

**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**

Introduction

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. John 12:24–26

The 8,000 people who heard these words at the inaugural service of the new United Church of Canada in 1925 must have understood the paradox of a grain of wheat dying in order to bear fruit. In the excitement of their great new beginning, they no doubt felt the loss of some of the cherished traditions and familiar ways of their uniting denominations. Yet somehow, their hope for a stronger, faith-filled future helped them overcome their fear of change.

Now, 85 years later, we face another profound moment in the life of our church. I come to you with a message of great hope for the opportunity we have to embrace a future in which we will actively live out our faith in a changed and changing world. If we seize this opportunity, the result will be a church that supports, rather than stifles with regulation and paperwork, a church that enables people to live out God's mission in their own contexts; a church that calls to people who hunger for spiritual nourishment in the 21st century; and a church that is open to new workings of the Spirit.

I am excited about the ideas presented in this report. I care deeply about the United Church, past, present, and future, so I also understand the significance of the changes I am proposing. Like many of you, I feel the losses that some of these changes would entail.

Life continually forces us to make choices between imperfect, or imperfectly understood, options. We never feel as if we know enough or have enough information. Scripture calls us to be bold in our vision, to try things that seem impossible, and to turn to God for guidance and comfort in times of uncertainty.

What Brought Us to This Place

Late last year, you, through the Sub-Executive, directed me to prepare a planning document that sets out three distinct options for the church for the next three years. The immediate impetus for developing these options was a budget projection that showed the General Council Office needed to reduce spending by a total of \$6.5 million in the period 2011–13. Just a few months later, I am concerned that projection may not be realistic enough. The best current advice is that we likely need to save \$3 million per year over the triennium. If we maintain the status quo, the gap between our revenues and expenditures will likely be larger by the end of the triennium.

The need to reduce expenditures forced us into a process of review. This was a blessing in disguise. We called the process "triennium planning," but it quickly became evident that we had to think about the longer term in order to understand what needs to be accomplished in the next three years. It also became apparent that the challenge of our time is not just money. The conversations that emerged during this process have been about who we are as the United Church; what it means to be a church, and Christian, in Canada today; and what we need to do

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

to reflect actively God's work in the world as the world continues to change. We have talked about money, too—both the need to conserve it, and opportunities to raise more of it—but that discussion has taken place within a larger conversation.

The General Council budget is a theological statement about our identity as a church, how we see our role in God's mission for the world, and where we are headed as a community of faith. Our budget processes exist to serve the church in fulfilling God's mission.

The beginning of our understanding of that mission is our understanding that everything that has been created is a gift from God. That understanding underlies the earliest expression of the faith preserved in the Hebrew scriptures, and is further developed through our recognition of the profound gift of God's gracious presence in Jesus Christ. 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."

This report expresses a vision for our church that seeks to commit financial and staff resources in ways that model faithfulness, creativity, transformation, collaboration, justice, sustainability, and our belief in God's abundance.

This planning process presented rich opportunities to think deeply about the challenges the United Church is facing and imagine new ways of being church together as we look ahead to the church's 100th anniversary in 2025. These challenges are well known. They include declining membership, aging congregations and ministers, eroding finances, and a model of ministry and mission that has failed to engage the spiritual yearnings of many young people. Many Canadians find community in workplaces, book clubs, sports teams, and Facebook, but church simply is not on their radar. As the *Alban Weekly* noted recently, churches have been "to paraphrase the words of Martin Luther King Jr., a 'taillight' rather than a 'headlight' in illuminating the pathway to spiritual vitality and wholeness for our time."¹

The United Church is not alone in these challenges. Most mainline and many evangelical Christian denominations in Canada are grappling with similar issues. A recent report commissioned by the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia suggested The Anglican Church of Canada could be "facing extinction by the middle of this century," and warned "the status quo is not an option."² The issues the United Church faces may not yet be as acute, but it is clear we need to address them if we are to live out God's mission in the world in ways that better engage people in the 21st century.

Some of the proposals in this paper, if approved, would change the church dramatically. But, in letting go of structures and processes that do not advance, and may even hinder, God's mission, we would be invited into new ways of being and acting together—ways that would free us up to focus our efforts on faith, and faith in action, and spend less time and fewer resources on bureaucracy, enforcement, and governance. We could then open ourselves to new connections and relationships with one another and the world.

¹ Bruce G. Epperly and Katherine Gould Epperly, "Tending to the Holy," *Alban Weekly* (March 29, 2010). Retrieved March 30, 2010, from www.alban.org.

