

2002-08-19

URGENT - TO SESSIONS, COUNCILS/BOARDS, NACC CONGREGATIONS

REMIT #7: REORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED CHURCH

Friends in Christ,

You will remember that about a year ago the NACC Executive offered you some advice on how to respond to this remit. It was to have been dealt with last Fall, but (presumably because much of the initial reaction was negative) the deadline for response was suddenly extended to October 31, 2002. In the interim General Council Office has provided additional explanation.

Even though a number of Presbyteries and Pastoral Charges have already dealt with this matter, others have not. If your Pastoral Charge and/or Presbytery have not yet responded, what follows may be helpful.

As noted in our earlier bulletin of last Fall, the proposal to reorganize the church's court structure comes to us in the form of a "remit" (i.e. a church-wide vote). What is proposed is complex, but the core question is whether to terminate Presbyteries and Conferences, replacing them with Regional Councils.

Please note, remits permit only YES or NO responses, and so this is very much an "all or nothing" matter. Because of several serious concerns about the proposal, the NACC Executive is recommending your Pastoral Charge vote NO in this remit, and that your representatives also vote NO at Presbytery.

Why is the Executive making that recommendation? – Because it believes Remit 7 suffers from the following critical flaws:

- A. **Potential for Serious Damage to Congregations** – The likelihood of negative impact on the local congregation or Pastoral Charge is great. Even though the Pastoral Charge is the acknowledged basic unit of the church (*Basis of Union, 4.2*), the ability of each Charge to carry out its particular mission will likely be compromised.
- B. The Potential for Other Negative Effects – "The Working Group on the Changing Church" (whose Report has led to Remit 7) appears to be aware of at least some of these: for instance it notes a

- number of “challenges” faced by Newfoundland and Labrador Conference when it was asked to test the pros and cons of a three court model. (See Appendix #1, attached.) In the view of the Executive, Remit 7 does not lay to rest many serious concerns about the negative impact of the proposed changes.
- C. A Basic Failure in Justification – At root, the United Church’s present difficulties stem primarily from decades of failure to promote an authentic, Scripturally-based understanding of the gospel rather than from organizational weaknesses. (For the Working Group’s rationale, see Appendix #2.)
 - D. Cost – The proposed reorganization promises to consume much of the church’s time, energy, and funds over coming years, distracting it from its proper business of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.
 - E. Inadequacies in Presentation – The Working Group’s Report contains notable inaccuracies about the current system, provides an inadequate description of what is proposed, and has not satisfactorily described the implications of the suggested changes.

Specifically,

1. As the NACC understands the *Basis of Union*, authority in the United Church is clearly intended to be delegated “upwards”. The effect of Remit 7 would be to introduce an unprecedented degree of “top down” control by General Council.

Comment: Many of the points below will illustrate why this is so, and the Report of The Working Group on the Changing Church (which led to Remit 7) clearly works to maintain and strengthen the role of the General Council at the expense of the other courts. This trend to centralize effective control in the General Council (and hence in the General Council Executive and Office) is by no means new: see, for instance, *Manual* sections 107, 329, 421, inserted in 1998, which taken in sequence, illustrate the point very clearly. (Here, Pastoral Charges will be particularly interested in Sec. 107, which gives Presbyteries unrestricted power to intervene directly in any and all of their affairs. If the Remit passes, this power would pass to the Regional Council.)

2. Pastoral Charges would become part of Regional Councils. The Councils would cover much larger geographic areas and contain many more members than the present Presbyteries.

Concern: Even as members of (smaller) Presbyteries, many Charges often feel “out of the loop”, on the sidelines. With the proposed larger body,

they can expect even less opportunity to engage in effective debate and to exercise influence. For example, based on 2000 UCC statistics, the proposed regional councils would, on the average, be more than twice as large as the present presbyteries. This does not seem to accord with the Report's suggestion that "smaller and closer are better" (*ROP [Record of Proceedings, 37th General Council]*, p. 215).

3. Regional Council staff will be "staff of the General Council working in the regions" (Virginia Coleman, General Secretary of General Council).

Concern: This would mean General Council's influence at the local level would become immediate, precise, and all encompassing. Through its regional staff, GC would be able to interfere directly in the affairs of individual Pastoral Charges to a new and dangerous degree.

