

**SOCIAL JUSTICE NETWORK of the ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCILS
of The United Church of Canada**

MEETING OF 18-19 JUNE 2019

In attendance: Charles Barrett (Eastern Ontario Outaouais Region), Jane Dawson (Eastern Ontario Outaouais Region), Susan Eagle (ISARC and Shining Waters Region), Ernie Epp (Canadian Shield Region), Sharon Hull (East Central Ontario Region), Ren Ito (Shining Waters Region), Will Kunder (Canadian Shield Region), Christina Paradela (Horseshoe Falls Region), and Carey Wagner (Antler River Watershed Region)

and General Council staff: David Allen (Transition Director) and Lori Neale (Program Coordinator, People in Partnership, for Canada-Global Relations) in the Church in Mission Unit

Serving as Chair, Charles called the meeting to order in the Red Room of Church House at 1:10 pm on 18 June 2019. He noted that Ernie had circulated the record of the meeting of 30-31 October 2018 earlier, and Ernie offered to send it to Charles for circulation again (with a correction of the date of the meeting he had just noticed). Susan moved, Charles seconded, that Ernie serve as the recorder of the meeting. Carried.

Charles observed that the agenda included David Allen's appearance the next day to answer questions about reorganization of the United Church of Canada. People from Beth Baskin's Church in Mission Unit would appear at 2:00 pm. Queen's Park concerns would be considered. Reports from the new Regions would begin this day and continue the next day. Planning for the future would also take place on Wednesday.

Will distributed expense forms for people to report their expenses.

Update on Transition to Our New Structure

Charles began the update with comments on the process in **Eastern Ontario Outaouais Region**. He provided a written report on a meeting of social justice advocates at St. Paul's United Church in Perth on 10 November 2018, which considered various activities and agreed to continue them within the new Region. The Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council met on the first weekend of June in the Smiths Falls Memorial Community Centre, a twin-surface hockey arena, with some 230 people in attendance. There was no social justice position in the new Region organization but Jane Dawson, who has been appointed as Minister for Communities of Faith, Clusters and Networks, has social justice work as one of her concerns. Among the financial resources available to the new Regional Council are a Mission Strategy Fund and the Scrivens/Baillie Fund, for which new bylaws have been developed.

Christina reported on the organization of the **Horseshoe Falls Regional Council**, which met at the UNIFOR Centre in Port Elgin with over 500 people in attendance. A staff person shares both Social Justice and Intercultural Ministry work. Three commissions responsible for Human Resources, Covenanting, and Mission and Discipleship were struck, with people volunteering to take part. Susan thought that General Council had specified that there could be only two commissions in each region, one concerned with Pastoral Relations and the other, Support for Communities of Faith. Ren asked whether there could not be Ministry and Discipleship and Faith Formation and Social Justice commissions. Charles saw value in the experimentation taking place in the regions, whereas Christina saw the need for standardization.

Sharon reported on the first meeting of the **East Central Ontario Regional Council** in a large church in Lindsay. Some 300 people attended, and it was very active with children and young adults in attendance. Leadership Teams for Nominations, Covenanting, Formation, Nurture and Justice, Equity, and Ministry through Property are in development. Since the preceding conference had been Affirming, the Region was able to become an Interim Affirming Ministry, with an action plan approved by Affirm United. (Ren observed that Shining Waters Regional Council had developed a 21-page document for its Affirming Ministry, which document has been directed to its Equity Team.)

Will reported on the organization of the **Canadian Shield Regional Council**, which spans a vast region and may hold biennial meetings as a result. Two commissions have been created, one responsible for Pastoral Relations and the other, Support for Communities of Faith. Various resource teams will make recommendations to the commissions, especially with regard to Affirming Ministries, Right Relations, and Camping. Financial resources from the preceding presbyteries came with expectations in these areas. Organizing clusters and networks will be a challenge. In response to Sharon's query, Will stated that social justice work would occur within the Support for Communities of Faith Commission. Will has been designated as staff for social justice and Peter Hartsmans, as Executive Minister, agreed with Ernie's participation in the Social Justice Network of Ontario Regions.