² The Anglican Synod of the Diocese of British Columbia, "Diocesan Transformation Team Report" (January 25, 2010). Retrieved March 17, 2010, from www.bc.anglican.ca.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

In order for the United Church to continue as a vital, living church, we need to address two urgent challenges: the nurturance and support of various aspects of the church during this time of transition, and the renewal of our leadership in order to identify and respond to new ministry opportunities.

This time of transition calls us to let go of some practices and forms in order to respond more faithfully to God's movement in these times. That process will involve some loss, but that does not need to be the central theme of what we are doing. In several of the options offered, there are opportunities for change that would bring new beginnings and hope, as well as endings.

In the midst of loss and change, we recognize new life that has already begun in the new work of the Aboriginal Ministries Circle and Council. As they develop new and inspirational ministries within Aboriginal community, they also will be grappling with the reality of our changing context. The Circle and Council's engagement in addressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the impact of colonization in community will provide new narratives for the whole church in relation to radical reimaging and sustainability. New life is also evident in our commitment to becoming an intercultural church, which we made at the 39th General Council and are still living into.

A critical concern during this planning process has been to respond adequately to the Call to Purpose adopted by the 39th General Council, the priorities developed by the Executive following that Council, and the themes from the 40th General Council. Each of these directions calls us to a deeper awareness of the transformation needed within the church in order to be faithful to God's mission in this time.

If each of these statements is understood as providing direction solely for the work of the General Council Office, then they presume the availability of resources and staffing capacity that either no longer exist or are significantly reduced. The outcome of such an approach would be for the General Council Office to do too many things, and to do them poorly.

However, if these statements are seen as a call to the whole church, then the question becomes what can the General Council most effectively and faithfully contribute to the vision of the church these statements offer? In this new time and new context, what distinctive part can the General Council and the General Council Office contribute to the life of the Christian community that we know as The United Church of Canada?

We are a conciliar church that values the distinctive role of each court in its participation in God's mission. Congregations, presbyteries, Conferences, and the General Council each have particular responsibilities. We recognize in our General Council identity a particular call to pay attention to the ways in which the church is more than the sum of its parts, and give careful attention to what we can better accomplish together than alone. Ultimately, the General Council is only one part of a large and diverse community.

A wide variety of congregations and communities make up The United Church of Canada. We know that many ministries and congregations are in transition. We also know that, over the next decade, many congregations will be unable to maintain their existing levels of ministry and will either close or need to find new ways of continuing to be present in their communities.

For that reason, I believe we need to broaden our understanding of congregations and local faith communities. Instead of considering those that cannot maintain a paid accountable minister as failures, it would be far more productive to support them in becoming different kinds

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

of faith communities. Such an approach might also encourage the formation of a greater variety of less structured faith communities to meet the needs of their place and time. Congregations as we know them would continue to be an active and valuable option, but not the only option. Christian community can continue and flourish in many different forms.

Given the demographics of our church and our ministry personnel, there is a huge need to find and form new leaders—lay leaders and paid accountable ministers—who will nurture these diverse communities of faith and inspire others to share the faith and live out God’s mission in the world.

The gospel message of hope and love is just as compelling today as it was 2,000 years ago. We honour the inheritance of faith bequeathed to us by those who have come before us, and prepare the way for those who will surely follow. May God give us everything we need as we seek renewal and transformation.

A Process of Creative Conversations

On December 10, 2009, the Sub-Executive of the General Council passed the following motion:

That the Sub-Executive of the General Council direct the General Secretary, General Council, to prepare a planning document for consideration and decision by the Executive of the General Council at its meeting in May 2010 that will

- a. be premised on the belief that we live in God’s abundance**
- b. be guided by the themes named by the 40th General Council 2009 and also informed by the Call to Purpose (GC39), and the Priorities of GCE 39**
- c. respect the financial projections provided by the Permanent Committee on Finance**
- d. work within the existing polity of the church**
- e. set out, with rationale as well as cost, program, and structural implications, three options reflecting three distinctly alternative approaches for a plan for 2011–2013:**
 - Current configuration with reductions shared broadly and equitably**
 - Radical reimagining of roles and relationships among the General Council Office and of the courts of the church to achieve reductions and lift up work in new ways**
 - Reductions and “rainy day” spending (cut deeper than required and use savings as well as additional draws from reserves for innovative work)**

Since receiving these instructions, I have consulted as widely as was feasible in the time available. A letter shared on January 4, 2010, with Conferences, presbyteries, commissioners to the 40th General Council, Youth Forum delegates, and the Church Leadership Network and posted online invited comments and input. In response to this invitation, we received some 130 e-mails and letters, which included submissions from almost every Conference across the country. In addition to these written responses, I and other staff members have had informal conversations with many of the respondents as well as others who did not formally respond. We also asked for advice from young commissioners to the 40th General Council.

