

Plans Towards 2010: Questions & Answers

October 2007

1. Is [Plans Towards 2010](#) [PDF: 29 pp/163 KB] a step toward “losing the heart” of The United Church of Canada’s commitment to social justice?

The plan reflects a shift and loss in means, though not of commitment. Social justice continues to be central to the mission and ministry of the United Church.

With these changes, we will have less capacity for this work in the General Council Office. There are, however, a number of new positions being created, including two generalist positions in the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit, to support the social justice witness of congregations. We continue to have staff for residential schools healing and right relations, and an executive minister and regional coordinators with expertise regarding global partnerships.

The vision for positive transformation within congregations includes encouraging and supporting genuine engagement on social issues.

2. Are we losing our “national voice” and capacity to lead the church on issues of social justice? Will the national church still have the capability to address the federal government on important social issues?

There are indeed losses in this regard. But the changes also represent a different approach to speaking as a church nationally. We will have reduced capacity for General Council Office staff to speak for the church nationally. Providing a national voice on faith and social issues will continue to be an active part of the role of the Moderator. The smaller staff complement at the General Council Office will focus on supporting the Moderator’s role, and assisting congregations with the research, education, and analysis that they need to support their work on social justice issues.

3. What about the reduction of grants to global partners and outreach ministries within Canada?

These reductions begin in 2009 and are proportional—that is, grants continue to represent almost half of our budget. Our hope is that congregations will be more directly involved in these partnerships and if financial circumstances improve, we will be able to restore or increase grants. The details of how these cuts will be applied have yet to be worked out—delaying this change until 2009 was intentional, in order to allow consultation.

4. Were global partners consulted as part of this process?

Consultation with global partners in the process of grant reductions begins this fall. A desire to be faithful in those relationships was in the minds of Executive members when they agreed that no reductions would be made to grants until 2009. Conversations, as per the plan, are beginning now to see the best that we can make of an unhappy situation.

Dr. Aruna Gnanadason of the World Council of Churches, a long-time partner from India and corresponding member of the Executive of the General Council, was also present throughout the

meeting in June when the budget was discussed. Her closing remarks noted the concern and faithfulness of the deliberations, as well as the difficult implications they represented. She also indicated that similar deliberations were faced by the World Council of Churches itself and by other denominations.

5. Will the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit be restructured as a result of these changes? Has the budget for the unit been altered in light of these changes? What about specific program losses like refugee work and a specialized focus on environmental issues?

Some work has been let go because we felt there were other areas that required more resources and attention.

There are reductions in several areas of our budget, including the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit. The changes do not include restructuring, but there will be reallocations of work within units, and a greater emphasis on people from different units working together on projects with common elements.

Over the summer, the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit has begun to identify ways of carrying on some aspects of the work affected by actions of the Executive of the General Council. Susan Ferguson, currently on salary as overseas personnel because she is living in New York where her husband is assigned to the World Council of Churches, has significant experience in refugee and immigration issues. Susan will provide support to congregations on refugee work and will continue her work in support of the United for Peace Campaign and ethical investment issues. There will also be some changes in how the General Council Office relates to national networks and to Conference groups on particular topics, but those details are not all worked out yet. Additionally, there will be some shifts in staff assignments and staff will be developing work plans more completely in the fall.

6. How will issues related to the rural church and rural life be dealt with if rural concerns are now relegated to a smaller portfolio within a larger one?

We do have an overall reduction in staff in this area, so there will be a reduction in capacity. The remaining staff in the Congregational, Educational, and Community Ministries Unit will not be asked to do more work, because we believe they have already been functioning at full capacity. There will be reassignment of work, though, so that, for example, although the rural ministries position is being cut, it doesn't mean that rural ministries work will no longer be done. We will have two people responsible for the areas of urban, suburban, and rural ministry where we previously had three, and therefore there will be some effect felt in each of these areas.

7. What does it mean to speak of congregations as the “primary mission unit” of The United Church of Canada? Is this a step toward congregationalism?