Carey offered a document from the **Antler River Watershed Regional Council** regarding social justice work.

To Jane's question about the importance of advocacy at Queen's Park, Charles and Susan spoke of the experience years ago when two Ontario conferences of the United Church took opposing stands on a piece of legislation, and it became clear that a body bringing representatives of the conferences together would be useful. For a time, the Social Justice Network actually prepared documents to be sent to the Provincial Government over the signatures of the presidents of conferences. Policy coordination was necessary. Ernie suggested that it was probably the Temagami dispute that led to the disagreement. Susan pointed out the value of the Social Justice Network in dealing with people of other faiths.

General Council Staff - Program Updates

Following a break at 2:45 pm, Jordan Sullivan spoke about the activity of General Council staff. He noted that Adele Halliday was on maternity leave. His own responsibilities as Ministry Partnership Animator include camping--this year's gathering will take place in Nova Scotia--campus ministries, and communities of faith. In regard to the Affirming Ministries and related justice concerns, he suggested that the acronym might better be 2SLGBTQIA+. This would recognize the Indigenous primacy in the orientation. He also reported on the Iridesce project launched last year and on activity it had inspired, including a dramatic production. He made an open call for local facilitators to lead workshops on Affirming Ministries or Living into Affirming Ministries. Research is taking place on the 1984-92 period in the church and how to bring the results to the national church, the General Secretary, and the General Council Executive.

Jordan reported that there had been a one-day gathering in April of persons concerned about faith-based 2SLGBTQIA+ activities within 23 denominations at the Centre for Sustainable Justice of the Lyndale United Church of Christ in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Participants have formed a Canadian Coalition of Affirming Ministries and will be building a Website over the summer. Another consultation is planned for 2-3 October. There is concern about a lack of participants from racialized communities and among Indigenous People. Jane mentioned that 160 churches are currently in the process of becoming Affirming Ministries. Ernie suggested that resistance in many communities of faith had a great deal to do with the fact that the Reformation churches had been deeply affected by the rise of the bourgeoisie, which was profoundly masculinist in nature and saw the marriage of man and woman and the family that resulted as central to respectability. One of the consequences of this (and other rigidities) is that the Reformation churches have found themselves in an "Unplanned Obsolescence," as society changes around them.

To Ren's question, whether the broadening out would water down the 2SLGBTQIA+ action, Jordan observed that the Iridesce project involved intersectionality, the lived experiences of people. In this context, he pointed to the assertion of BlackLivesMatter in the Toronto Pride Parade last year. Christina saw the lens of intersectionality in Jordan's work. She added that, in the Horseshoe Falls Region, Affirming Ministries were being asked to provide action plans and to offer annual assessments of their achievements in this regard. Jordan suggested that these might be reported to Affirm United, too.

Ren also asked about intersectionality in regard to General Council. Jordan responded that he had been in communication with the Moderator of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom and people had shared a variety of stories and experiences there. "We were humbled," he concluded. Jordan also noted that Affirm United will be holding its 2019 Annual Meeting in August at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary.

In regard to Poverty in Canada, another huge subject, Ren noted the work of the Canadian Poverty Institute, which has been established at Ambrose University in Calgary. Their approach is that the church used to provide for the poor, but then the government took over the responsibility. More than just charity is called for, and governments need to be held responsible for the present situation. Susan observed that General Council had provided powerful

statements in the Thirties. Capacity could be found in other organizations, too. Jordan saw these organizations as useful in getting the word out to communities of faith, and mentioned Canada Without Poverty, Citizens for Public Justice, and organizations combating homelessness as vital in this activity. Susan expressed her own joy at seeing Housing and Homelessness back on the agenda. Among a variety of resources, Jordan mentioned the Woodlake publication, *Activist's Alphabet*, by Donna Sinclair. Jordan stated that he was planning a newsletter on Church in Mission.

Susan commented that they had attempted the Kitchen Table Conversations suggested by Christie Neufeld. People had been excited about doing so but found it too complicated. She was looking to renew the effort in the fall. Will reported that the North Bay Cluster had found it a great springboard to action. Jane observed that there was pushback around the language of public witness, which was seen as top down pressure. Jordan suggested the need to say things more simply.

