

Consultation on PMRC Justice Ministry

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A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS¹

During this past year (2020) all congregations and communities of faith have faced very challenging issues due to COVID-19. Members and volunteers of communities of faith have also faced issues of financial security, employment, childcare, schooling decisions, care of loved ones and grieving those that have died. Moreover, across Canada and regionally our church memberships are for the most part declining

There is a lot on people's plates and how we meet and organize as volunteers and staff has changed completely.

The opportunity to meet online has opened up some new ways to share information and conversation between communities of faith and amongst clusters and the region.

People acknowledged that justice work in local communities of faith could be lonely.

"Issues all have importance for different people at different times. Not everyone is ready for a conversation at the same time."

In spite of these challenges, there is a strong interest in continuing the United Church history of advocacy for social justice and action in the tradition of our faith. Many see their home Communities of Faith and the UCC as a place where justice is alive in our gospel messages. They appreciate the UCC theological interpretation, in thinking beyond ourselves, and in what we speak out about. They feel like this challenges and supports them to do the same.

"We bring spiritual rootedness to our work for justice. God is at the center of this work."

Others were new to social justice as a ministry but were eager to learn more and what their involvement might look like.

The importance of building and maintaining relationships came up time and again. It was said that all justice ministry work is done more effectively through meaningful and respectful relationships.

"We need to learn to walk respectfully with each other and with all beings in creation."

The affirming process has shown how the church can create safe spaces to challenge our assumptions, biases and prejudices as we strengthen and grow our relationships with each other. The affirming process has offered people tools to have these conversations.

"Strong relationships of trust and compassion create more capacity to grow and embrace justice work."

¹ See Appendix Two for learnings from the interviews shared with the focus groups



“Becoming an affirming church encourages difficult and deeper conversations.. with the potential to alter the DNA of those involved in terms of recognizing injustice elsewhere.”
Pam Rocker

This is true also for the Region's recommitment to Anti-Black Racism and Righting Relationships with First Nations. The Region has a leadership role in supporting communities of faith to learn and understand our privilege, to look at where racism is embedded in who we are and to learn how it is we might Walk in a Good Way along the path to reconciliation for the wrongs done through the residential school system.

"Understanding our colonial past and racist history is important work to encourage in all our communities of faith."

We have a Native Ministry within our region that is available for non-indigenous people to ask for leadership and advice. There are also a number of accessible resources for these conversations (e.g. KAIROS Blanket Exercise, White privilege and racism workshops and book studies).

See the Appendices for a partial list of existing justice initiatives in the Pacific Mountain Region and national UCC priorities for advocacy.

Social and ecological justice work done by communities of faith is largely volunteer-driven. Some but not all UCC regions have dedicated staff to enable and support this work.

There are multiple points of entry to justice work. From stocking shelves in a thrift store, to gathering clothes for those in need, to refugee support, to advocating for the homeless, to fighting for a Guaranteed Livable Income, from fighting climate change to seeking peace in Palestine. All are important. All are interconnected and all are points of entry for newcomers and experienced leaders.

"Dishwashing is important."

In some regions, justice is at the core of their vision. Justice goes hand in hand with Faith Formation work. For other regions, justice is off to the side somewhat. The key is to integrate justice throughout.

"Faith without action is barren."

Amplifying the voices of our youth and young adults is vital. They are teaching us new ways of thinking and acting in the face of the climate emergency. We can work to revitalize the church with young people and we can work alongside and partner with young adults and organizations in the community (e.g. Nelson United Church).

Considering the existential threat of the climate crisis, working with young adults, inter-faith and community organizations on climate justice should be a priority and will be part of our legacy.

Notably, visible support for social and ecological justice including commitments already made by the Region in support of Indigenous rights, our affirming nature and anti-black racism, are important to young adults and other allies in the broader community.

“We don’t want to shy away from our Christian message of justice for all.”

