

TICIF 02 PRINCIPLES-BASED JUSTICE WORK

Origin: Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee

1. What is the issue?

The 44th General Council asked that a principle-based approach to its justice work be developed. A set of principles would govern the church's responses to historic, current, and emerging social justice issues and enable timely and contextual responses. The 44th General Council 2022 directed that this work be done by the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee.

2. Why is this issue important?

The United Church has used a policy-based approach to its justice and advocacy ministry for decades. For the most part, the policies are reflective of a particular time in history and limited by the current realities of the time. Changes to policies are often slow because of our governance processes. With dynamic and evolving contexts, policy statements made in specific moments in time find us out of sync with the calls of partners and with rapidly changing global realities. Increasingly, because of changing global and political contexts and requests from partners and civil society organizations, the United Church finds it difficult to be responsive due to the limitations of its policies.

Shifting to a principles-based approach to our justice work will enable the church to respond more quickly to situations of injustice, while at the same time being guided by a consistent framework. The principles give direction and guidance to national staff and national committees in the church's work to seek justice and fullness of life.

3. How might the General Council respond to the issue?

The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee recommends that the General Council:

- a) adopt in principle the proposed Principles, with any necessary revisions to be brought to the 45th General Council 2025 for final adoption. Such revisions will be based on the experience and evaluation of using these principles to respond to situations of injustice and to requests from partners, and
- b) encourage further conversation with the Indigenous church about ways to include Indigenous spiritual teachings into the Principles document and to bring suggestions and revisions to the 45th General Council 2025.

4. What will be the impact?

The impact could be that the United Church is able to respond in more timely and contextual ways to situations of injustice arising in Canada and around the world, and further, that we can be more responsive to requests from partners. Shifting to a principles-based approach can be seen as part of the church's ongoing learning and efforts to decolonize its processes, actions, advocacy, and ministries.

The work has been an activity stream within the Justice objective of the Strategic Plan.

There is no financial cost to this proposal. It will involve staff time in terms of staff becoming familiar with the principles and developing processes for applying the principles in their work.

5. How does this proposal help us live into the commitments on equity?

Adopting a principles-based approach to justice echoes and amplifies the already-existing principles and commitments the church has made on equity.

6. For the body transmitting this proposal to the General Council Executive:

The Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee approved the draft principles at its meeting on August 29, 2023 and commended the work of the working group in drafting these principles on a tight timeline. At its September 22-23, 2023 meeting, the General Council Executive approved the recommendation to forward these principles to the October, 2023 annual meeting of GC44 (TICIF 01).

If this proposal is in response to assigned work – either from General Council or a previous GCE meeting, please list proposal / motion numbers.

GCE03 A Principle Based Approach To Justice Work In The United Church Of Canada

Draft Principles for Justice Work in The United Church of Canada 2023

Preamble:

The United Church has used a policy-based approach to its justice and advocacy ministry for decades. For the most part, the policies are reflective of a particular time in history and limited by the current realities of the time. Changes to policies are often slow because of our governance processes. With dynamic and evolving contexts, policy statements made in specific moments in time find us out of sync with the calls of partners and with rapidly changing global realities. Increasingly, because of changing global and political contexts and requests from partners and civil society organizations, the United Church finds it difficult to be responsive due to the limitations of its policies. The 44th General Council asked that a principle-based approach to its justice work be developed. A set of principles would govern the church's responses to historic, current, and emerging social justice issues and enable timely and contextual responses.

Principles operate as guides and direction for prayerful discernment of responses to situations of injustice. Principles do not spell out in detail what specific actions should be in specific circumstances but rather provide a framework for making ethical, justice-seeking decisions. Contexts and the particularities of each justice issue will need to be considered in such decision-making, guided by the principles.

