

39th General Council: Orientation to Discernment—Kerygma Café

Deb Bowman, Saturday, August 12, 2006, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (Song of Solomon, 2:10, 13). In the lectionary readings that await us on Labour Day weekend, beloved calls to beloved. Arise, and come away. This leapt off the page at me, not as a call from individual lover to lover, but as a call from God to the people of God. A call from God, lover of all creation, to the church, to one of the many manifestations of the people God claims as precious, as beloved. Arise, my love, my fair ones, and come away! And so here we are. Responsive to the call. Eager to hear the voice of our beloved.

When we began work on planning for this General Council, what seems like a lifetime ago, I realized that I was not clear on the exact purpose of this meeting. I have attended several General Councils, and I was aware that there seemed to be a pattern and a dynamic that moved through each meeting, but when I considered what a “successful” meeting would look like, I wasn’t sure. When I asked General Council Executive for some clarity on the particular purpose of the meeting, they too paused. They too, while sure about the patterns that had been set over the years, were not of one mind about the purpose. And so together we were brought to a place where we realized it was time to reacquaint ourselves with the purpose of the General Council meeting. And as we thought about it, we were shown that we needed to be reoriented not just to the purpose of the General Council, but to the purpose of The United Church of Canada. We had come to a place, as do all organizations and movements at some point in their lives, when so much has changed that the body needs to reacquaint itself with who and whose it is, and what it is for. GCE took the prophetic and practical step of deciding that the purpose of GC is to come to a still point and to listen for God’s yearning for the church.

This is prophetic because the temptation is to keep on doing what we’ve always done, only harder. The temptation is to put our heads down, focus on what we see in front of us, and seek to respond faithfully to that patch of our vision. It is prophetic to call the church to a still point, to down tools for a bit, to lift up our heads and our hearts and look toward the horizon of God’s possibilities for us. It is prophetic, and it is biblical. Just last Sunday we heard the author of Ephesians imploring us to consider our call. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...” (Eph. 4:1). We come away to be reminded of the calling, to be re-membered and re-acquainted with what is the worthy life of our calling.

This time for focused discernment is practical also. The Moderator has spoken and written about the fact that The United Church of Canada has been slowly starving over the last 20 years. In response, we have made small adjustments, a nip there, a tuck here. We have not stood back and considered the full reality of the changed financial, spiritual, demographic, and economic state of our church. We need to make more than minimal adjustments in how we work and serve. We need to identify clear areas of focus. With thanksgiving and sorrow, we may need to leave behind some areas of work we have laboured over for two generations. The General Council Executive, the elected and appointed members of committees and the staff all committed to serving the church, cannot make the kind of decisions necessary without some time out to consider where from here. Without some conversation about the future direction of our church. Without some sense of how and where God is pulling us, attempting to develop a strategic plan will be hopeless. Be very clear: this GC will not develop a strategic plan; it will—we pray—begin to identify the broad direction in which we are to move, in alignment with God’s intentions for us. This purpose statement that it is our job to identify will be used to orient future work of the staff and elected members that serve the national church. You will have seen in many of the

proposals the words: “Direct that the report inform the purpose statements to be developed by this GC.” All our decisions will inform, will be part of what helps us identify the purpose of our next generation of United Church. We will look back and ask ourselves, “What do these decisions reveal for us about who and whose we are, and where we are called to go?”

I want to be clear that this isn’t the first time we have used discernment as a “tool” for thinking together. We are, at our best, discerning people who take as one of our core values an attentiveness to God. What is different is the emphasis and effort that will be placed on being collectively attentive for longer periods than usual about different questions than usual.

We will need to be aware of the temptation to avoid the call to listening and waiting. We will be tempted to avoid looking at the horizon before us, and to fix our focus instead on tasks that are “easier” to get a handle on. I want to encourage you to be leery of the lure of work avoidance, which might ironically masquerade as the “real” work before us. We will be tempted to focus on work and ways of working that we are familiar with. Not that those things are not important and require our attention, but we need to hold them in context and in relationship with our larger task. Even if you are new to GC, and about 65 percent of us are, we have all been formed in patterns of behaviour from our participation in other parts of the church and in the world. We are trying something different; something new, an alternative way of being in community. It will be difficult, and we have all we need to do it.

Over the last year, we have tested with the GCE different methods of discernment. I asked the Executive to take on the role of Cinderella, but instead of many potential princesses trying on one glass slipper, we had a variety of glass slippers to try on the one body. We were looking for a process that would fit the foot of the Body of Christ as it is known here. What became clear as we were doing some of this trying on is that rather than trying to talk the GCE into a new way of being and thinking together, we were scrambling to catch up to a deep desire to discern differently, to be the Body of Christ together in a new way. The church, as partly reflected in the General Council Executive, has been hearing for some time the Song of Solomon, “Arise, my love, and come away.” I am grateful for your graciousness and your willingness to help us learn how to do this.

