies and actions of any government, whether the government of Canada or the government of Israel, can be valid. However, a caution is raised about criticism that can cross over into antisemitism:

Legitimate criticism, on the other hand, concerns itself with specific policies and actions on the part of Israeli leaders and governments, as well as the enduring problems and tensions of Israeli society. **Legitimate criticism is always able to distinguish between a regime and a people**, between what is transient and what is enduring in the history of a particular country.

And... the fact is there are some in our churches who still use “the Jews” to mean Israelis or the State of Israel, and have problematic, supersessionist, and antisemitic interpretations of scripture. It is clear that not everyone has engaged in the study encouraged in *Bearing Faithful Witness*. My prayer is that the church at the congregational level will take a both/and approach to deep reflection on the ways in which antisemitism and Christian Zionism are still showing up in problematic ways (both intentionally and unintentionally). And that the church will continue to organize and show up in prophetic and publicly engaged ways to say we are *not* antisemitic, *not* anti-Jewish, *and* support the liberation of Palestinians and the end of military occupation and a just and sustained ceasefire.

We have much work to do in learning about the roots of Christian Zionism, antisemitism, and how they are connected to Eurochristian Settler Colonialism.

We are also called to the principles-based approach to respond to the current political and military events, and to call on Canada and the rest of the international community to uphold international human rights and humanitarian law as legitimate criticisms of the State of Israel, and to centre the voices of the oppressed in this time and place.

There are a number of excellent resources through global and ecumenical partners that I’ve used to continue to engage my understanding of the conflict, which has spilled across national borders into Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. I have deep appreciation for the Church of Sweden’s [Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre](#), [Kairos Palestine](#), the [Middle East Council of Churches](#), and [ActAlliance](#) for Christian perspectives on the conflict. Many of you may also know of [Independent Jewish Voices](#) (Canada) and [Jewish Voice for Peace](#) (USA/Global). There are also good resources, including liturgies and prayers, on other church websites, like the [Presbyterian Church USA](#), the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), and [The United Church of Christ’s Palestine Israel Network](#).

I close my report with this prayer adapted from the ELCA:

For Peace²

You calm and quiet us, eternal God, as a mother holds her children close; all people have refuge in the shadow of your wings. Spread over us the shelter of your peace. Hold before us the

² https://blogs.elca.org/worship/8658/?_ga=2.227512980.825827673.1728432023-1277357748.1728432023 as accessed October 8, 2024.

wisdom of your cross, where we are drawn to you not by might or power, but by your boundless love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (*All Creation Sings*, pg. 48)

O God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to your church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts; through... Jesus, [love incarnate.] Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 76)