The United Church of Canada is called to seek justice, dignity, and fullness of life for human beings and for all our relations within God's beloved creation. The United Church is called to speak and act with humility and with courage, recognizing the ways in which the church has perpetuated harm and has benefited from its complicity in systems of oppression and colonization. Colonialism stubbornly remains in our midst. It shapes our imagination and informs the many ways we relate with one another both individually and institutionally. Colonialism reproduces and expands white supremacy, modern-day slavery, racism, exploitation of labour of one class over another, among many other manifestations.

The call to bold discipleship, deep spirituality, and daring justice means that the people of the United Church cannot remain silent in situations of injustice. Addressing injustice includes (though is not limited to) building:

- a. *awareness* and understanding of the injustices our neighbours experience
- b. *analysis* of the systems and forces that perpetuate injustice
- c. *advocacy* with those neighbours who are most vulnerable and marginalized
- d. *action* with those neighbours who invite/welcome our participation in their work

The principles outlined below are intentionally interdependent and are informed by the United Church's policies, affirmations, and commitments.¹ The principles give direction and guidance to national staff and national committees in the church's work to seek justice and fullness of life. Other councils, staff, lay people, and ministry personnel of the United Church may choose to draw on these principles to guide their own speaking and acting. The principles are identified in bold, with clarifying sentences to illustrate each principle.

Anti-Oppression

Lament and actively oppose the expressions of oppression and colonization, including but not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and discrimination of any kind in our churches, our communities, our nation, the world, and God's good creation. Encourage the ministries and work of anti-oppression in our churches.

Truth-telling

Recognize, acknowledge, and repent the ways in which The United Church of Canada has contributed to, or enabled, whether intentionally or unintentionally, suffering and unjust practices, including its participation in colonization. Amplify the voices of the most marginalized as opposed to those who hold power. Encourage critical analysis of power and thoughtful exploration and questioning of biases.

Holistic Scope

Recognize and name complexities and potential multiple oppressions in situations of injustice and strive to avoid false dichotomies in analysis and in statements. Seek to remain in relationship and in dialogue even when it is difficult and painful, at the same time being aware of systemic power differences at play. Seek to act ecumenically and with interfaith groups when appropriate.

Respect for Human Dignity

Be in solidarity with those among us experiencing injustice, oppression, the denial of dignity, and violation of human rights. Affirm the right to resist, repudiate, and challenge any expression of injustice.

Full Participation and Decolonization

Challenge all expressions of colonialism through recognizing and naming colonial mentalities that are automatically replicated in our institutions and relationships with partners. Support community-based self-determination, including the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. Listen attentively to social movements and groups of people who are historically marginalized and who are most affected by injustice. Engage in critical discernment about the best ways forward when called upon to speak and act for justice, to dismantle institutions and practices that are instrumental in replicating colonialism and usher a new mode of thinking and doing that decolonizes.

Equity, Mutuality, Respect, and Reparations

Pursue equity, mutuality, respect, and reparations as the path towards justice, reconciliation, and right relations. Continue to be prayerful companions in mutual discernment, discipleship, and justice-seeking with United Church partners, ecumenical and interfaith partners, and with other justice-seeking groups.

Costly and Prophetic Solidarity

Speak and act prophetically against injustice in all forms, knowing that the Holy Spirit calls us to costly solidarity with the least of these, in living our discipleship in the world.

¹ Over the course of several years, General Council has made the following commitments on equity. There are places where the church is already living into a principle-based approach to its justice and advocacy work such as:

- adopting [the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) as the framework for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples;
- adopting the [Calls to the Church](#) from the Caretakers of our Indigenous Circle as the basis for a new relationship;
- welcoming [people of all sexual orientations and gender identities](#) into full membership and ministry in the church;
- committing to becoming [an intercultural church](#);
- committing to becoming an open, accessible, and barrier-free church, where there is [full participation of people with disabilities](#);
- working towards functional bilingualism and [ensuring that Francophone ministries are an integral part of the church's identity, mission, and vision](#);
- [opposing discrimination](#) of any kind on the basis of identity; and
- developing an anti-racism policy and committing to becoming an [anti-racist denomination](#).