Kerygma Café is the method or process we are using to help us be in discernment together. It is not an end in itself, but a means to time away, to arriving at a still point. Some of you formed in popular education methodologies will recognize parts of the process. All of us formed by Marion Pardy’s focus on Holy Manners will recognize much of what is key. Actually, much of what we need to know about being together in this way we did learn in kindergarten—be kind to each other, share, and don’t run with scissors.

Kerygma Café sees conversation/dialogue as a core process for identifying value. It takes very seriously the power of conversation to help us attain outcomes we’re looking for: new ideas, uncovering wisdom, direction, purpose. The process, we hope, will create a space for reflection, for the exchange of regional, national, and international perspectives and for the generation of knowledge that will promote and focus our efforts to be God’s people. We can and do gather knowledge from many sources, from many voices. This is not an easy process, it is not effortless work, but it is something that we absolutely can do, and do well. It is a process that we are learning how to use; we will need to be flexible and light about our learning together.

I want to offer one caution about how and what we’re hearing. An important value of the United Church is that we listen to many voices. As a church that celebrates inclusiveness and diversity, we are loath to leave anyone out of the conversation. And we need to be realistic about our ability to hear all the voices and all the perspectives at one time. In a

global, Internet world, we must know we can't hear everything at once. Indeed, we skate on the edge of idolatry if we think we can hear and understand everything; only God has that cosmic perspective and wisdom. So we will recognize our humanity and our limitedness. We will seek to know what we can know, in this time, in this context. We will be provisional in our prophetic declarations, aware and grateful that with each sunrise we are informed in new ways; conscious at the same time that within our limits we need to make some decisions and lurch forward in humble confidence.

Kerygma Café takes the shape of conversations with friends at a coffee table. We will be in small groups, leaning into each other, having conversations that matter.

Principles of the Kerygma Café

Listen for the Spirit

In our time together, in all the places and ways we are together, intentionally listen for the Spirit.

Gather and Share Collective Discoveries

Make collective knowledge and insight visible. Include readings, reports, and other input received prior to the meeting.

The cynical among us sometimes consider a process of listening to just each other an experience of sharing our ignorance. We are wedded to our reliance on experts; in this reliance we ignore our own experience and wisdom. In our time together we have both the "expert" input, found in the massive workbook you have read carefully and in the really hundreds of resource people here, and we have our own experience and collective wisdom. We will be attentive to all of these sources of knowledge and insight. We have what we need, here and now, to develop this statement of purpose.

Listen Together for Patterns, Insights, and Deeper Questions

Focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contribution.

Listen to learn: enter the conversations with the goal of learning from each other. Notice how, if you're determined to get in your own point of view, you aren't listening fully to what the other person is saying. It doesn't leave as much room for learning.

Listen for difference: be curious, listen for differences. What do the differences tell you not only about the other person but about your own assumptions?

Listen with support: encourage each other to take the thinking further. As the process moves on, try to link your thinking, follow a train of thought that is developing rather than jumping around randomly.

Listen for connections: listen together for new connections, collective wisdom, or insights that you wouldn't have come up with on your own. If someone else gets "credit" for something you mentioned earlier, let it go. Know at sometime you'll get credit for something you picked up on. Listen for what's emerging in the middle, both in the table and in the commons.

Listen reflectively: Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has said: “Those things which we cannot understand we must pass over in silence” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*). Sometimes silence offers up the deepest wisdom. Take some time for silence and to reflect on “What’s at the centre of our conversation?”

A collection of people called the “message group” will be listening attentively to both what is being said, and what is not being said. They will help us begin to identify the mind of the meeting, through listening to what you say, reflecting on what they see written on your papers during your time together, by reviewing the notes posted on the message board. They will test with us what they think they are hearing, to see if what they think they have heard you say is an accurate reflection of our common mind. I will say more about this group later.

Connect Diverse Perspectives

Intentionally increase the diversity of perspectives and deepen the connections even while retaining a common focus on core questions.

Encourage Everyone’s Contribution

Enliven the relationship between the “me” and the “we.”

Set the Context

Clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold.

The image I find most helpful to explain this is that we will identify the banks of the river even while allowing the river to meander. While the conversations wander, they need to stay within the banks. Over the week of the meeting we will be seeking to deepen our awareness of what is being learned, of what we value and what we might need to set aside, of what makes us uncomfortable and what makes our hearts sing. During the week the questions will move us deeper, below the surface of our thinking, and then, begin to move us up again, to notice what is emerging as new insights and possibilities and purpose.

Create Hospitable Space

Assure the welcoming and safe environment that nurture personal comfort and mutual respect. Be conscious of Holy Manners.

On the table cards at your large tables you will see some suggestions for how we might hold this hospitable place. Again, the passage from Ephesians offers us some ancient wisdom about how we should be together: “...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2–3). All of us share in the responsibility for creating and protecting a container in which together we know we are held and nurtured, safe and yet pushed a little.

Explore Questions That Matter

Focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement.

Patterned after Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).