



2023 Strategic Plan Report

Deep Spirituality | Bold Discipleship | Daring Justice



The United Church of Canada / L'Église Unie du Canada





Message from the General Secretary

Our ancestors in faith sought to understand who Jesus was and to live faithfully as his disciples. We too seek to enter the story of Jesus in spirit and truth in our own time.

As we stand on the cusp of our church's Centennial, we hear the call to be deep, bold, and daring in renewing our church for the next 100 years.

The General Council Office's Strategic Plan is intended to help the church realize our Vision, working closely with regional councils across the country. As the plan unfolds, we are sharing stories in the hope that they will engage, inspire, and compel. These stories provide a glimpse into how we are advancing our strategic objectives in the areas of Growth, Justice, Leadership, Common Good, Climate Integrity, and Indigenous Pathways. I invite you to learn more about the plan by going to [Our Call and Vision](https://www.united-church.ca/our-call-and-vision) on [united-church.ca](https://www.united-church.ca).

To renew our church towards this Vision requires faith and belief, hard work, determination, and dedication. Overall, this year the General Council engaged in over 80 activities in the six strategic areas. We strengthened transparency and accountability, introducing quarterly public reporting. I am grateful that we were able to achieve close to 72% of our planned key results in our very ambitious first year. We continue to learn from the planning process, improving our focus and strengthening our orientation towards results and impact.

Overall, our goal is to collaborate with regions to support communities of faith to thrive through strategies of renewal, creation, and invitation. Our story is of a church formed by the fidelity of its members: imperfect, challenged by aspects of our legacy, but still called to a ministry of transformation and hope. May this plan invigorate that hope as we respond in faith to God's call in our time.

Rev. Michael Blair
General Secretary

Who do you
say I am?

Et vous... qui
dites-vous
que je suis ?

Mâduwech
echâmâgî

(Matthew 16:15)

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we live, worship, and work on Indigenous lands.

We are committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, and recognize that this includes aligning ourselves with the values of living with respect in creation.

We continue living and praying together on this great land, and together we support each other's journey.

Call and Vision

Our Call strives to reflect the core of what The United Church of Canada seeks to be in this time. Deep and grounded faith compels a life of bold discipleship lived in worship, service, and community, and expressed in the church and world in daring acts of justice.

The Vision aims to reflect what the church aspires to be within a 5- to 10-year span.

Call

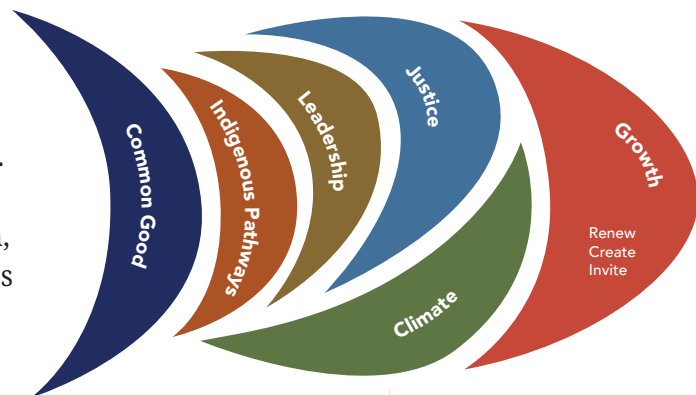
Deep Spirituality
Bold Discipleship
Daring Justice

Vision

Called by God, as disciples of Jesus, The United Church of Canada seeks to be a bold, connected, evolving church of diverse, courageous, hope-filled communities united in deep spirituality, inspiring worship, and daring justice.

Strategic Objectives

Strategic objectives to guide progress towards the Vision were approved by the General Council Executive. They are focused on the ministry of the General Council Office. Each objective forms part of the operational plan, and is broken down further into initiatives and activities that are accountably tracked and evaluated.



Embolden Justice

Collaborating to Mend
Church and World

Invigorate Leadership

Adapting and Innovating for
Bold Discipleship

Nurture the Common Good

Equity and Sustainability
in Resources

Deepen Climate Integrity

Living Climate Commitments

Growth – Strengthen Invitation

Humility and Confidence
in Sharing Faith

Journeying Indigenous Pathways

Forging Right Relations

You can find the full text of the objectives by going to [Our Call and Vision](#) on [united-church.ca](#) and selecting the link for each strategic objective.



