Backgrounder #8: Networks

Networks connect people with similar passions across the church. Networks are based on interest, not geography, and provide opportunities for individuals and groups to connect around and collaborate on specific areas of ministry or mission.

The Comprehensive Review Task Group has heard from communities of faith across the church that there are times when they feel alone in an area of ministry or mission, or are unsure how to connect beyond themselves on a particular theme. A network model for ministry would allow for a strong denominational voice on particular issues or themes and realize the potential of our collective faith in action. Networks remind us that we are stronger when we work together and build on our collective strength.

For example, members of an urban congregation in British Columbia who are interested in climate justice might find inspiring connection with members of a rural congregation in Nova Scotia who are also working on this issue. Together, they could choose to form a network rooted in a commitment to climate justice, gathering communities and individuals across the church to take action together.

The diversity of existing networks in the United Church illustrates the opportunities this model offers. Networks can hold gatherings, share information, and connect creatively in ways that inspire leadership. They can gather in a variety of ways, both in person and electronically. Some exist for long periods of time, while others are time-limited.

The **United Church Women** (www.united-church.ca/allages/adults/women/ucw)—one of the United Church's longest-standing groups—offers significant insight into the types of connection and impact that can be offered by gathering together around a common issue or area of ministry. While we don't usually think of the United Church Women as a network, they were functioning with the values of networks long before networks were imagined, and provide a wonderful example of what new and emergent networks could strive to be. Formally inaugurated in 1962, the United Church Women today operates at the congregational, presbyterial, Conference, and national levels. The United Church Women creates connections across all levels of the church by hosting annual events, providing opportunities to nurture spirituality, promoting justice, and reaching out in local Canadian communities and around the world, including significant fundraising for the church's Mission and Service Fund.

A three-council model with strong networks would provide opportunities to build on the collaboration that is already at work in the church. Here are some examples of vital networks in the United Church that are already supporting a variety of ministry areas:

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble is an example of a network that gathers to work on a particular issue, in this case sexual orientation and gender identity. Membership in this justice-oriented organization of people in the United Church is open to those who support the network's work. Through the network model, Affirm United is able to provide a voice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities rooted in education, action, and support. Affirm United is also responsible for the Affirming Ministries program that congregations use to identify themselves as Affirming. http://affirmunited.ause.ca

Another network that convenes on a specific issue is the **United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel**. This network, through education and advocacy, works toward the goal of a just peace in Palestine and Israel by calling for an end to the illegal

Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the restoration of equal rights for all who live in Palestine/Israel. www.unjppi.org

Some networks identify themselves theologically. **Cruxifusion** is a movement in the United Church that was started by a diverse younger generation of clergy with different theologies who centre on Jesus Christ as head of the church. Their goal is to support, connect, and inspire their members and uphold the name of Jesus in the church. http://cruxifusion.ca/

As people and communities of faith, we long for a culture of collaboration and support. Sometimes, this can be brought to life by networks that operate within other networks. For example, there are a number of formal and informal youth ministry networks across the United Church. This collection of groups, such as networks of youth leaders and provincial youth networks, are part of the United Church's commitment to ministry with youth. Some presbyteries have youth ministry networks, while some Conferences provide specific connections for youth. Nationally, these networks connect and gather, resulting in a culture of vibrant youth ministry and diverse opportunities for young people to be involved in the life and work of the church.

A number of networks connect ethnic and linguistic communities across the church. For example, **Table de concertation régionale des ministères en français (M&O)** provides space for the French-speaking community, which has been part of the United Church since its creation and plays a fundamental role in our national identity. Made up of individuals, congregations, and groups in Quebec and the rest of Canada, this is an ever-growing, ever-changing network. Several Tables function at the national and regional levels, and more informal networks work across boundaries to support French-language ministries. In the church, one Conference functions bilingually, there is a francophone presbytery, and a staff person located in the Church in Mission Unit of the General Council Office is responsible for supporting ministries in French.

Initially formed through a gathering of self-identified Black peoples from the United Church, **The Journeys of Black Peoples** was a national network that provided meaningful connection. At the group's initial gathering in 2005, there was a clear expression of desire for ongoing connection, supporting and enabling the work to continue. The network grew out of this initial gathering and moved to support further in-person gatherings, affirming goals for the diverse community, and mandating a national steering committee to oversee work in the time between gatherings. While this group is no longer meeting, the value of its connections continues. It is an example of a network driven by people's energy and issues, and provides insight into one of the possible characteristics of networks, which is impermanence. Connected to the national **Ethnic Ministries Network, The** Journeys of Black Peoples was another example of a network within a network.

Some groups, such as the **Living into Right Relations network**, work to help the wider church live out commitments. In May 2008, 92 people from all Conferences attended a "Living into Right Relations" gathering in Pinawa, Manitoba. At that time they covenanted together to explore, develop, and nurture just and respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on a five-year journey, paralleling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission timeline. The Living into Right Relations Task Group provided support and leadership to the home groups and the network between 2008 and 2013. A key principle was striving for a balance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in all gatherings. The Living into Right Relations network is an example of the value in nationally seeding an initiative with the intention of bringing it to life in the regions. As a result, the network's work is now visible in the regions. The Aboriginal Ministries Council and the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools continue to support the network

of some 300 people by preparing and distributing a weekly "Living into Right Relations Digest"; publishing the *Turning the Page Together* newsletter three times a year; managing the Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools Facebook page; providing funding through the Justice and Reconciliation Fund for projects or events that promote dialogue, understanding, and right relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples; launching Take Action alerts; posting resources and updates on the United Church website; and planning webinars on requested topics.

While some networks are structured and ongoing, others might provide fluid, short-term, and time-specific points of connection. One such example is **Rock the Bible**, a Facebook-based Bible study that took place in June 2013 and provided meaningful online engagement in faith discussions. In 2014, Moderator Gary Paterson's Lenten study followed a similar format. Rock the Bible has inspired other learning communities to sprout in various locations across the church.

Expanding this network approach would build on existing expertise in supporting faith communities. It would also foster a sense of connection and collaboration based on common passions and address contextual diversity and change.