Congregations are where most Canadians encounter The United Church of Canada and are clearly the primary location for engagement in God's mission. This does not mean, however, that the General Council Office does not also have a distinctive role in support of this mission. As we

have noted, the transitions in Canadian social justice work will still allow the General Council to continue to play a vital role in focusing church-wide efforts on justice initiatives. However, there is concern about the capacity of the whole church to support this work. Not only have there been reductions at the General Council Office but several Conferences have also made reductions in this area, and this will have to be closely monitored.

8. Is work being downloaded to Conferences, presbyteries, and congregations?

One of the areas identified in the plan for longer-term work is the relationship between the different courts of the church, and the ability of each to do the work that is best done by that court. This is part of longer-term discussions that the Permanent Committee on Governance, Planning and Budgeting Processes will lead.

9. Where did this come from? Why didn't more people know about this ongoing priorities discernment?

The priorities that the Executive of the General Council approved in May are for this triennium. They were developed by the Executive after a process that had been underway for over a year. Following the 39th General Council 2006, the Executive created a Priorities Task Group at its November 2006 meeting, and that group worked over the winter to prepare to lead the full Executive through its priorities process at the May meeting. The General Secretary was given those priorities at the conclusion of the May meeting, and directed to come back to the Executive in June with a budget plan that would reflect the priorities.

Although Conference representatives to the Executive regularly communicate with their Conferences about the work of the Executive, communication has been raised as an issue enough times in recent weeks that it is clear that we need to devote time to talking about how to improve communication and accountability.

10.A recent *United Church Observer* article indicates that the church is in good financial shape. Why are we making these cuts?

We are pleased that *The Observer* picked up on the forward-thinking discussion about finances that has taken place at the meetings of the Executive of the General Council. We are in good financial shape now, but continuing our spending practices, which rely on drawing in excess of \$2 million annually from our reserves, is not sustainable and will eventually deplete the reserves. The Permanent Committee on Finance has been asked to report to the Executive in November on the feasibility of launching a major fundraising campaign. All aspects of how to manage a proposed campaign, and what goals are realistic, are being considered. We are very hopeful that the result will be a plan for a fundraising initiative that will provide the basis for a strong future for The United Church of Canada.

In the meantime, our situation is that annual givings to the Mission and Service Fund have not increased over the past 20 years, while our work and costs continued to multiply. It is the Executive's feeling that while efforts to improve our financial situation are underway and under consideration, it is irresponsible to commit to budgets based on that possibility.

11. Why weren't cuts made to the senior staff salaries and the Office of the Moderator and the General Secretary?

The General Council Office salaries are in keeping with those of other comparable organizations and in compliance with the compensation policy set by the Executive of the General Council. Of course, although that is the current practice, it is always possible to change directions. The plan that was approved by the Executive includes review of "efficiencies" in all areas, including the Office of the Moderator and the General Secretary. This will include an outside assessment of our business practices, which will include a cost-benefit analysis of a range of items that could save the church money.

12. Was this a staff-driven process?

The elected members of the Executive of the General Council spent much of their time this year discerning in an attempt to refine and distill the priorities arising from [A Call to Purpose](#). "A Call to Purpose" was not specific enough to help focus the use of resources. The General Secretary, with the staff, was asked to create a plan based on the priorities discerned by the Executive. That plan came back to the Executive, where it was considered carefully and then approved. The process and plan was led by, engaged in, and decided by the elected members of the Executive of the General Council. It belongs to them and they own it.

Heather Burton, the elected member of the Executive of the General Council who chaired the Priorities Task Group, put it this way: "As a member of the Executive, I know that we considered carefully, prayerfully, and faithfully all decisions, and tried to be guided by the directions offered by the 39th General Council 2006 and by the Holy Spirit. I know, too, that those decisions which affected staff positions were especially painful for us. I do believe, however, that the Executive has a real responsibility. Sometimes, that means recognizing the need to do things differently, and making changes."

13. Also, a number of concerns have been raised about the process at the 39th General Council 2006, particularly whether it provided for adequate attention to clarifying priorities and whether the implications of decisions were clear to commissioners.

These concerns will be included in our reflections on the 39th General Council 2006 as we prepare and plan for the 40th General Council in 2009.