Embolden Justice

Informed by those with lived experience, we join with others in the hard work of bringing about racial and Indigenous justice, and 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, including by supporting racialized and Indigenous youth.

Indigenous and racialized young people from the United Church demonstrate solidarity, friendship, and care for one another and their communities.

The Indigenous and Racialized Youth Gathering, held at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre near Winnipeg, Manitoba, was an intentional space where young people gathered with others who look like them to shed the pressures of expectations and stereotypes.

The participants visited [Camp Morgan](#) to learn from the friends, families, and supporters there who tirelessly advocated for searching the landfills; their presence was appreciated. Since it is difficult to translate “Search the Landfill” into Indigenous languages, together the young people came up with “the search for the hidden truth.”

Nathaniel, a participant from Oxford House, Manitoba, helped the youth build a fire, cook pickerel, and make bannock. They taught each

other their traditional songs. Inzwi, a participant from the previous year who was offering her leadership skills, learned to build a fire as part of her rite of passage.

“As an adult, it was a beautiful thing to witness,” says Springwater Hester-Meawassige, who with Emo Yango guides the program year-round from the General Council Office. “I heard the young people say they had no idea this was missing from their lives.”

Rey Anderson and Joni Shawana supported the young people at the gathering, while Kayleigh, Inzwi, and Sarah, all of whom participated in 2022, helped develop the 2023 program. The 2024 plans are already underway.

“Create and sustain a racialized and Indigenous youth program” was one of twenty 2023 activity streams within Justice.





Invigorate Leadership

As we strive to better reflect the diversity and needs of the country—current and future—we are developing key resources, experimenting with pilot programs, and reimagining training for leaders to enable them to meet new challenges and possibilities.

When I served on the committee that prepared the *Voices United* worship resource in the 1990s, I was one of the youngest members. As I currently serve on the *Then Let Us Sing!* development committee, it appears I am now one of the most senior!

A long time between the two projects.

Most striking is the technology used to prepare the two collections. With *Voices United*, I recall hauling around cardboard boxes full of photocopied music and hymnals. No one had laptop computers, email was in its infancy, and minutes and notes were taken by hand. Sometimes we used faxes, with their smudgy images on greasy paper! To meet, members flew, rode, or drove in from across the country.

In contrast, while preparing for *Then Let Us Sing!*, most of our meetings were held online.

Data files of all resources, including “sheet” music, hymnals, sound files, and videos, have all been easily shared and accessed. Of course, *Then Let Us Sing!* is very much an online resource, although a print version is in the works.

The 2025 launch will make almost all of our current music resources accessible online, and also nearly 200 new songs and hymns—with current interpretation of inclusion, theology, and intercultural sharing. *Then Let Us Sing!* will be a source of many new favourite hymns and songs in the years to come!

“Focus worship resources to meeting emerging needs” was one of eighteen 2023 activity streams within Leadership.

David Kai grew up attending the Toronto Japanese United Church. He was commissioned as a diaconal minister in 1987.





Nurture the Common Good

Being a national organization can help benefit communities of faith across the country. Administrative efficiencies, effectiveness, and accountability, including by sharing services, frees up time and resources for ministry.

The UCC Protect United initiative is by far the largest financial commitment of the strategic plan. A \$3 million loan funds an insurance program to help participating United Church ministries reduce, then contain, insurance costs. The church provides the startup capital, but also needs to provide more capital for particularly adverse claims results—especially in the early years.

The program was rushed into place for December 2022 to provide immediate premium relief. We saw premiums reduced by 11–27% during a year when insurance premiums went up by 15–30%.

So far, the program has been a success financially. Annualized premiums for 2021–2022 paid \$10.1 million versus \$8.1 million for the first year of the program, saving almost \$2 million when adjusted for new business and closures/amalgamations. The interest on the startup loan is paid annually.

However, customer service and administration have been very poor and caused a lot of frustration, in part because of rushing the program's launch; our partner's existing systems and staff proved inadequate for the volume of queries that arose. Church decisions to deliver more savings also proved challenging administratively. We've been working on achieving proper service capacity by the second quarter of 2024. This will also be when we launch greater coverage flexibility and improved communications.