4. Virginia Coleman has also said, "Some of the current overlapping of duties will have to be 'sorted out' but no duties or powers would either be added or deleted." Here she is referring to the relationship between the responsibilities of the old Presbytery/Conference and the new Regional Council. However, in light of the above worries about centralization of control, several omissions in the report are alarming.

Concerns: For example,

- Will the Pastoral Charge retain its present responsibility for initiating a call to a new minister? (The report mentions only the Regional Council's responsibility in this matter.)
 - At present, General Council is required to consult Presbyteries and (when appropriate) Pastoral Charges on changes affecting "doctrine, worship, membership, government and property" (Basis of Union, 8.6.2). The Report is completely silent on this, not mentioning even Regional Councils.
5. What is proposed is a monumental reorganization of the centre of the United Church's structure, and, while the Report which led to the Remit shows evidence of dedicated labour, it is short on critical organizational details.

Concern: For example, the church is being asked to approve a plan without knowing even the most obvious basic details – e.g. the number of regional councils is merely described as "about 40"; there is no information as to geographical boundaries. Presumably, such fundamentals have not been worked out as yet.

6. It is acknowledged that the proposal will cost "more than the old

system", with the Report estimating \$20,000,000 will be needed in 2003 just for the work of the Regional Councils. (It also cautions that this figure should be seen as a very approximate guideline to future years, "due in part to the relatively long period before the structure would be fully operational", hopefully in 2005)(*ROP*, p.263). Please note, this \$20,000,000 is additional to the start-up costs mentioned below at #7.

Concern: Here again the church is being asked to approve the plan on the basis of sketchy information. The Report concedes that overall costs will be significantly higher. (See "Funding the work of the whole church", *ROP*, p. 218.) Moreover, the expectation is that the current system of "free will" support through the Mission and Service Fund would be replaced with formal congregational assessments (see "Cost", *ROP*, p. 217, and "Projected Revenues and Expenses", *ROP*, p. 263.) Such a system of assessments, even if set regionally, could be expected to cause difficulties for a number of congregations: no formula can deal adequately with wide disparities in resources, challenges in ministry, etc.

7. The two-year start-up costs alone are estimated at \$1,500,000 (*ROP*, p.275).

Concern: This appears to be low – for instance, there is evidently no provision for the relocation costs of the estimated 120 staff General Council who will be appointed to the Regions.

8. Although the "definitions" section of the Bylaws states clearly that there is presently provision for five levels of court (*Manual*, p.38), the Report speaks routinely of there being only four.

Concern: While Official Boards (Church Boards, Church Councils) would all apparently become "Pastoral Councils", there is no mention of the base court, the Session. From an explanatory note regarding multiple point Pastoral Councils (*ROP*, p 249), it appears Sessions are to be renamed "Congregational Councils". If so, the *Basis of Union* will have to be amended. Doing so might merely involve substituting one term for another, but (as evidenced in 4 above) there is also the possibility that some of the Session's present duties and responsibilities would vanish.

9. There are a number of legal implications which do not seem to have been considered.

Concern: For example, there are a variety of Presbytery-based corporations, many with responsibility for significant funds and property. Legal costs for formal reassignment of oversight, etc., could be

considerable.

10. The church is being asked to embark on a long and complex process of readjustment. As suggested above, it will have to deal with a number of problems not anticipated by the Working Group. Is there a reasonable chance of this being pulled off without very significant damage?

Comment: The disarray into which General Council Office was thrown by changes authorized by the 37th General Council (see *The United Church Observer*, June, 2002, pp. 16-18) provides a timely warning of committing to change before everything has been thoroughly thought through. In terms of scale and complexity, what is proposed by Remit 7 is vastly more challenging.

11. Finally, the root argument appears to be that the proposed reorganization is justified because the Church is presently unable to conduct its business as efficiently and as effectively as it should. (See Appendix #3.)

Comment: Inefficiencies undoubtedly exist, but the NACC Executive believes these can be dealt with by adjusting processes and procedures within the present structures, particularly if there is a reversal of the General Council's current "top-down" assumptions.

Conclusion: In the light of the above, the Executive of the NACC recommends Pastoral Charges and their Presbytery Representatives vote No to this remit.

