

Deep • Bold • Daring Toward 2035

An Introduction to *Toward 2035* for Conversations Within Communities of Faith

Session 1

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,

What's in this Session 1 Resource?

Note: This resource is intended for communities of faith in The United Church of Canada. It represents session one in what is expected to be an ongoing series. If you have feedback on this session or suggestions for future areas of focus, please send them to planning@united-church.ca.

An Introduction to *Toward 2035* for Conversations Within Communities of Faith

What's in this Session 1 Resource?

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The material in A–E is intended to provide background material for facilitators. The material in F is a two-hour session. A PowerPoint presentation has been developed to accompany this session, so elements can be projected. Not all “Questions for Consideration” will likely be used. Please choose from what is offered for what works best, given timing and the gathered group.

For more information or with questions, please contact: Planning@united-church.ca

A. A Reorientation of Our Imagination | A Message from General Secretary Michael Blair



The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has said, “**in order to change a person’s behaviour, you must first change their imagination.**” The church has an opportunity at this point in our history to expand its imagination. The truth is that we cannot solve today’s challenges with yesterday’s tools. Essayist and management guru Rishad Tobaccowala

expresses this in the title of his weekly newsletter, *The Future Does Not Fit in the Containers of the Past*. In her workshops on Flourishing, the former Moderator drew on the work of Jane McGonigal (*Imaginable: How to Create a Hopeful Future*), emphasizing the need to imagine possibilities of a preferred future.

At its November 2024 and March 2025 meetings, the 44th General Council Executive directed the General Secretary to implement and prioritize a strategic plan looking ahead from the Centennial to 2035. Such a plan both sharpens and intensifies the existing General Council strategic plan, and broadens it to **the whole of the church**, enabling the General Council and regional councils to collaborate to make a common vision a reality.

The plan does not require any change in polity or structure; it calls all the councils of the church to take seriously the authority given to them by the Basis of Union. To be intentional about this work, there needs to be a **reorientation of our imagination**, as we are reminded in the words of *A Song of Faith* (2006):

*It requires the Spirit to reorient it,
helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition,
challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement,
for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.*

We need to change some of our practices which made sense in 1925, 1960, or even 2020, but now act as a hindrance to the call to be a blessing to the world. *Towards 2035* is an invitation to the whole of The United Church of Canada to engage in courageous and spiritual discernment and make a bold commitment to act

towards the future. We invite you as an individual, community of faith, or regional council, with its commissions and committees, to consider how you will participate in creating such a future.

In Christ,

The Rev. Michael Blair | General Secretary of The United Church of Canada

B. Hosting a Conversation Within Your Community of Faith

If you are reading this, you have been introduced to *Toward 2035* as either a leader within your congregation, the region, or both. This resource is designed to support you and other leaders to introduce *Toward 2035* in your community of faith.

There will be more resources coming, including further session outlines, to support future conversations that invite more engagement and discernment.

The goal of *Toward 2035* as a whole church conversation is to orient the collective imagination of The United Church of Canada towards a future that we may join in co-creating, with “God who has created and is creating” and who “has called [us] to witness in love and justice to the liberating, healing Christ risen in this place and time.” *Toward 2035* leads us to a hope-filled strategy for a bolder future.

Through this conversation...

- Participants will understand, through engaging data, the current shape of decline within The United Church of Canada and what that could mean for the future of the presence of the United Church both across Canada and within your local area.
- Participants will reflect on the importance of the unique witness of The United Church of Canada, across the country and where you call home.
- Participants will reflect on the preferred future suggested in *Toward 2035*, and imagine how it would feel to inhabit such a future in your local context.
- Participants will have a common grounding and language to engage with participants from other congregations and United Church ministries about the future of ministry in your area.

As a conversation host...

- Read the material in advance a few times to become familiar, and put some thought into what invitations to pause at and which questions will be most helpful.
- Use this as a script or a guide, whichever is most helpful.
- There are many questions offered herein. Some may be good for group discussion, others for personal consideration. Use whichever ones make sense for your group and the time you have available to you.
- Adjust the times and add a break as it makes most sense for your context.
- Root your conversation in prayer—not just an opening prayer (do that too), but pray for the participants before. Leave time to intentionally listen for the Holy Spirit. This moment calls us to learn to stretch ourselves in this way with intention.

C. What is *Toward 2035*? | A One-Page Summary

We speak of *Toward 2035* as a **conversation** and a **strategic direction**...

As a conversation...

- To be engaged at every level of the church, from communities of faith to General Council 45, about the preferred future of The United Church of Canada, rooted in a shared understanding of our current context, within the church and beyond.
- That every level of the church might engage in and work on collaboratively, making this truly about the **whole church**.

A strategic direction...

- That the General Council Executive adopted in November 2024 and March 2025 and has directed the General Secretary to prioritize and implement, with approval to specific wording provided in November 2025.
- That focuses the attention of the General Council and regional council offices on collaborative work in supporting communities of faith towards a bolder future for The United Church of Canada.

- That is commended to regional council executives, commissions, committees, and other such bodies.
- That is, by design, quite broad, recognizing diverse contexts and inviting diverse expressions.