This initiative will run just like a traditional insurance company, with claims administered accordingly. The difference? Together, we all try to reduce risk and claims—and therefore premiums. This arrangement exists solely to benefit participants, our communities of faith across the country.

“Implement a self-insurance plan” was one of eighteen 2023 activity streams within Common Good.



Canadian Memorial United Church. Credit: Maxine Bulloch Photography.



Deepen Climate Integrity

We offer tools and resources for immediate climate action to help communities and individuals live with respect in creation. Building by building, and coast to coast to coast, we are taking responsibility to reduce our emissions.

An affirming church with a progressive congregation, Old Barns United in Lower Truro, Nova Scotia, is more than 100 years old. It is a strong, active, and engaged community where worship and deep conversation are informed by events in the local community and by the news.

“There were a lot of stories on the environment,” says Bob Francis, a member of the Board of Stewards and Trustees who led a recent initiative to green the old church building. “The stories were about the climate crisis, with an occasional good news story of people doing something about it.”

One good-news story came through a new minister, the Rev. Phillip Kennedy, whose previous charge installed solar panels. Motivated, a working group at Old Barns United created a wish list: solar panels, heat pumps, switching to LED lighting, and updating electric baseboard heaters.

“It ended up being a major project,” Francis says. An application to the Faithful Footprints program

received approval within two days; funds were matched, and rebates added.

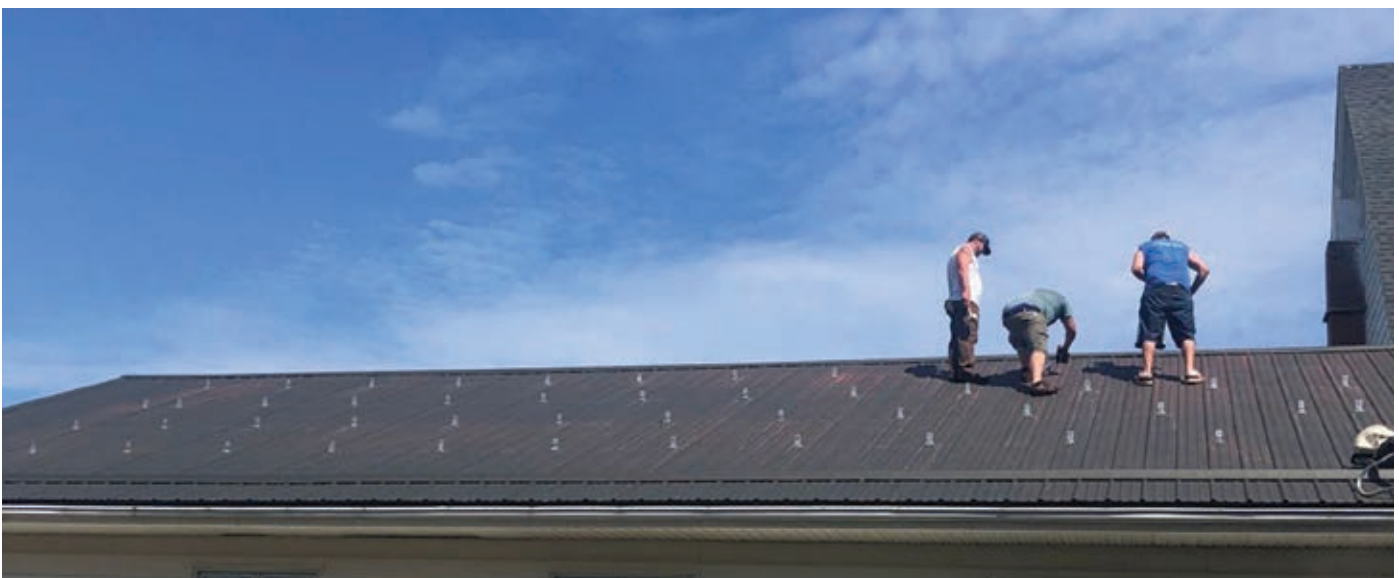
“We’ve produced 1,100kWh since October 20,” Francis says. “That’s pretty darn good, considering the weather we’ve had. Today, we produced 1.4 kWh of power, and we haven’t even seen the sun yet.”