Our visibility is critical to build understanding and support for justice within our communities of faith, to be seen by newcomers, those that pass by our places of worship or engage our social media. We also build relationships and support by joining civil society campaigns with other organizations.

We can be successful if the invitation to this work is compassionately, energetically and continuously made through our messaging at all levels. A theology of justice should be at the heart of the church’s reason for existence.

Staff positions supporting justice work in some regions are overseen or guided by regional committees or commissions. Funding support is necessary in the form of grants or similar for work sponsored by clusters or networks giving voice to issues of justice.

In 2014, BC Conference Justice Advisory Circle held a conference-wide meeting entitled “Rising Hope: Turning the World Just Side Up” to share experiences, energize and mobilize participants on social and ecological justice issues being addressed by churches within the Conference.

The following year, the Justice Advisory Circle sponsored a conversational survey to explore how best to support social justice initiatives within and amongst congregations in the region. The exercise was intended also to begin building a regional network for justice and outreach work. The Justice Advisory Circle Report recommended formalizing the BC Conference Justice Advisory Circle network with a website, blog posts, small group conversations and a follow-up conference/workshop amongst other ideas to “Support, Inspire and Connect.”

Since 2015, much has changed but the need to connect, to build relationships, to share and to learn with others remain strong. New on-line tools are available for small group conversations, webinars and meetings. Of course, BC Conference is no longer and the Pacific Mountain Region has been created. Clusters and networks are being encouraged.

The following definitions and direction establishing clusters and networks is relevant to the Pacific Mountain Region as we work to live out our faith.

- **Networks:** linking people working on specific issues (e.g., supportive housing, intercultural ministry, youth ministry) or for project work (e.g., event planning) that function through the whole church, depending on the issue

- **Clusters:** local clusters of communities of faith that would provide community and support for communities of faith and their leaders, and focus on worship, mission, learning, collegiality, and strategic planning

The UCC General Council Executive agreed that

- Those involved in clusters and networks will define their own meaning and responsibilities
- Church councils will not define clusters and networks
- The church is encouraged to experiment with how clusters and networks can assist in living out the faith of The United Church of Canada
- Clusters and networks are encouraged to seek support from local resources
- Local bodies that wish to support clusters and networks are encouraged to do so
- Church councils may support clusters and networks to their level of ability and within their areas of responsibility
- Clusters and networks are encouraged to share their experiences with others in the church and the wider world through media available to the church
- Following a period of experimentation, the church will learn intentionally from the experiences of clusters and networks

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Leadership

The Region should:

1. Engage practices and concrete strategies to embody regional commitments to just relations within the church and beyond (e.g. affirming church, anti-racism, reconciliation, human rights, equality/equity)
2. Prioritize a social and ecological justice lens and our justice legacy in decision-making remits of committees reviewing change of use of church properties, those controlling church investments, human resource policies and volunteer engagement
3. Dedicate staff and a budget for supporting communities of faith, clusters and networks as they lift up justice through education, advocacy and action
4. Encourage and support communities of faith to engage with regional justice initiatives (e.g. Orange Shirt Day) and to join with ecumenical, inter-faith and community alliances (e.g. KAIROS, Greater Victoria Acting Together - GVAT) focused on justice
5. Speak out as a Region (e.g. town hall events, media advisories) on social and ecological justice joining with other faith groups and other organizations calling for justice and highlighting position statements and endorsements in communications with our communities of faith
6. Follow-through on Regional Council endorsements and position statements (e.g. 2015 requests for a provincial fracking moratorium and a review of LNG-based economic strategy) with continuing education and advocacy
7. Promote national church campaigns within the region, liaise with United Church of Canada national office and encourage the national office and the Moderator to speak out and to join others in calls for justice
8. Encourage youth involvement in justice work through:
 - Integration of social and ecological justice (with attention to Indigenous rights) into Faith Formation, the First Third Ministry programs and Native Ministries
 - Encouraging local alliances with youth and young adult climate strikers (e.g. Nelson United Church) and with Indigenous youth