Yours in Christ's service,

Geoff Wilkins. For the NACC Executive

Please note: For how GC debated this matter, see *Record of Proceedings 2000*, pp 201 – 206. The complete Report "A Choice for a Changing Church" is at *ROP*, pp. 213-293.

Appendix 1

From the *Record of Proceedings of the 37th General Council*:

[Note: (1) this *ROP* excerpt refers to the experimental Districts in Newfoundland and Labrador, which are analogous to the proposed Regional Councils; (2) what appears below is a selection of points made in the Working Group's Report.]

The Challenges of the District System

Among the challenges identified in the evaluation process were: geography, workload, financial pressures, need for clear guidelines and the length of time required for change.

- Geography will be a challenge in many parts of Canada, whatever structures the church adopts. This is certainly the case in Newfoundland and Labrador. Ongoing work will be required to support and connect geographically remote regions.
- There has been no apparent reduction in the number of volunteers needed to fulfil the responsibilities of the District. In fact, in the Ministry Personnel and Education area, the workload has increased.
- The District experiment - in the nature of an experiment - began without a detailed set of guidelines and changes to *The Manual* to reflect its new structure. A large measure of creative adaptation was required to fit old rules to new ways of doing things. The lack of guidelines also posed a problem in explaining the foundation and rationale for the new structure to people.
- After four years of the District model, there was still a lament for the loss of the Presbytery system. It was only in the eight-year evaluation that loyalty to, and appreciation for, the new structure began to emerge more strongly. By that point, there were people in the system who had not known any other structure in the Conference.

In thinking through the relative advantages of a various models for restructuring, the Working Group is aware of a number of important cautions arising from the Newfoundland and Labrador experiment:

- Without a reduction in the complexity and number of responsibilities of lay and ordered members of various bodies, it is unlikely that any new structure can achieve the goal of reducing the volunteer workload. Reduction in duplication alone will not obtain the desired result.
- It will be imperative that any new structure be accompanied by clear organizational guidelines. This will not only reduce confusion and

uncertainty in doing the work in a new way, but will be important in helping people understand the reasons for the changes.

(*ROP*, pp. 237-8)

Appendix #2

From the *Record of Proceedings*:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Change?

Successive General Councils have identified the need for change in the now seventy-five year-old structure of the United Church. That structure has enabled connection and lively mission across the church, but it is showing signs of wear and strain. Church Courts often struggle to find enough people to fulfil heavy and increasingly complex responsibilities. New generations of church people question the duplication, slowness and inefficiency in the system and find structures inaccessible. Many congregational members have little understanding of larger church structures and a sense of great distance between themselves and the other parts of the church. United Church members and church Courts have identified the following as reasons to change our structure:

- *To free more of the time and energy of lay and ordered people for direct involvement in mission and to minimize the amount of time, money and energy spent on governance*
- *To make the most efficient use of human and financial resources*
- *To recognize the changing ways that church people wish to offer their time and money*
- *To eliminate unnecessary duplication*
- *To enable the work of pastoral relations, pastoral oversight and personnel matters to be carried out effectively using appropriate human and financial resources*
- *To allow changes currently taking place to happen in a coordinated fashion*
- *To simplify and streamline policies and procedures*
- *To enable a renewed vision of the mission of the church to emerge*

(*ROP*, pp. 213-4)

Appendix 3

From the *Record of Proceedings*:

What restructuring will be expected to accomplish

Through the consultation process, the Working Group has developed a list of criteria by which to test its proposals for changes in structure. Any new model for the decision-making bodies of the United Church should be expected to:

- Help us to focus the mission of each part of the body
- Provide no fewer opportunities, and, ideally, more opportunities to work ecumenically and with other faith partners
- Lessen the burden on Ministry Personnel and laity by reducing the number of tasks carried out by Presbyters and Conference members
- Allow changes in governance to happen with consistency and orderliness across the country rather than in an ad hoc fashion
- Move more of the resources of the church (staff, financial resources, training and educational materials) closer to congregations
- Clarify lines of accountability, roles and functions
- Enhance communication between the Courts of the church
- Create greater continuity between the membership of the General Council, its Divisions and Council and the other spheres of the church's decision-making responsibility
- Create a sense of lessened distance between the General Council and the congregations

(*ROP*, pp. 238-9)