By summer, Old Barns United won’t have any power bills at all.

It’s an impressive conversion, significantly reducing the church’s greenhouse gas emissions, saving money, and creating a more comfortable space for the community. And the church is animating the message in our Creed: “Living with respect in Creation.”

“Improve energy efficiency of faith buildings” was one of eight 2023 activity streams within Climate.

This story was adapted and edited from the longer version on the [Faithful Footprints website](#).





Growth – Strengthen Invitation

We are renewing existing communities of faith, creating new churches, and supporting bolder invitation. The United Church of Canada is not wrapping up; we are ramping up as we turn towards our next 100 years.

Gallery of Faith is not a traditional church, nor is it an art exhibition. It's one of The United Church of Canada's new and emerging communities of faith. Gathered online or in person in a rich spiritual community, the group is diverse and includes church leaders, ministers, theologians, artists, designers, and musicians.

They have one thing in common: they share origins in Hong Kong.

At Gallery of Faith, LGBTQIA+ members are warmly welcomed, with queer theologians and scholars contributing insights and perspectives. Online gatherings for worship are inclusive and creative, incorporating elements such as videos, music, and online exhibitions. Meet-ups happen in homes and restaurants for spiritual conversation, or in special events like a Full Moon Ceremony in a local park.

A recent gathering focused on the topic of death, acknowledging its profound significance within the human experience and including a reflection by William Chan, a Christian who has skin cancer.

This dynamic new community is one of 40 possible new communities of faith among migrant, diasporic, and francophone communities being explored through the Growth initiative. Other aspects of the church's leading priority on growth include renewing existing congregations and strengthening enthusiastic invitation to United Church communities, new and old.

A team of Growth Animators are now deployed across the country to support regions to renew, create, and invite—strengthening and transforming the church for the next 100 years.

“Create new migrant communities” was one of thirteen 2023 activity streams within Growth.



Credit: Michael Lee



Journeying Indigenous Pathways

We recognize and celebrate diverse Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and engaging with theologies and spiritual practices. We are committed to decolonizing church structures, and to partnering with a self-determining Indigenous Church.

The National Indigenous Spiritual Gathering was held July 28–30, 2023, with the theme “Our Strong Voices.” Moderator Carmen Lansdowne offered a keynote address, asking, “What does a flourishing Indigenous Church look like?”

The answer will unfold as the Indigenous Church articulates its vision of self-determination.

Perhaps the strongest voices came from the youth gathering panel. Three young people shared experiences of growing up in the North and in urban centres, speaking of challenges, their relationship with the land, their years with the Indigenous Ministries and Justice youth program, and plans for the future. These strong young people will lead in their communities.

Delegates took part in the National Indigenous Council’s vote on the remit on creating an autonomous Indigenous organization, which passed to sounds of great joy. Youth voices

powerfully influenced the discussion before the vote, identifying the pivot point where the Indigenous Church—and the United Church as a whole—must choose to move forward.

In ceremony, the sacred bundle was opened again after four years. Now passed to Executive Minister Murray Pruden from the late Grafton Antone, it remained central to the business and worship at the gathering. We also celebrated stories, teachings, and songs at the sacred fire. There was also drumming and dancing, and time for the conversations that can only happen when people gather in person.

The gathering recognized a large group of candidates for ministry and celebrated the ordination of Carol Many Chief.