ISARC

Susan then spoke to the work of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC). The "Voices from the Margins" material, which is currently the main project, had been sent out on 19 March. "We have had enough of statistics, of data. There is a need to return to the sharing of stories." Five communities are already lined up--including Peterborough, Orillia, London, and Hamilton--and a total of twenty-five is sought. Charles pointed to a downtown network in Ottawa, and Susan noted that Waterloo will be active later this year. They hoped that this would be achieved by the time of the Faith Leaders Forum at Queen's Park in November. To Ren's question about the interfaith dimension, Susan said that funding by the Toronto Board of Rabbis is particularly important.

Ren asked whether people with lived experience would be part of the work, and Susan pointed to the UN Rapporteur's model in taking down information. A videographer was prepared to do a video. Anonymity would be provided, although some people might be prepared to tell their stories before the camera. They hoped for a mixed-media presentation in which rural poverty would not be neglected. Charles noted the reality of poverty among seniors. Will asked about the link to the Social Audit, and Susan said it was a continuation of that work. Susan noted as well that the actions of Conservative MPPs were being tracked, especially by the Legal-Aid Clinics. As Susan said, "You need people to report changes in reputation of the MPPs!"

Further Updates

Christina added to her report on the **Horseshoe Falls Region** that, in addition to the commissions, there was Affirming Ministry work.

Carey provided a written report for the **Antler River Watershed Regional Council** which met on the May 24th weekend. The former Division of Social Justice of London Conference continues to meet as Social Justice Network Resource, offering support to the Antler River Watershed

Mission and Discipleship Commission. Among important activity was a protest against cuts to Legal Aid funding. The Mission and Discipleship Commission met with the other commissions on 12 June to get organized and reviewed a variety of visions and concerns. The Commission plans to meet again by Zoom in the last week of August.

In regard to uncertainty about funding, Charles stated that funding was to be freed up for Missions and Ministry work. Carey thought that the greater concern was inspiring communities of faith about social justice concerns.

Charles returned to the written report for the **Eastern Ontario Outaouais Region**. Jane noted the importance of monitoring applications to the Vision and Transformation Leadership Team. It is important that people share understanding across the region. The November 2018 meeting had involved four presbyteries within two conferences.

Susan then spoke to the Proposal to the **Shining Waters Regional Council** to establish a Social and Ecological Commission. This proposal to share work is being implemented by the Regional Council.

Christina added to her report for **Horseshoe Falls Regional Council** by saying that she and Carey had neglected to say that they had three commissions and that a resource pool of people had been formed from which the commissions will draw members.

Carey asked whether Ren had been identified for the Social and Ecological Commission of **Shining Waters Regional Council**, and Ren responded that he had not yet been so designated and that the budget needed to be clarified.

Having agreed to hold the Finance Report over to the next day, the meeting adjourned at 5:15 pm.

19 June 2019

Chapel Service

Members gathered for chapel at 9:00 am, with Maggie Dieter presiding, and joined in Honouring the Indigenous Day of Prayer. A Ceremony of Forgiveness and Healing used strawberries--"heart berries"--and their teachings as the means of communion.

The Transition Process

David Allen, who had led the process, spoke briefly about the work as he nears the end of his three-year contract. What had initially seemed quite simple had become quite complicated. The Executive Ministers had been working since May 2018 and would continue the work of organizing the Regional Councils. The greatest concern was about a fall-off of volunteers, and it was too early to know whether that would happen. Reports from the various Regional Councils

were encouraging. Toronto Conference used to convene 250-275 people, but the Shining Waters Regional Council brought about 350 people together. It was a good solid beginning. Charles noted the same phenomenon in his Region.