In order to encourage active participation by General Council Office staff, I asked a staff team (mostly non-managers) to plan and facilitate two meetings to invite comments from staff. General Council Office staff contributed more than 260 ideas, ranging from simple cost-saving

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

measures that have already been implemented to more far-reaching ideas about processes and culture.

The responses we heard were rich and varied in their scope and opinion, but strong themes did emerge. Many people expressed frustration with the status quo, impatience with tinkering, and a readiness for change. Many people named the importance of continuing to live out our faith through action as being central to who we are as a church. Some people expressed fear for the future, but we also heard in these comments overwhelming love, commitment, and hope for the church.

It was clear from the beginning that we could not do everything that was suggested. Some suggestions conflict with one another, and others would require working out details that would distract us from the bigger picture needed at this stage. Some suggestions for practical improvements have already been acted on, and others may be fleshed out depending on the directions given by the Executive. All of the comments were heard and considered, and they will be available for the Executive to consider. We are also working on the necessary consents to share them publicly.

These comments and advice were shared with senior managers and formed the basis of fruitful conversations at a General Council Office Management Group retreat on January 28, 2010, and a Staff Leaders meeting (General Council Office Management Group and Conference Executive Secretaries) on March 1–3, 2010. The options you see below began to take shape at these meetings.

In the midst of this process, I asked six informal teams to conduct further research and analysis on some of the suggestions we heard. These teams were composed of managers and staff members of the General Council Office and Conference staff, and covered the following broad areas: identity and culture, governance, fundraising, cost savings, human resources, and radical reimagining.

These conversations and analysis led to the development of the three options requested by the Sub-Executive, which are outlined below. The opportunity to think deeply about three distinct scenarios was very important because it invited greater creativity and inventiveness than a single option would have provided. It also led to the realization that, while each of the three options offers valuable insights and learnings, none would be sufficient by itself to ensure the long-term vitality of the church.

For that reason, I am offering a fourth option that draws together important elements from each of the other three options. I recommend Option 4 to the Executive as the option that best takes account of cultural and economic realities, simplifies our processes and structures, and focuses our resources on nurturing faith in a changing context.

Working within a balanced budget is an essential assumption in all of the options. The costing details for options 1 and 4 will be provided at the Executive meeting. Costing for options 2 and 3 will be partial because neither of these operates as a stand-alone option. Some of the costing for options 2 and 4 will be imprecise because these options build toward longer-term savings that would not all be realized during this triennium. Inherent in options 2, 3, and 4 is also an expectation of positive effects on revenues.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

Option 1: Current Configuration with Reductions Shared Broadly and Equitably

Option 1 assumes no major changes in our structures, processes, or ways of doing things. Instead, savings would be realized by making proportionally equal cuts to all areas. Given current budget projections, this approach would require a cut of approximately 10 percent in all areas, and would be understood as a proportional reduction that would affect all aspects of the work of the General Council more or less equally. Fixed costs would be excepted, as would Aboriginal Ministries, which are just beginning and funded primarily through the Morrison Bequest.

The General Council budget is composed of several broad areas. Approximately 45 percent of the budget goes to grants, including Mission Support, Global Partnership, Education, and Conference Operating grants; 35 percent to staff costs; 12 percent to programs; and 8 percent to rent and operating costs. The composition of the budget means it is very difficult to reduce costs without significant impacts on grants and staff, especially when we take into account that, at least for this triennium, certain costs such as the lease on our office space are already fixed.

In Option 1, significant savings would need to be found by making cuts to grants and staff, although reduced expenditures for travel, resource production and distribution, meetings, and other areas would also be needed. Some of these reductions would be felt acutely but could reasonably be adopted in these changing times. Others would cut deeper and potentially jeopardize the goodwill needed to bring about more significant changes. For example, reducing the General Council grants to Conferences would reverse the direction agreed to last year with the Conference presidents. Such a decision could work against the need for the General Council Office and the Conferences to work together in new ways.

Option 1 represents a technical fix, an attempt to continue to do all the things we have done without changing our ways. It would allow us to continue to cover the same broad areas of work, but the work would be done differently and fewer projects would be possible. It would require us to accept that we would be able to do less and do it less well. It would not take into account the adaptive changes that have already begun, and would make it difficult to do new things.