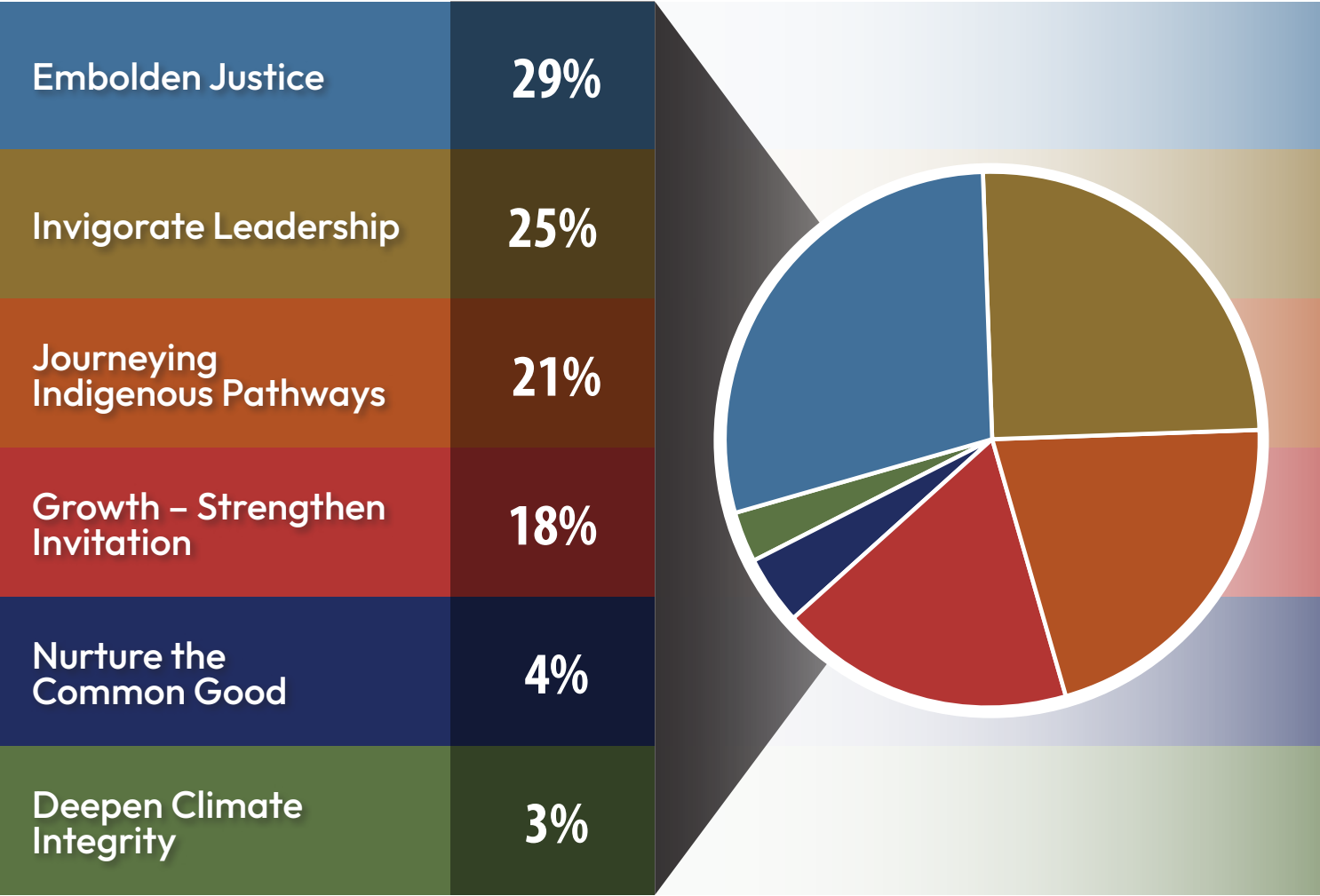
“Create and develop a self-governing Indigenous Church” was one of six 2023 activity streams within Indigenous Pathways.



Financials

Operating Budget ONLY

In 2023, the General Council of the United Church dedicated resources (salaries, grants, program, etc.) from the operating budget to the six areas of the Strategic Plan.