Building a Regional Justice Network

The Region should:

1. Activate and maintain a Regional Justice Network contact list of church members, adherents and staff to draw the circle wider.
 - Start with tuning up the Justice Network email list of approximately 400 individuals and activate the renewed list with (quarterly?) updates, analysis with short and simple, straightforward action ideas to all ministers and many lay congregants (by name or by post) – celebrate actions and successes, enable smaller churches and busy congregants to raise the issues, share ideas
 - Establish a Justice Network e-bulletin board for everyone to share event notices, organizing experiences, campaign information and to learn about what others are doing with a “one-stop shopping” feel and user-driven
2. Bring together the leadership of various justice campaigns in the region with regional staff (e.g. Justice Advisory Circle) from time to time to assist in coordinating campaigns, to advise on priority actions, to serve as a resource group to the Region, and to organize annual/bi-annual region-wide gatherings

Supporting Campaign Networks

The Region should:

1. Enable and support issue-focused networks including PalNet and the various national campaign networks (e.g. Affirm United) and any new regional or sub-regional campaign networks and alliances arising from communities of faith or clusters by:
 - Speaking out on issues, endorsing campaign goals, signing on to correspondence, sponsoring petitions, etc.
 - Participating in campaign planning and implementation
 - Supporting campaign communications through media advisories and availability, social media and publications
 - Providing access to meeting and communication e-platforms (e.g. Zoom, Discourse)
 - Providing funding support
 - Sponsoring events and meetings

Material resources and on-line presence

The Region should:

1. Prepare and provide (or source) educational resources for all ages for leaders and members of our churches
 - Establish and advertise a catalogue/library of resource materials
 - Promote First Third Ministry and other existing Ministry resources, as applicable
 - Promote UCC and KAIROS resource materials (e.g. Orange Shirt Day) and awareness of materials produced by allied organizations
 - Develop and produce campaign materials
 - Webinar and podcast support
 - Assist in the preparation of root-cause analysis and discernment
 - Create toolkits for energizing outreach and compassionate work in support of transformative experiences and advocacy for justice
2. Make changes to the Region's website (e.g. contemplative justice links) to better reflect current priorities and emphasize our nature as a justice-seeking community of faith. Also, consider design changes to provide ready overview of justice initiatives/social action and to improve navigation. Finally, keep the website up-to-date on social justice issues with background information and documents and links of interest
3. Integrate justice messaging into Regional social media for church and community audiences

Leadership Training

The Region should:

1. Open *LeaderShift* events to lay and informal church leaders, as appropriate
2. Share webinar information and training opportunities on the Justice Network bulletin board (to be established)
3. Support youth leadership training

Priorities

Some current and recommended Regional initiatives/priorities

1. Encourage and support all communities of faith in the region and clusters to become affirming communities of faith (e.g. completing Regional affirming status) and build on the affirming "toolkit" to expand understanding of our differences

2. Encourage our communities of faith to end silence about and work towards the dismantling of anti-black and other forms of racism (e.g. UCC anti-racism initiative – That All May be One)
3. Encourage further acts of reconciliation at all levels within the church in relation to the harms done in the residential school system (e.g. Orange Shirt Day) and encourage relationship building with Native Ministries within the Region
4. Encourage action on climate justice (e.g. share info on local initiatives)
5. Promote the “For the Love of Creation” national ecumenical campaign
6. Encourage ongoing conversation and implement campaigns on Palestine and Israel (e.g. e-petition on protecting Palestinian children)
7. Promote use of UCC campaign resources (e.g. Unsettling Goods Advent Peace Box)
8. Promote refugee settlement support and migrant justice initiatives
9. Support national Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) campaign
10. Promote Mission & Service

APPENDIX ONE

Terms of Reference

- To identify stakeholders and hold consultations and/or focus groups regarding the Region's justice ministry
- Consultation will include a review of existing programs as well as identifying potential opportunities for future ministry. Consideration will be given to inclusion and diversity.
- A summary of the findings of the consultation will be provided to the region, with recommendations about future directions for the ministry.