By trying to make cuts on an equitable basis without changing the way we do things, we would avoid facing the deeper issues and difficult choices with which we know we must grapple. Such an approach would accomplish the short-term goal of balancing the budget for 2011–13 but might leave us facing a similar, or worse, set of decisions three years from now. Further cuts could send a message of scarcity, decline, and decay—exactly the wrong message if we want to attract new leaders and appeal to younger people and new Canadians who are yearning for a vibrant spiritual home. Proportional reductions now would also send a message of gradual diminishment that would risk dampening fundraising prospects.

Many people who offered comments advised strongly against tinkering and argued instead for more substantial change. I agree that Option 1 is not desirable in the absence of other kinds of changes. We need to find savings in the short- and medium-term but with a clear sense of long-term directions that will bring significant transformation for the church. We will make better and more life-giving decisions if we are willing to make the difficult choices now.

As you will see later in this paper, Option 4 would incorporate some of the reductions found in Option 1 but would also include other—although not less difficult—changes to achieve the savings we need.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

Option 2: Radical Reimagining of Roles and Relationships among the General Council Office and of the Courts of the Church to Achieve Reductions and Lift Up Work in New Ways

One strong message we heard during the triennium planning consultations was that radically reimagining the life of the church is not only necessary but also a preferable option to trying to preserve the status quo. The time for tinkering is past, many people told us, and neither the status quo nor the glorious past is an option for the future.

There was general agreement about the need for change but there was no consensus about what changes should be made. However, the fact that those who responded overwhelmingly indicated acceptance of a significant shift that would unfetter our structures and processes and free people to live out their faith more fully offers the church possibilities that might not have existed even a few years ago.

I have developed this option with a view to focusing our resources and activity on faith and faith-rooted actions while spending less time and fewer resources on process, bureaucracy, enforcement, and governance.

As a starting point, we reflected on whether radical reimagining should involve the elimination of a court of the church. After exploring this idea more fully, I concluded this discussion might distract us from the more important issue—namely, what is and is not being done by each of the courts of the church. Moving toward eliminating a court would also risk tying up the church in years of debate and delay. Therefore, I am not recommending a reduction in the number of courts.

Instead, I am proposing that radical reimagining be achieved by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each of the courts of the church. Such clarification is important not only to avoid duplication but also to ensure we do not let processes distract us from God's work. The various parts of the church should complement and support one another.

I have identified several key assumptions to guide the radical reimagining of the General Council:

- *Our structures must give freedom for the church to be more fully engaged in God's mission in the world.* 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. The church exists to live and enable God's mission, which is larger than the church itself. As the Church of England's statement on missional communities reminds us, "It is not that God's church has a mission in the world, but that the God of mission has a church in the world."
- *Attention must be paid to the national connectedness of the United Church.* The United Church exists as a distinctive national body. Without national identity, congregations would become isolated and there would be little to hold us together. This commitment to connection also relates to the call to partnership in God's mission. Recognizing that God's purposes in the world involve others outside the church invites us always to ask where we can join with others in God's mission.
- *The church must make full use of new technologies and become a better steward of its own resources to lessen its ecological impact.* The church must take seriously the ecological

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

impact of its current ways of operating. This is a matter of faith and integrity. As the church increases its visibility on ecological issues, it must demonstrate consistency between its public stance and its practices.

- *The church must also engage a broader representation of its membership and Canadian society in its national life.* Our current practices make participation in governance structures easiest for those people who have flexible schedules, speak English, are well-educated, and are salaried workers. Our current practices also fail to engage younger generations, who tend to connect through social networking and are less able or willing to participate in current meeting formats. Our commitment to interculturalism also requires us to embrace new forms of leadership and participation. The General Council cannot invite the larger church to transform itself in broadening the participation of diverse communities of people if it fails to do so in its own life.
- *Changing social contexts must be addressed.* Attention must be paid to generational shifts in patterns of engagement and participation in church life. One of these shifts is a desire for more direct connection in mission, including patterns of financial support directed to specific projects. Another is a desire for personal learning through engagement rather than more traditional models of reports and animation. These and other shifts are not likely to be changed by education or interpretation; rather, they represent new patterns that must be addressed and embraced.
- *Something new is emerging.* The overwhelming reality of the church is that something new is coming into existence. Existing paradigms of congregational identity are changing, and many people no longer have an active connection with church, yet there is a deep spirituality throughout society. The global community, once seen as a “mission field,” is now next door. We are challenged to reimagine the nature of life in the church in the context of a significantly changing world and society.

