

UCC Framework for Public Witness and Advocacy 2009

1. *That the United Church of Canada, in its diverse manifestations, embraces justice-making as integral to faith and mission.*
2. *Congregations, courts and ministries of the UCC engage in education, theological reflection, social analysis, advocacy and action for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.*
3. *Engage with Canadian, First Nations and global partners in public witness and advocacy, addressing systemic injustice, critical needs and care of creation, for just, equitable and sustainable communities.*

(from a statement of JGER Unit Goals 2009)

1.0 The public witness of the United Church of Canada is grounded in a reformed Protestant ethos of its founding denominations: the Congregationalist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Building on the evangelical tradition of transforming individuals in the 19th century, through the social gospel movement of transforming the social order in the 21st century with global, ecumenical, regional and local partners, the United Church continues to seek justice and resist evil through a variety of public policy initiatives.

1.1 Background and Context

First Nations peoples originally populated the land we now call “Canada” hunting, fishing, gathering, and planting crops for sustenance. Family and tribal systems along with ecological and spiritual teachings and practices guided these peoples’ lives. With the influx of the French and English in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, first as traders and missionaries, and afterwards as settlers, colonization changed the nature of society and how the church saw its role. “Christianizing” came to mean “civilizing” and “colonizing” First Nations peoples, as well as Europeans, for the sake of personal salvation as well as social control.

The new country “Canada” was primarily an agrarian society. However, growing urban slums populated by unemployed farm workers and newly arrived immigrants in the early 20th century, pushed Canadian churches to begin thinking about poverty and people’s welfare in broader societal terms. In the 1930’s, the exploitative conditions created by industrial development and the state’s complicity provoked theologians to begin reflecting on the organizing of society on Christian social values - thus the development of the “social gospel”. Those working with the poor came to reject the popular notion that work, thrift, and foresight automatically led to success. Social workers – largely church-based at the time - ceased to moralize about the shortcomings of individuals and moved beyond seeing the family as the primary provider of support and began calling for a government supported social safety net. The secularization of society following World War II shifted the focus from the development of a Christian social order to the building of a “responsible society”, or social welfare state, increasingly informed by the experience of partners in the Global South. Charity and service became integrated into a larger vision of justice-making and systemic change. The methodology and important role of the public witness of the church was set: the churches were called to be aware of their social role and to see its resources as a powerful vehicle for social change.

Canada, rooted in its aboriginal, French, and English heritage, continues to welcome immigrants from all over the world. It is a country of strong francophone, anglophone and other diverse cultural contexts. This reality brings alive both the local and global context for advocacy.

Civil religion no longer plays a major role in post-Christian Canadian society. Instances of civil religion when they do appear, are suspect as they reflect a nationalist and neo-liberal economic agenda, often associated with empire. Historically though, the church has often aligned itself with oppressive forces and crucified Christ anew. It is not surprising then that in a liberal democratic society many would prefer the churches to understand their musings on political questions as issues of private conscience where they can remain irrelevant and do little harm. More Canadians, however, belong to religious communities than political parties. In Canada the public square is not secular, it is multi-faith. The recognition of this fact is the true embodiment of the liberal democratic commitment to freedom of religion, not relegating faith to individual conscience.

Today, we are witnessing the break-down of financial and economic systems, an increase in conflict and militarism, and the destruction of our Earth home. These problems disproportionately affect women and children, impoverished people, refugees, migrants, Indigenous peoples, and populations in the global south. The confluence of these crises compels the church to pray, speak out, and act in the public arena for the sake of a moral, sustainable economy and a peaceful world.

1.2 UCC Congregational Climate: the need for education and capacity building for justice

At this critical time for congregational advocacy and public witness, UCC congregations in the early twenty-first century face challenges of context and mission. Demographic changes of the last decade have had a profound effect on the nature of the neighbourhoods in which congregations are situated. Some urban and small town congregations can no longer claim their traditional identity as *community churches* and so search for new and exciting ways of being church. Some rural congregations are faced with aging memberships, changing land usage and farm crises; others welcome younger families and newly retired city folk in a context of healthy and sustainable farming operations.