Methods

- Stakeholders identified with assistance of regional staff
- Held consultations by phone call, video link and email communication
- Held focus groups via video-conference
- Conducted online research
- Participated in two Leadershift events
- Attended several PMRC town halls, the Kootenay FaithFest and the PMRC General Meeting
- Prepared this summary of findings and recommendations

Consultation interviews

More than 40 interviews were completed from September to mid-December, 2020. These interviews included individuals from around the Pacific Mountain Region providing some geographic diversity. Only one young adult was interviewed. Various staff were interviewed from the Pacific Mountain Region, Eastern Ontario/Outaouais Region, Antler River Watershed Region, Region 15 and Northern Spirit Region, as were relevant UCC national office and KAIROS Canada staff. A list of those interviewed is included in the Appendices.

The consultation touched on a wide range of issues and actions as they relate to justice and creating change. Many interviewees were highly focused on certain projects or issues. Many acts of compassion and caring were shared and the importance of standing for human rights here and abroad was emphasized. All those interviewed were filled with strong values of justice and compassion.

Participants:

Heather MacDonald
Marianna Harris
Julie Graham*

Susan Draper
Barry Morris
Pamela Evans

Debbie Hubbard
Keith Simmonds
Mary Nichol

Helen Allen
Sandra Nixon
Zsuzsa Harsman
Janet Gear
Lori Neale*
Laura Hunter*
Linn Murray
Beverly Brown
John Bullas
Minnie Hornridge

Christina Kinch
Lori Ransom, UCC National staff
Rob Crosby-Shearer*
Beth Lorimer, KAIROS Canada
Pamela Rocker*
Tressa Brotzky*
Judy Graves
Diane Matheson-Jiminez
Sally Bullas
Treena Duncan*

Carmen Lansdowne
Frances Kitson
Greg Powell
Robert Hart
Ibi Chuan
Elaine Julian
Allison Rennie*
Jane Dawson*
Bill Booth

*Staff - UCC Region

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were held between late November and early December with individuals who self-identified their interest in participation following an advertisement in Region's News of Note and a broadcast email invitation to a PMRC e-list. Sixty individuals signaled their intention to attend. In the end, fifty-one participated. A list of participants is included in the Appendices.

The focus group conversations were designed to seek comment on the organization of a regional justice network and overall what role the region should play. Prior to each focus group session, three questions, various working papers and set of draft recommendations were shared.

Participants:

Keith Simmonds
Barry Morris
Barbara Hansen
Cheryl Bear
Susan Johnsen
Dorothy Jeffery
Debbie Hubbard
Diane Emond
Jane Dawson
Cathie Talbot
Zsuzsa Harsman
Susan Draper
Sharon Copeman
Dana Juba
Linda Ervin
Val Holowach
Kathy Cook

Beverly Brown
Karine Poznanski
Robert Gilbert
Lynn Walford
Michael Caveney
Marianna Harris
Nigel Chuah
Linnea Good
Rob Crosby-Shearer
Helen Allen
Susan Gage
Dee McEachern
Peter Newbery
John Bullas
Kim McNaughton
Teresa Augustine
Rob Filier

Heather Clarke
Larry Todd
David Boyd
Jaylynn Byassee
Jean MacDonald
Pamela Brown
Stuart Clark
Linn Murray
Frances Kitson
Heather Macdonald
Mimi Smienk
Robert Hart
Carla Wilks
Albert Fowler
Marian Garnett
David Talbot

APPENDIX TWO

What was learned from the Interviews?

This consultation provided an important opportunity for the Region to hear from members in our communities of faith and to consider what other UCC regions are doing.

The United Church of Canada is held up as a justice organization and a reason for active membership for many.

Visibility on justice issues is important to demonstrate where we stand as a Christian church, to challenge assumptions, to encourage debate and to shift policy.