In contemplating how the church could be reimaged, I have considered more than just court structures. Option 2 also includes *The Manual*, fundraising mechanisms, and consideration of how we would staff the work.

A. The Courts of the Church

I recommend a reformed “courts” process that can be summarized as follows:

The primary focus of meetings of the General Council would be on matters of denominational identity and “connectionality.”

Identity, in this context, is about care for the compelling story of the church, both theological and social. It is about care for the “brand name” or ethos of the denomination that takes expression most directly through its faith but also in its policies. This denominational identity must be understood as not fixed but dynamic and located within changing and evolving relationships. It is about having a sense of who we want to be and how we want to be known. The General Council is the governing meeting of the denomination, and the primary focus of this meeting should be on denominational and faith-shaping policies.

Connectionality must be understood in its deepest sense as building networks of mission. This concept is akin to “connexion,” a term that has deep roots in the Methodist tradition. It is also found in Section 3.4 of the Basis of Union of the United Church, which reads, “That in this view it is possible to provide for substantial local freedom, and at the same time secure the benefits of

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

a strong connexional tie and co-operative efficiency.” In emphasizing this connectional role, the church would affirm that the primary task of the General Council Office relates to building and strengthening connections across the church. In more current terms, it suggests that this key role is supporting relationships or networks for mission.

These two areas of focus would not encompass the entire work of the General Council and the General Council Office. There are many areas of responsibility that fall to a denominational office that must be done, including a significant responsibility for human resources work relating to ministry personnel.

However, by focusing on these two key responsibilities, it would become easier to determine what programmatic work can and should be done. Such an approach also provides greater clarity about what governance structures need to be in place. Adopting this dual focus for the General Council would have the following implications:

- 1) *General Council:*
 - a) General Council meetings would be used for denomination-shaping work only.
 - b) General Council meetings would be held every four years.
 - c) The Executive of the General Council would meet five times in a four-year cycle.
 - d) New technologies would be used more broadly to hear a wider range of voices from diverse places in the church. Fewer and smaller formal General Council committees and task groups would be needed, and fewer in-person meetings would be held.
- 2) *Conferences:*
 - a) The general model would be that Conferences would assume responsibility for human resources and pastoral relations work from presbyteries, and would have professional staff to do this work.
 - b) Because different approaches and models are emerging across the church, a period of experimentation around the roles of presbyteries and Conferences might be valuable. Local variations may be necessary to reflect the regional realities of the church.
- 3) *Presbyteries:*
 - a) The primary role of presbyteries would be mission, including supporting congregations and other ministries to live out God’s mission in the world.
 - b) Presbyteries would also be a collegial forum for ministers and lay leaders to support one another in their work.
- 4) *Congregations and local ministries:*
 - a) Congregations and local ministries would continue to be the primary places where the ministry of the United Church is lived out.
 - b) In addition to core ministries within congregations, we would lift up a variety of other ministries, including chaplaincy, camps, house churches, coffee houses, faith-based environmental and social action groups, and social networking.
 - c) Our current structures cast a group that cannot maintain a building and support the costs of a minister as a failure. With a broader definition of ministry, there would be greater scope for congregations to transform into less formal kinds of faith communities, and for new and less structured faith communities to be born.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

B. Toward a User-Friendly *Manual*

- 1) *The Manual* would be substantially rewritten, marking a shift away from overly complex processes and regulation and toward clear minimum standards and guiding principles, with greater flexibility in the details.
- 2) The new *Manual* would be significantly shorter.
- 3) This project would be carried out within the next year to allow full opportunity for people across the church to review the proposals prior to the next General Council.

C. Funding Mechanisms

- 1) A dedicated fund would be established to provide an opportunity and invitation to Canadians to support the justice and global work of the United Church. The United Cares Fund would reach beyond our traditional Mission and Service givers to those who are in sympathy with the United Church's ethos and programs, and would encompass three giving streams: justice work in Canada, global partnerships, and emergency appeals.
- 2) The United Cares Fund would open opportunities to raise more funds overall by inviting givings for specialized programs and new important work.
- 3) The United Cares Fund would offer the opportunity for community or corporate groups to support the church's work, and the possibility of offering an "affinity credit card" for United Cares supporters would be explored
- 4) We would continue to actively raise money for our annual fund, known as the Mission and Service Fund, which would continue to fund the core programs of the church.
- 5) Through the People in Partnership program, the concept developed on a pilot basis as "extra measures" would be expanded to build on Mission and Service strength to provide additional support from congregations and presbyteries for global partnerships and mission projects in Canada.
- 6) Some people suggested introducing an assessment as a way to protect the Mission and Service Fund from further decline. I considered this option but am not recommending it, since it would require a change to the Basis of Union and a lengthy remit process. The experience of other denominations is that assessments leave no opportunity for growth. There is also no guarantee congregations would pay their assessments, and this can be a point of friction. For these reasons, I recommend maintaining the voluntary nature of the Mission and Service Fund.