As well, many congregations feel weighed down with concerns about their own economic security, membership and participation. They see being involved more broadly in their community and world as something they will do when they have resolved these more immediate concerns. As well, multiple demands on family time and the allure of a consumerist culture compete with the practices of Sunday morning worship, study groups and outreach efforts offered by congregations.

Some congregations have lost sight or become confused about the mission of the church. Our once strong rootedness in the social gospel and our connection to community ministries has ceased to ground many churches. Our vision is clouded and our future as justice-makers is uncertain.

These are some of the complex realities of our church today. It is imperative, therefore, that education and capacity building for justice-making be undertaken for the sake of energizing and opening congregations to respond to their contexts and the Spirit in their midst. Through education and

animation, congregations may begin to engage in a more holistic understanding of “mission” that places God’s mission and prophetic ministry at the centre of church life, rather than on the periphery as an optional extra.

2.0 Biblical Calls for Public Witness

Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace. Acts 18:9

Be ready always to give an answer to everyone that asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. 1 Peter 3:15

Numerous references in the Gospels from the Sermon on the Mount to Luke’s record that Jesus was anointed, “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free”, all bear witness that walking in the way of Jesus means the church has a prophetic and political role and is called to live its life in the public square. As recorded in the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world with the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit takes the church into the public arena so that the church can be the church, witnessing to the resurrected Christ amidst principalities and powers. The activity of God in the public square is incarnational and co-creational. God’s work is done through human beings individually and corporately. This work is best done in partnership and solidarity with others. To resist this summons to public life is to resist the Christian calling to political ministry and to fail to live out the mission of the church.

The church needs again to make connections between its worship life and its active discipleship in the world; between its pastoral and prophetic callings; and between love and justice, in the spirit of Christ. The words of Isaiah 58 challenge us to deepen our discipleship:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; I shall go before you...and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. (Isaiah 58: 6-8,11,12)

2.1 Understanding God’s Mission for the Church

We sing of God’s good news lived out, a church with purpose: faith nurtured and hearts comforted, gifts shared for the good of all, resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize, fierce love in the face of violence, human dignity defended, members of a community held and inspired by God, corrected and comforted, instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ, creation’s mending. We sing of God’s mission. (Excerpt from “A Song of Faith” - UCC 2006)

In the final analysis it is the people in the pews who bring strength and credibility to the institutional witness of the church in the public arena. It is only beginning with local experiences of members, and global partners, that stories can be told, questions formulated, proposals tested, and political positions advocated in a developing circle of public witness.

Congregations get involved in charity and service work and start asking themselves why there is injustice in the first place. For example, congregations that have opened their doors to homeless people for food and shelter during cold winter nights in Canada have been digging into the reasons for homelessness. In some cases they have found public policy issues that can't be solved by homeless people working alone with a congregation. What are needed are advocates to develop a broad consensus on a public policy including the wider institutional church, partners in society and globally, even our politicians! In fact, governments can't expect to make good decisions unless they hear from the people in the community who are involved in tackling tough issues.

Thus the actual methodology surrounding the church's advocacy role in the public square has largely remained unchanged:

- discover the ministry personnel, lay people, Canadian and global partners, and socially marginalized peoples' groups who can best help the churches understand the nature of the crisis in society and globally by asking the right questions
- consult widely with ministry personnel, lay people, Canadian and global partners, and socially marginalized peoples' groups to discern proposals to the questions with which the churches are concerned in order to render a credible and faithful public witness
- promote an interdisciplinary/ecumenical/interfaith approach to these issues for study in the church, and take appropriate action with the government.

The public and prophetic witness of the United Church is also informed by the Lund principle: let nothing that can be together be done apart. This has led to a strong ecumenical witness characterized by a number of faith based social justice coalitions in the late 20th century advocating on a host of social issues from illegitimate debt to refugee support. The public witness of the United Church and other churches in Canada is also intentionally informed by partners in the Global South and ecumenical partnerships at home. The witness of the Canadian early justice coalitions is carried on through KAIROS: Canadian Social Justice Initiatives.

It is the lived experience of communities of faith, whether here at home or globally, supported by local ministers and denominational resources, that is the critical starting point for our model of advocacy and public witness.