Faith-based organizations provide opportunities for spiritual growth, being in community and for action. We seek relationships with others to contribute, to be nurtured and to grow.

Seeing injustice around us, naming it and letting others know that we see it, lifts up the message that “you are not alone.” Part of our justice work is to invite others to enter relationships with us so we might journey together.

There is a widespread call for justice to run through all that the church does. Love and justice need to be at the core of the church.

The climate emergency is acknowledged as our most critical issue as is the church’s role to stand for a just response to this crisis.

Supporting Indigenous rights and working towards reconciliation must be priorities for the region.

The church must work to advance human rights here in Canada and abroad (e.g. Palestinian rights).

Charitable works (e.g. community meals, thrift stores) and refugee support provide critical opportunities to lend a hand to those in need. Volunteerism also can encourage relationship and community building inside and outside the church and feelings of community.

Importantly, charity and outreach also can help to galvanize advocacy for social and economic policies designed to reduce inequality (e.g. guaranteed livable income).

Achieving justice means systemic change that aligns with the values of the church and lifts up the marginalized.

Faith organizations are important allies with other groups advocating for justice in our communities and across the country and globally.

APPENDIX THREE

List of some Justice initiatives of communities of faith, clusters and networks in Pacific Mountain Region (pre-COVID)

- Many meals being prepared - usually sit down and relationship building but now a couple continue as take out
- Shelters in a few church buildings continue in partnerships with other organizations
- Food security partnerships in a few communities - gardening/workshops/learning more about what's involved/advocating for those that need it
- Social enterprise partnerships being set up in a couple of communities of faith
- Thrift shops - trying to figure out how to operate during COVID restrictions
- Refugee support ongoing in a number of communities of faith
- Conversations and groups working on what it means to 'reconcile' or 'walk in a good way' with our indigenous neighbours - ongoing in several cases and on hold for some
- First United Partnership Circles
- Longhouse Ministry and other Native Ministries
- Affirming processes underway in various communities of faith
- On-line book studies through Leadershift and communities of faith (e.g. 21 Things You May Not Have Known About The Indian Act)
- On-line video conferencing events on anti-racism (e.g. Racism 101)
- Mid-north Island Cluster on justice issues - sustainability issues
- Some communities of faith in northern BC had worked to launch a northern justice network but limited people/energy means difficult to sustain
- Various communities of faith are working with and supporting young adults and youth calling for urgent action on the climate emergency
- Three or four communities of faith are taking an active part in Greater Victoria Acting Together (GVAT) - an alliance of 33 diverse organizations with over 70,000 members
- PalNet Pacific Network consists of a core group that uses email and social media to reach its larger network. Most recent initiative was support for a parliamentary e-petition telling Canada to Stand Up for Children's Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that was endorsed by PMR with a follow-up town hall.
- Zatoun products are sold by some communities of faith to raise awareness about Palestine/ Israel issues and to support the Palestinian olive growers
- Several communities have connections with the Stephen Lewis Foundation – Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign in relation to the devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic in Africa.
- Some communities of faith are engaged with Amnesty International letter writing to free prisoners of conscience
- Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) national campaign spearheaded by several PMR members and others from regions across the country (following up on the UCC Moderator's letter to the Prime Minister). This group is looking for support to share information and build support within communities of faith

APPENDIX FOUR

NATIONAL UCC Priorities

Rev Michael Blair, UCC General Secretary, has identified 4 areas of advocacy work for the national church, as follows:

1. Climate Justice
2. Palestine/Israel
3. Refugee/Migration
4. Poverty

Rev. Blair says we must be witnessing and listening to hear what purpose lies at the heart of the United Church of Canada at the beginning of its third generation.

He asks the church to consider

- What does an inclusive community of faith look like in terms of all creation?
- How broadly based are we, how diverse can we be - how inclusive are we?

He says we should be looking for partnerships in all manner of areas as “together we can do more than alone”.

(excerpted from town hall with Michael Blair and Treena Duncan)