D. Staffing the Work

- 1) The work of the General Council Office would focus on identity and connection.
- 2) The General Council Office would maintain capacity for major initiatives in identity formation that flow out of the commitments of the General Council. These initiatives would be transformational and identified by the General Council as a denominational priority. An example of this kind of priority would be our commitment to becoming an intercultural church.
- 3) A major initiative, the People in Partnership program, would expand programs for engaging United Church communities in global and Canadian partnerships. It would be supported by an effective global partnership program and a new emphasis on Canadian mission relationships. This model would form the basis for shifting a significant part of the work of General Council Office staff to supporting the connections of congregations and local ministries with partners.
- 4) The General Council Office would have a major responsibility for communication and facilitation of resources within the church.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

- 5) The General Council Office would continue to provide a range of services and administrative functions that are required by *The Manual* and by virtue of its responsibilities as a denominational and national organization.
- 6) Recruitment, development, and support of ministry personnel, with a particular focus on a diverse new generation of leadership, would be named as an important focus for the next decade. This work would include actively supporting as well as removing barriers.
- 7) Openness to using different organizational models would be signalled by the creation of a Centre for Ministry Development, which would offer training and consulting services tailored to the needs of congregations and other local ministries. The centre would be composed of a core staff team and clusters of regional consultants, who would provide cutting-edge research and training on transformed ministry to the church. The centre would operate through a combination of core funding from the General Council Office and cost recovery for services.
- 8) New ways would be developed for Conference and General Council Office staff to work together.
- 9) With the input of staff, the assistance of a consultant, and advice from the Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services, the General Secretary would develop and implement a detailed plan for the General Council Office staffing model.

Radical reimagining presents clear opportunities to build a leaner General Council Office, more agile governance structures, and a stronger stewardship model. However, change on this scale cannot be accomplished quickly. All of the proposals outlined in Option 2 should be adopted and implemented, but other measures would have to be taken to address the budget shortfall for this triennium.

Option 3: Reductions and “Rainy Day” Spending (cut deeper than required and use savings as well as additional draws from reserves for innovative work)

What if we think of the church’s reserves not as something to guard tightly for all time but as stored seed grain—seeds that are set aside at the end of the fall harvest and planted in the spring to sow new crops? What if we think of the drop in United Church membership and the erosion of Mission and Service Fund givings not as a sign of inexorable denominational decline but as a winter season in which we begin to prepare for the new life of spring?

Option 3 expresses our faith that spring is coming. Believing there will be new life, we need to think about how we can prepare for and nurture it rather than retrenching.

Option 3 assumes cuts equivalent to the levels required in Option 1, but the cuts are not detailed here—that is left for Option 1. Although I considered deeper cuts during our planning process, I am not recommending this route because of the scale of reductions already required to balance the budget. I am also not recommending spending from the reserves to avoid cuts in current expenditures. It may be necessary to cover certain costs from the reserves if projected costs or revenue vary from current assumptions, but we should not *plan* to use the reserves in this way.

Where I do recommend “rainy day” spending from the reserves is to establish a New Ministries Fund. In Option 4, I recommend that \$1 million be allocated from the reserves to establish this fund, which would be used to sow new ministries, nurture new ministers, and give new life and expression to the eternal message of the gospel.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

Many of these ministries would not look like our predominant Sunday morning model of congregational ministry. They might focus on environmental justice, global and community ministries, and social action, or build communities around coffee houses, book clubs, or social networking. We would meet people where they are instead of expecting people to come to us. These ministries would help people make a difference in their neighbourhoods and the world. Some of these ministries would be temporary, some more permanent. However new or innovative, these ministries would remain faithful to the values and goals of the United Church: to build and nurture communities of faith and justice that live out the message of Jesus Christ in the world.