By the Numbers in 2023

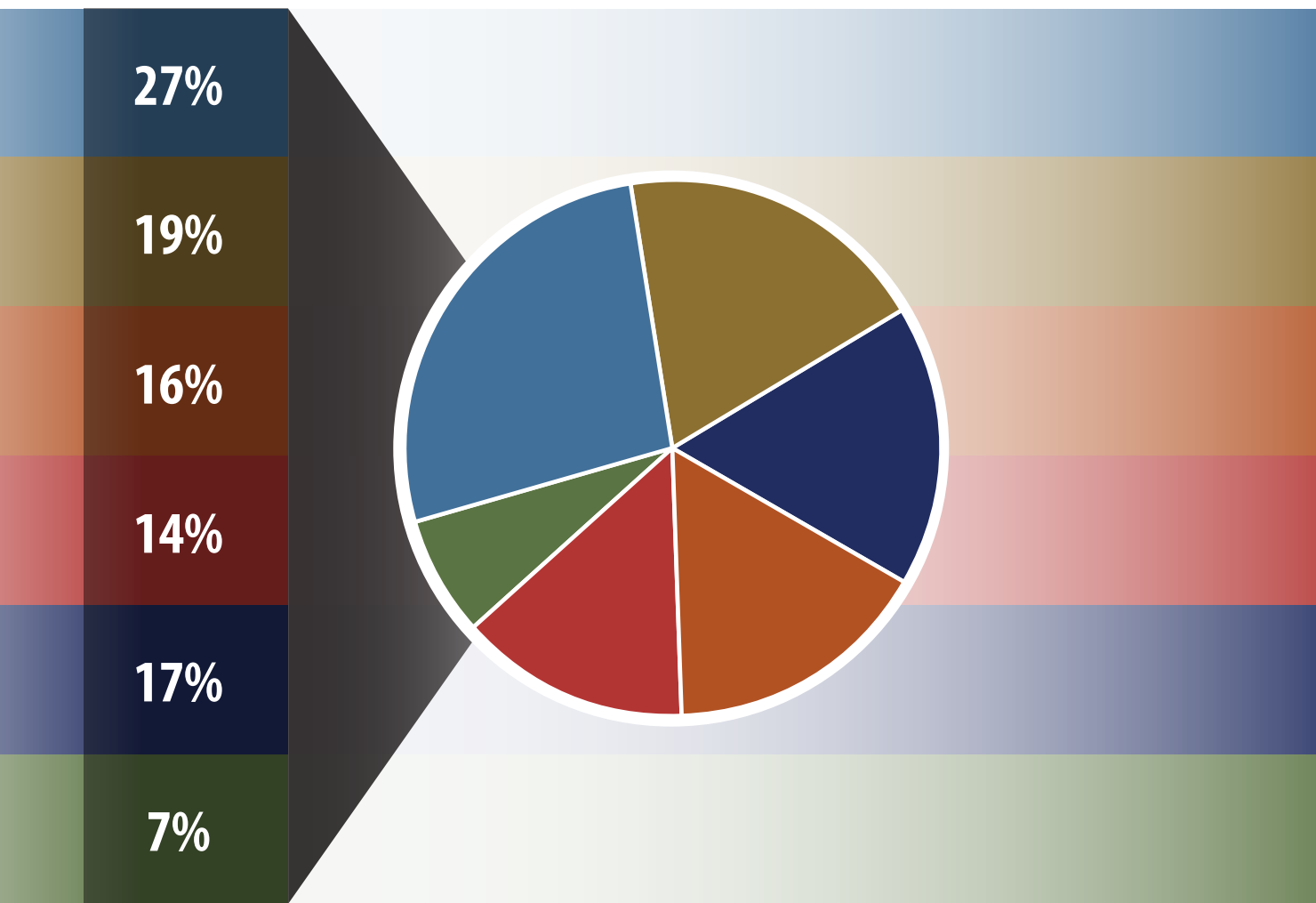
- 6 Strategic Objectives 🐟
- 83 Activity Streams ➡️
- 40 Priority Areas (of the 83 Activity Streams) 🎯
- 72% progress on planned Key Results overall* 🔑

Climate objective highest at 84.5% progress on Key Results ⚙️
Growth objective lowest at 58% progress on Key Results 🌱

*Excluding Indigenous Pathways, which reported in a narrative manner.


Operating Budget PLUS Fund Centre Activities

In addition, particular areas were supplemented by specialized reserve funds, or fund centres.



For more detail, refer to the audited financial statements that will be available later on united-church.ca (search “financial statements”).

We are deeply grateful to be able to advance the Strategic Plan, drawing from Mission and Service contributions, assessment, reserve funds, and other revenues.



This report is available on the [Our Call and Vision webpage](https://united-church.ca/call-vision) (united-church.ca/call-vision).

La version française de ce rapport sera disponible en ligne sur la page [L'appel et la vision de l'Église Unie](https://egliseunie.ca) (recherchez «appel et vision» sur egliseunie.ca).

For the latest updates visit the [Our Call and Vision webpage](https://united-church.ca/call-vision).

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Cover photo: After the Moderator's installation service at
Canadian Memorial United Church, Vancouver, August 2022
Credit: Maxine Bulloch Photography

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