The roots of the word *advocacy* have to do with lending assistance, calling for a voice to speak out. Advocacy is a way of raising our voices; speaking out on behalf of ourselves and with those partners and people or causes we stand with. We use *advocacy* to mean publicly and prophetically witnessing to our belief in the reconciling love of God for all creation found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Congregations of The United Church of Canada have the skills and resources to be excellent advocates; compelling spokespeople for public policies that reflect our Christian commitment to justice, peace, and sustainable community life.

3.0 Advocacy Principles and Practices

Advocacy is understood as work to address the root causes of injustice, having a political and public dimension, and working to seek the achievement of universal human rights and the integrity of Creation. Fear of “politics” in the church is often linked with the assumption of partisan politics. Advocacy for The United Church of Canada does not mean “lobbying”. Our public witness is always nonpartisan; the church concentrates on public policy issues and never endorses or negates specific politicians or parties.

Advocacy includes awareness raising, development and human rights education, popular campaigning and public events, policy research and analysis, and the production of materials to support these different styles of advocacy. Ecumenical advocacy has been defined as:

Advocacy - Action on political, economic, cultural and social issues by churches and their members, church related agencies and other organizations which aims to influence policies and practices of those in positions of power and influence in order to bring about a more just, peaceful and sustainable world. Marginalized communities must be seen at the centre of ecumenical advocacy and be their own advocates. The advocacy efforts of others must be seen as an expression of solidarity with and an accountability to those who suffer from the world's injustices and violence. (Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, Guide to ACT Development, June 2006)

3.1 How We Are Doing our Advocacy Work Differently

Advocacy can not be seen as the work of the national church only. All courts of the church, congregations, community ministries and individual members must see themselves as living out this political ministry in their own contexts as part of their Christian discipleship. This work begins with the experiences and stories of local people which make it clear that we are speaking publicly with integrity and authenticity. Nurturing this prophetic ethos and political engagement for effective public witness brings both challenge and opportunity for UCC leaders.

Given our present UCC context, there is a need to determine strategic directions for our advocacy and public witness work. Most recently, with Canadian social justice staff reductions in the JGER Unit, we have begun to shape our advocacy work differently. With one program staff with lead responsibility for the work of poverty, wealth and ecological justice in Canada and globally, we must rely more heavily on the advice, research and resources of our Canadian and global networks of ecumenical, interfaith and civil society organizations. Their expertise and experience, along with that of Conference and Presbytery staff, congregational and community ministries, committees and networks, undergirds our advocacy initiatives.

The United Church of Canada acts through ecumenical spaces as well. The UCC participates in advocacy (such as HIV/AIDS) through the work of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance.

Advocacy then, can and is often initiated by our network partners. To determine whether the UCC should engage with particular advocacy campaigns and strategies, staff consider: whether the intent of the advocacy is coherent with UCC social policy and congruent with the views of partners; how this strategy fits into JGER, Aboriginal Ministries, and Intercultural and Diverse Ministries justice and work priorities; whether there is staff capacity to engage in an advocacy campaign; whether there is capacity in the UCC constituency to effectively engage in the campaign.

3.2 Range of Practices:

In any advocacy initiative by the United Church to the federal government our positions will only be heard through the use of a multi-pronged approach with complementary functions for the General Council, other church courts, congregations and community ministries. Guidelines for deciding who signs which letters, when to notify the moderator, and how controversial an issue is, must be determined through consultation with the Public Witness, Advocacy and Education for Justice Advisory Group.

3.2.0 With the General Council Office^[1]

- policy statement/brief/position paper –copies to all United Church MPs/Senators
- letter to Prime Minister/cabinet minister/copy to critics – normally always asking for a response, possibly a meeting
- meeting with federal government bureaucrats/embassy officials
- meeting with cabinet minister/Prime Minister
- presentation to parliamentary committees/round tables/cross country hearings
- individual meetings with key MPs
- delegation of ecumenical , interfaith , civil society and global partners to Ottawa
- media event^[2]
- intervention at the United Nations
- inter-Unit collaboration
- intervention with foreign government^[3]

3.2.1 With Conferences and Presbyteries

- Presbytery and Conference staff and leaders help to engage and influence their own court and other courts regarding social policy issues
- Presbytery and Conference staff, committees and networks are reminded of their decision-making role regarding moving policy directions forward through the courts to General Council
- Conference staff and leaders are encouraged to follow up their GC resolutions with education and advocacy in their regions and with their provincial governments

^[1] Normally General Council advocacy initiatives are pursued ecumenically and with partners when ever possible.