Ernie asked about the future, and David pointed to financial challenges, ministers retiring, and a declining number of churches. Ernie mentioned the instance in Thunder Bay of the sale of the building formerly used by Knox Pruden United Church to Wesleyans from New Brunswick, who are now congregating as the Transformation Church. In this regard, David noted that the money from these sales largely remains in the areas, and Ernie pointed to the irony that the property belongs to the United Church of Canada but the funds are not centralized. Perhaps there could be a re-cycling of moneys, especially from the former Toronto and British Columbia Conferences, to other parts of the country. David said there had been some disbursements from Toronto Conference, and Charles said there had been some from Ottawa Presbytery, too.

Will enquired about evaluation of changes by General Council, and David said it was to occur in 2023-24. Derrick Evans had been hired to establish base-lines and goals, and his report had been received.

Ren enquired about the place of social justice work in the new organization, noting that there was a variety of responses to this challenge. David responded that the desire for some uniformity had not been achieved. A template had been looked at in Region 10, but what happened? It was a research project to check the various Websites for organization and activities.

Susan enquired whether General Council commissioners would be kept informed, and David said that material was sent to everyone, including commissioners. Will recognized that it had gone to the whole church in a bombardment of material. Charles thought that the Webinars on Pastoral Relations had been done well, even if there was some skepticism among the receivers.

David concluded with the observation that more will be known a year from now as we work through things.

More Updates

Sharon reported for **East Central Ontario Regional Council** that they too were working on getting reorganized. Formerly the Bay of Quinte Conference, they were focused on equality. An Equity Monitor policy had been established, which she could share with the Network in a form. As regards Communications, there was a survey on their Website with a multitude of questions that were to be answered by a person from each community of faith. This information is to be mapped. Sharon promised to share this information with the Network. (Charles commented on the challenge of getting information from churches in Ottawa Presbytery. One said they were Affirming when they actually were not!)

Another focus in East Central Ontario Region is the Affirming Ministry. The Region is Interim Affirming. In regard to Right Relations, there are "pockets" of activity, such as Travelling Tours to Right Relations with paddling as part of the activity. Wampum Camp will take place at the Five Oaks Centre this year and include Neechi from Manitoba. The granting of funds by the Regional Council includes \$50,000 for mission, with grants made in spring and fall.

To Charles' query about rules of order, Sharon pointed to a checklist before and during an event about such matters as accessibility. A microphone is always required.

A General Council Staff Report

Lori Neale came in to speak about People in Partnership and mentioned a group going to Palestine/Israel. She then turned to the Ontario political scene and the actions of individual MPPs. Her own MPP is Merit Styles, a New Democrat who is "on side." In looking at the voter base for each of the Conservative MPPs, she had arrayed them from the smallest margin of victory--Jeremy Robert's 176 votes in Ottawa West Nepean--to the largest share of the vote--Minister John Yakabuski's 70% in Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke. Ernie noted that thirty-three of the Conservative MPPs had achieved absolute majorities!

Lori also mentioned a youth delegation going to Japan in the fall. Youth included people from 18 to 35 and the cost was \$300. It was suggested that Ren should go!

More Regional Council Reports

Will reported further on the **Canadian Shield Regional Council**, which met at the beginning of June in Sault Ste Marie. In regard to justice work in the Support for Communities of Faith Commission, there were good volunteers for the trans community. He expressed his frustration with Affirm United and its demands but said that the Regional Council was jumping through the required hoops. His frustration related to the fact that the preceding presbyteries had all been Affirming prior to the reorganization.

The Regional Council has three part-time staff: the Rev. Rob Smith (in Thunder Bay), who is new to such responsibilities, and he himself (in North Bay) and the Rev. Melody Duncanson-Hales (in Sudbury), who are familiar with the work. They were sorting things out! He saw opportunities in regard to Right Relations. There are also funds for the development of clusters in the various areas.

Ernie presented a written report from the west end of the **Canadian Shield Regional Council**, primarily the city of Thunder Bay. After scanning the organizational challenges following the splitting of Cambrian Presbytery, he noted the proliferation of social justice issues resulting from actions of the Ford Government, the work of Poverty Free Thunder Bay (with which he expects to be more involved soon), Right Relations challenges and opportunities in Thunder Bay, the thoroughly successful Pride Festival the previous week and week-end, and the profound disappointment that the United for Mining Justice network has experienced in the

failure of the Trudeau Government to establish an empowered Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise. Ernie also recognized the challenge of organizing clusters.