This option would be implemented as follows:

- 1) A dedicated fund would be established to provide support to the establishment of new ministries within the United Church.
- 2) This New Ministries Fund would direct resources toward establishing new and innovative ministries to enable the United Church to continue to be a transformational force for God's mission in Canadian society. This fund would be directed primarily toward supporting ministry personnel in visioning and establishing innovative ministries. This fund would help fulfill a direction of the previous Executive in March 2009 that required me to recommend a plan for new ministry development across the church.
- 3) The fund would be seeded with \$1 million from the reserves of The United Church of Canada.
- 4) The fund would be actively promoted in congregations and other United Church entities that are selling property as a place to invest in the ministry and mission of the United Church.
- 5) Consideration should be given in the future to whether churches should be required to place proceeds of the sale of buildings and other property in the New Ministries Fund. Such a change would entail legal changes that would require the consent of the General Council. Therefore, I recommend that we proceed on a voluntary basis for now but do further analysis to determine if the Executive should be asked to approve moving ahead with a mandatory program.
- 6) Applications to the New Ministries Fund could be made by nascent congregations, local ministries, individual leaders who demonstrate the ability to work with a community, theological schools, and education centres.

Emerging Spirit and other initiatives have taught us that many people have strong spiritual yearnings that are not being met by current models of ministry. Investing in new ministries and new ministers expresses faith in the future and the enduring power of the Christian message, while recognizing that the message may have to be expressed and engaged in different ways that are better suited to our cultural context. It is a strategy that should be vigorously pursued.

However, Option 3 does not address the pressing need to streamline church governance structures and processes. The deep cuts it prescribes would entail significant disruptions to staff and areas of work. By itself, Option 3 is not a viable strategy.

Option 4: Faith for the Future

Each of the three previous options has merits, and at least some part of each option should be implemented. But none of them provides a complete answer to the considerable financial and demographic challenges the church is facing.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

A better alternative would be to combine the best parts of options 1, 2, and 3 to create a comprehensive plan for a vibrant and sustainable church. Such a plan would encourage the church to question assumptions about how things are supposed to be, enable us to let go of what the United Church once was, and embrace new possibilities and ways of being church that remain faithful to the example of Jesus. Healthy and growing ministries would be supported and strengthened, and congregational ministry would continue to be a central form of ministry. Significant support would also be offered to less traditional forms of ministry. Theological education would develop leaders for various kinds of ministries in a changing world.

Option 4 would consist of several parts:

- 1) Reductions would be made at the same overall level as Option 1 but would not be taken “across the board.” Rather, resources would be realigned in a way that matches the assignment of work to each court of the church and the simpler governance structures outlined in Option 2. This approach assumes operational changes would be made to achieve the necessary level of reductions.
- 2) Operational changes would include staff reductions in the General Council Office of between 15 and 20 full-time equivalents. These reductions would not necessarily take place all at the same time, but would be implemented during this triennium as the changes recommended in this report are implemented.
- 3) Staff structures at the General Council Office would be realigned to support identity, and connections within and outside the church. Staff would be asked to work in different ways to live into those roles.
- 4) A high priority would be given to using new technologies and social media to their full potential, recognizing that accommodations would be necessary because access to these technologies is not uniform in all parts of the country. A review of our print resources strategy would be conducted with a view to reducing the number of print resources produced. The number of in-person meetings would also be reduced.
- 5) The roles of the courts of the church would be clarified as set out in Option 2, according to a work plan that would include initial steps beginning in the spring of 2010. The final stage would conclude following the 41st General Council, as set out in Option 2.
- 6) As part of a shift in emphasis from regulation to encouragement, support, and invitation, *The Manual* would be reduced by half and made more user-friendly.
- 7) A shift would take place from structure and process to increased fluidity of connection.
- 8) A greater range of ministry possibilities would be identified and celebrated. Without losing the importance of congregational ministry, the next chapter of the United Church would open the door to alternative kinds of communities of faith as legitimate expressions of the United Church.
- 9) There would be a renewed call to share and live our faith by using new communication and networking tools.
- 10) The New Ministries Fund would be established using \$1 million in seed money from the reserves, as set out in Option 3. Congregations and ministries that are selling church properties would be encouraged to contribute to the fund.
- 11) The United Cares Fund would be established, as set out in Option 2, to enable donors to contribute to areas of the church’s work that reflect their own passions. The fund would encourage donations to the work of the church that reflect the passions of the donors.
- 12) A major Legacy Campaign would be developed based on all of the changes set out in this report.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

If Option 4 is approved, the following processes would be incorporated into a work plan that would be presented at the May 1–3 Executive meeting. This plan would outline follow-up steps that would be taken, including the following:

- 1) A summary of decisions would be prepared, posted on the Web, and provided to all Executive members within four days of the Executive meeting. A question-and-answer sheet would be provided to all Executive members.
- 2) A review of General Council Office functions and staff resources would be undertaken to identify savings of \$3 million per year, using the advice of an outside consultant.
- 3) The consultant would also provide advice to the General Secretary about new opportunities for working relationships between Conference staff and the General Council Office.
- 4) The General Secretary would make decisions about staffing needs, which could include implementing interim cost-saving measures such as closing the General Council Office for one week during the summer with a commensurate reduction in pay.
- 5) Work to streamline *The Manual* would begin immediately. A small team would be appointed with broad scope to consult and seek advice, including from *The Manual* Committee. This team would present an interim report to the Executive in November 2010 and provide a final report in May 2011.
- 6) Grants would be prioritized and rationalized to make the most effective use of the resources we have. Notice would be provided of a reduction in grants to Mission Support, Global Partnership, and Education (Theological Schools and Education Centres) to a maximum of 10 percent, to be implemented in 2011. (That reduction in grants would be proportional to reductions across the budget and would reflect the reality of a smaller church. All three areas have been engaged in reviews of existing programs and have been informed of the potential for this reduction.)
- 7) The United Cares Fund would be established by the fall of 2010 to invite other opportunities to work in partnership and share abundance.
- 8) The New Ministries Fund would be established with a \$1 million transfer from the reserves.
- 9) The board of the The United Church of Canada Foundation would be consulted on planning for the creation of these new funds and the fundraising to follow.
- 10) A workshop for financial development officers would be held on using the new funds as tools for new fundraising initiatives.
- 11) The Legacy Campaign proposal would be revised, taking into account the new funds and new ways of communicating.
- 12) The Centre for Ministry Development would be launched and its services made available to the church by the fall of 2010 to provide training and consulting for congregational and new ministry development.
- 13) Information would be shared broadly about these changes. All parts of the church would be invited to give their input and engage in conversations. Members of the Executive would be encouraged to take an active part in those conversations.

If the recommendations in Option 4 (or Option 2) concerning the clarification of the roles of the courts of the church are approved, it is suggested that the Executive not appoint members to the Task Group on Court Structure and instead leave follow-up related to implementation of the Triennium Plan to the General Secretary and the existing Permanent Committees.

Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action

Looking for the Church of the Future

The decisions before the Executive at this meeting would set in motion significant changes. Some of the changes can be approved only by General Council and some by remits, but we need to take the initial steps now if we are to embrace a different future.

This kind of change does not happen overnight and should not happen in a vacuum. Elected members and staff will need to be attentive to many conversations throughout the church that will inform and shape the work ahead.

We are in a time when change is not an option. It is a reality. We can choose how we will change, or we can simply wait for changes to happen — changes not of our own choosing.

This is not new. In 1968, the United Church proclaimed that “God has created and is creating.” We live with a confident awareness that in God and with God this realm continues to unfold. Long before the General Council adopted these timeless words, more timeless words were spoken: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted....” Qohelet, the author the Book of Ecclesiastes writing in the 5th-century BCE, lived in a time of profound, utter change that often left people overwhelmed and breathless. Yet Qohelet remained confident in a more durable and persistent Spirit that in all times and in all seasons holds us.

In A Song of Faith, we continue to proclaim that we are a work in progress: “We can grow in wisdom and compassion,” we sing. The Spirit helps us “to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition, challenging [us] to live by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.” So we “sing of God’s good news lived out, a church with purpose.... We sing of God’s mission.”

Looking forward to this triennium, and beyond, the challenge to sing of mission and live out God’s good news in this time of profound change and with ever-changing resources can overwhelm and leave us breathless. But we will be neither. The Spirit is our breath and it is both insistent and persistent.

Exploring these options for meeting these times has been surprisingly invigorating as people across the church dreamed dreams and saw visions. Staff in the General Council Office and in our Conference offices brought their best to the invitation to look forward. We became increasingly aware of both the wisdom and the faith of the author of the Gospel of John, who writes of Jesus saying, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

It takes darkness and wet working from outside to soften the husk, but the inexorable power of life pushing from within bears the fruit. Is it the challenge of restricted financial resources and an increasingly secularized society that is softening our husks so that the new life that is within can bear fruit? In God and with God all things are possible.

As A Song of Faith reminds us, “Grateful for God’s loving action, we cannot keep from singing. Creating and seeking relationship, in awe and trust, we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.”