^[2] Normally the General Council speaks directly to the federal government, not through the media.

^[3] Normally General Council does not address foreign governments directly except at the explicit request of a partner and/or in response to a humanitarian emergency i.e. an impending execution

3.2.2 With Congregations^[4]

- policy issues are posted on the web
- United Church members are invited to write federal government/contact/*visit* local MP
- direct e-mail to congregations inviting members to take action
- *United Action for Justice* electronic newsletter sent to subscribers
- bulletin insert for Sunday morning orders of worship (Infopac) provided
- poster with accompanying information inviting members to take action (Infopac)
- congregational animation/education kits/studies
- information updates, articles, studies, ads in *Mandate, Minutes for Mission, World Development and Relief* materials, *The Observer*
- worship material in *Gathering*- intercessory prayer and advocacy
- action component: postcard campaign/petitions/wear a pin/bracelet/public events
- speakers for congregations
- demonstrations/donate money
- exposure trip/fact finding mission

4.0 Focus on Congregational Capacity Building for Justice

One important focus area for effective advocacy is helping local congregations to reclaim their commitment to living out God's mission prophetically and politically in their community and the world. To this end, capacity- building with congregations for justice-making and advocacy is extremely important.

4.1 Range of Strategies for Capacity Building in Congregations for Justice Making

- Extra Measures Project
- Research from Conference visits with justice staff, networks and committees, 2008-09
- Face to Face visits connected to advocacy campaigns
- People in Partnership programs
- Coaching Conference and Presbytery Social Justice committees and networks
- National advocacy event Fall 2010
- Regular communication with Conference and Presbytery staff
- Regular consultations with Conferences, Education Centres, Theological Schools.
- Social analysis and public witness as part of the theological education curriculum
- Education and animation for Public Witness - Advocacy Toolkit , workshops etc.
- Lifting up local and regional stories of social justice engagement to help inspire and animate others in the collective witness of the church
- Encourage Conferences to follow up their GC petitions with education and advocacy in their regions
- Collaborate with Conferences, Education Centres and theological schools re research and programs that build advocacy skills, analysis.

^[4] General Council is committed to exploring more opportunities to partner on advocacy initiatives with the originating court i.e. media event in Conference/congregation

- Use political openings and social moments to move issues forward with congregations
- Help congregations make connections between their local justice issues and those in the wider global context
- Equip ministry personnel with an understanding of how social policy is developed and moved through government
- Communicate the reality that the UCC does advocacy with other faith communities, civil society organizations and global partners
- Use the charity-service-justice continuum to educate and animate for social transformation and resistance to empire
- Focus advocacy efforts so they are manageable by congregations
- Coordinate advocacy efforts across General Council Units (re worship, Christian formation, and pastoral care resources and initiatives)
- Encourage local movement building and collaboration on advocacy issues
- Work with returned overseas personnel and global visitors
- Build on the expertise and insights from congregational refugee sponsorship

Other Resources:

Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth (WARC 2004)

Advocacy Toolkit: for Ordinary Citizens who want to make a Difference (Citizens for Public Justice CPJ,2008)

A Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century (Presbyterian Church USA, 2006)

A Song of Faith (GC 39 - 2006)

Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire (GC 39, 2006)

Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire: Partnership Consultation (2008)

Mending the World (GC 36, 1997)

Recommendations to the GCE from the Public Witness Presentation. (PCPMM, Feb 17-19, 2005)

To Seek Justice and Resist Evil (GC 37, 2000)

Glossary:

Social Policy – operational principle, guideline, or course of action adopted by an organization or government that concerns the ways certain groups of people, or all people, should be treated.

Law- principles and guidelines established by a government and applicable to a people whether in the form of legislation, or of custom and policies recognized and enforced by judicial decision.