To Susan's question about funding the clusters, Will responded that, especially in the areas of Right Relations and Affirming Ministries, there were funds for activities. He added that the Canadian Shield Regional Council was discovering how rich in resources they are and referred specifically to Thunder Bay and Marathon.

Ren then presented a report on the **Shining Waters Regional Council**, noting first the written report from Tina Conlin (who was not able to attend). He also noted the report on the Social and Ecological Commission, which Susan had presented. Various groups and clusters are forming, especially in regard to social justice concerns. There was strong leadership in regard to Living into Right Relations, and people were working on becoming an Intercultural Church. As Social Justice Animator, he was less active in being the formal face as an advocate and more interested in bringing people together. His strong focuses are Indigenous Justice and Right Relations across all of the Shining Waters Region, talking about White Privilege in the Intercultural Work, working for justice for LGBTQI2S+ people, and anti-poverty work. He was intensely aware of the characteristics of different cultures.

in regard to Tina's report as community minister, he noted actions in opposition to government cuts in Toronto and the Butterfly Project to focus the work of United for Mining Justice. He also referred to the sex-education cuts and mentioned a proposal to involve churches in education. Curriculum work in regard to sex-education and physical education, which was sensitive to gender and sexuality, could be done. He also pointed to the connection between mental health and being intercultural. Looking at the history of Indigenous People was important, and he pointed to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. An Equity Committee has been formed in the Shining Waters Region, which will broaden the partnership with Affirm United.

Ernie spoke to the potential for development of intercultural understanding for members of the "WASP" United Church of Canada by having people learn about the treatment of European immigrants. He cited his own Mennonite forebears, who fled Russification in the 1870s only to be subjected to Canadianization in Manitoba. Some of them fled Canada in the 1920s and migrated to Mexico.

Carey also asked the Network to remember the Climate Justice concerns that are so important to Marg Murray, even though she was not with us.

Charles appreciated the Equity work being undertaken in a couple of regions--"kudos to you!" And Susan observed that poverty lends itself so readily to handouts, when the structural realities seem overwhelming.

Finance Report

At 11:30 am, Will began his financial report with a table of receipts and expenses since 2007. The funds requested from the conferences for the 2019 year had been received, to a total of \$7,300. The same sum received in 2018 had made possible the customary grant of \$3,000 to ISARC. He asked what the request should be for 2020 and observed that he had been reminding the three Executive Ministers of this upcoming request.

Charles asked whether there were any concerns about the Covenant. He suggested that if we were happy with it, we should ask the Regions to sign on, i.e., we should send it to the Executive of each Regional Council to obtain their approval. In regard to matters of concern, Will asked whether there would be involvement of two people from each Region. Ren suggested that one of the meetings could take place by Zoom. Will reminded the meeting that the Mission envelope for the Regional Councils was \$289,000. A straw poll suggested that each Regional Council should be asked to provide \$1,500 and that one of the semiannual meetings be face-to-face in association with the ISARC gathering. Sharon suggested that, if the costs became larger, that would provide a basis for requesting \$2,000 annually.

The Covenant of the Social Justice Network of Ontario Regions of The United Church of Canada

Charles asked everyone to review the draft Covenant over the next couple of weeks and send any suggestions for improvement to him. He would then draft the correspondence required to put this before the Regional Councils.

Other Business

Charles then suggested that we plan to meet again in the fall in connection with the ISARC meeting. Susan stated that the next Faith Leaders Forum was planned for 27 November. It was consequently decided to meet on Monday and Tuesday, 25-26 November 2019, and people were asked to pencil this in.

Susan reminded the meeting of the Stories which were being sought around the province, including from Thunder Bay. She noted Rabbi Schachter's concern about the work force changes developing these days, which intensify concerns about poverty.

Charles declared the meeting adjourned at 12:00 and Charles, Ernie, Jane, and Sharon decided to lunch together before they headed home.

Respectfully submitted,
Ernie Epp