

## **Presentation on Context**

### **Moderator's Town Halls: Strategic Planning (April and May 2021)**

Critical to strategic planning is reading the signs of the times, opening minds and hearts to the world around us as a context for discerning our bold action. How have we begun to read the signs of the times in this process? We have looked at it in many different ways—such as research, polling, reports, interviews, surveys. We also held a session on March 6, 2021, with the General Council Executive and National Indigenous Council to gather their insights. All of this harvesting gave us a broad sweep—pages and pages of information on context. This data was overwhelming, much of it negative. Then the project team took a critical eye at what of that context not just creates a sense of challenge or crisis, but what presents potential opportunity. We will explore six areas into which we will root what comes after—mission, vision, and strategic direction.

### **This Changes Everything: Imperative of Climate and Indigenous Justice, Racial Equity**

The global climate crisis “changes everything,” with huge risks to communities, peoples, and the earth itself that cannot be responsibly or ethically ignored in future planning. Historic and current injustices facing Indigenous and racialized communities are being recognized through calls to action toward Truth and Reconciliation and movements like Black Lives Matter, increasing the possibility of racial equity. In this moment, there are possibilities to centre Indigenous wisdom, partner in shared advocacy, and demonstrate integrity through continuing efforts to address Indigenous justice, anti-racism, and ecological justice as church.



### **Not Nuns, Nones: The Challenge of Secularization**

Those who say they have no religion are the fastest-growing religious group in Canada. Attendance in all mainline Protestant denominations is dropping sharply, with United Church of Canada weekly attendance reduced 37 percent over the last 10 years. Polling suggests that opposition to religion, particularly in young people, comes in large part from perceptions of exclusive religious beliefs and fusion to conservative politics. This means that the United Church, if known, should be able to respond. In addition, the number of persons born outside Canada continues to rise, with 40 percent of new immigrants being Christian. Outreach to migrant churches and peoples may offer opportunities for mutual transformation.



### **More than Buildings, but...: The Call for Collective Discernment**

An estimated one-third of Canada's faith buildings are in danger of closing, approximately one United church per week. Fifty percent of non-profit groups currently using faith buildings could not see how they would find another space. The trend is particularly acute in rural communities and may be accelerated by the pandemic. Two national United Church initiatives—[Faithful Footprints](#) and the [United Property Resource Corporation](#)—are showing some value in national resources and support, but other aspects of property challenge may still need more support.



Shared United Church and ecumenical ministries may be an answer, but are not always easy to coordinate locally. Could collective discernment and more intensive support help?

### **No Going Back: Polishing Pandemic Silver Linings**

The pandemic has revealed vulnerabilities and deepened inequities while changing, in some cases definitively, patterns of behaviour. Patterns for work have been altered, and so too models of worship and meeting. Recognizing that equity issues in connectivity continue, some faith communities discovered some benefits in online worship. More than three times the current religious attendees say they would maintain the availability of online services rather than discontinue them post-pandemic (56 percent would maintain online services versus 17 percent eliminating them). The pandemic also showed the value of some collective support and resources from both national and regional church. This may open opportunities for stronger church-wide shared services and specialized resources, online worship innovation, and creation of technology hubs, for example to support multi point charges.

### **Change Again? Renewing and Reimagining Leadership**

There seems to be a growing recognition, even from folks right in the thick of things, that there are aspects of denominational and organizational culture that impede bold change—things like high degrees of criticism, lack of trust of decisions, fear on the part of leadership to act

decisively, and overreliance on every individual voice rather than on collective processes. At the General Council Office there are remnants of silos, and a need to articulate a unified vision and strategy and better track results. With deep respect to our leaders, we wonder if they have the support and skills we need to shift culture, adapt to ongoing change, and work and minister flexibly and creatively. And there is a need and opportunity for new pathways that will lead to more diverse and equitable leadership for the present and future.



These are the key context challenges that the project team felt had seeds of opportunity in them. But there is of course one more key challenge, and that is the declining resource environment, with some unknowns about the long-term effect of COVID. Looking only at Mission & Service funding, we know the following:

- 1991: \$31.6 million
- 2020: \$19.6 million

We need to think about what we can expect for 2031. While this a pretty huge challenge, there is also a sense that if mission and vision were clarified and giving strategies shifted, there may be some capacity to slow this process.

These are the overall areas of context where we believe there is both challenge and opportunity and in which we can root our mission, vision, and strategic objectives, in addition to the core commitments and values.

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