The 10-year strategic direction approved by the 45th General Council Executive in November 2025 describes a preferred future. In 2035:

*In The United Church of Canada, **inspired**, **resilient**, and **diverse** contextual communities of disciples seek to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world.*

The church is present and deeply connected coast-to-coast-to-coast in rural and urban settings, and in ecumenical and global relationships.

Guided by hope-filled, adaptive, and effective ministry leaders, the denomination is increasingly multigenerational, multiracial, and intercultural.

In the broadest of terms, and in diverse expressions across the country, **inspired** communities embody all aspects of the denominational Call: Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice.

Resilient communities have sufficient stability and sustainability to prevent them from being just one or two crises away from closure. There is a sense of having and being “enough.”

D.A Note About Numbers

We have heard that it is not a very “United Church” thing to speak about numbers.

We hear in this a concern that to speak of numbers is to equate numeric results with a direct sign of worth, or faithfulness of ministry.

We agree that numbers cannot be used this way.

We also suggest numbers can be helpful, and there is a healthy way to engage them.

We are speaking about *Toward 2035* as “data-informed,” which does not mean that we assume numbers take the space rightly given to the Holy Spirit as we discern

the most faithful response to God's call to us as a denomination, or any community in its local context.

Our Methodist heritage asks us to imagine discerning God's voice by attending to multiple elements in conversation with each other (the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience).

We think data can work like that.

Toward 2035 asks us to look at the data that belongs to the people of The United Church of Canada, data that congregations submit annually via "blue forms."

From this, we have pulled out figures including membership, worship attendance, number of givers, deficit, ministry personnel, and more for our collective consideration.

These numbers come from communities of faith and their reflections on their ministry, directly from the people most closely engaged. At the same time, seen together, this data pulls us up and out to see the big picture of the church across the country, beyond anecdote.

Looking at these things tells us something—not everything—but something.

The conversations this resource proposes will ask you to consider numbers and reflect on what these numbers point us towards.

It will also ask you to ponder scripture, pray, and speak from your own lived and shared experience.

So please, when you encounter a chart let it offer what insight it can.

When you read "data-informed," know that you are being invited to bring numbers into a conversation which is about much more than just numbers, but that the numbers can help us ground our conversations as we seek to perceive that new thing which God is doing.

E. A Prayer for Communities of Faith in The United Church of Canada

Gracious and loving God
You called into being
This United Church of Canada
One expression of Jesus'
Beloved community,
Here in the particularities
Of our place and our time.
For the past 100 years
You have guided and sustained
And called us back when we have erred.
Now, as we look back
We also look forward,
Daring to believe
That even among us
Even in this very place
You are doing a new thing.
We long to perceive it
Like a way through a wilderness
For the sake of our neighbours
For the sake of this world of beautiful
And broken things
Yearning to be made whole
Yearning to be made new
May we perceive and live into it. Amen.

F. Conversation Outline and Materials

i. Spiritual Grounding | A Church Continuing the Story of Jesus (20 mins.)

Open with prayer, such as the one found in section E.

Remind participants that in *A Song of Faith* (2006) we proclaim:

*We sing of a church
seeking to continue the story of Jesus
by embodying Christ's presence in the world.
We are called together by Christ
as a community of broken but hopeful believers,
loving what he loved,
living what he taught,
striving to be faithful servants of God
in our time and place.*

Take a few minutes of silence and ask each person in the group to think about Jesus.

Can you name for yourself something about the story of Jesus—what he loved, what he taught, how he lived—that captures your heart?

Think about your own time and place, and reflect on what about Jesus' story you long to see embodied in it? Not necessarily in the church, but in your neighbourhood, in the lives of the people in your town or city? What is happening in our world right now that makes the story of Jesus especially needed?

After everyone has had a few minutes to think about this, go around the circle and share what came to you for one to two minutes each.

Write down the responses so you can come back to them later.

While *Toward 2035* is about the future of The United Church of Canada, we root this in a conviction that our vision is not just of an organization or an institution, but a movement and a people whose shared life is an embodiment of Christ's presence in the world.

In the Hebrew scriptures, we read this in the prophet Isaiah (43:19):

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

We invite you to hold this scripture with you as you engage the material to come, seeking to perceive in here what new thing God may be doing in your midst.

ii. A Watershed Moment for the United Church of Canada? (30 mins.)

A watershed moment is a pivotal point, one that changes the course of a situation.

Although a watershed moment can only ever be seen in hindsight, we propose that we might think of this moment we find ourselves in as one for The United Church of Canada, when thinking of our future as a church that exists across the country in both rural and urban localities.

We suggest that this may not be a given when we look at data laying out the current situation within the church.

In this section, we share a number of data points comparing 1992 and 2023 annual statistics that were submitted by communities of faith. 2035 numbers are projections.

The projections were developed by data analysts who work with the General Council Office, by tracking each year between 1992 and 2023 to establish a rate of decline and continue that trend forward. A projection is neither a prediction nor an inevitability. It cannot account for everything. The reality could be more or less dramatic.

Projections are designed to give us a picture of a future without intervention, to allow us to consider the cost of inaction, and to focus the choices we make in the present to imagine a preferred future.

Individual participation in the United Church has decreased significantly related to membership, worship attendance, and number of givers, at very similar rates.

Chart #1 shows the total membership of the United Church in 1992 (gold) compared to 2023 (blue). Based on the trajectory of these numbers, one can project that total membership in 2035 could be represented by the red.

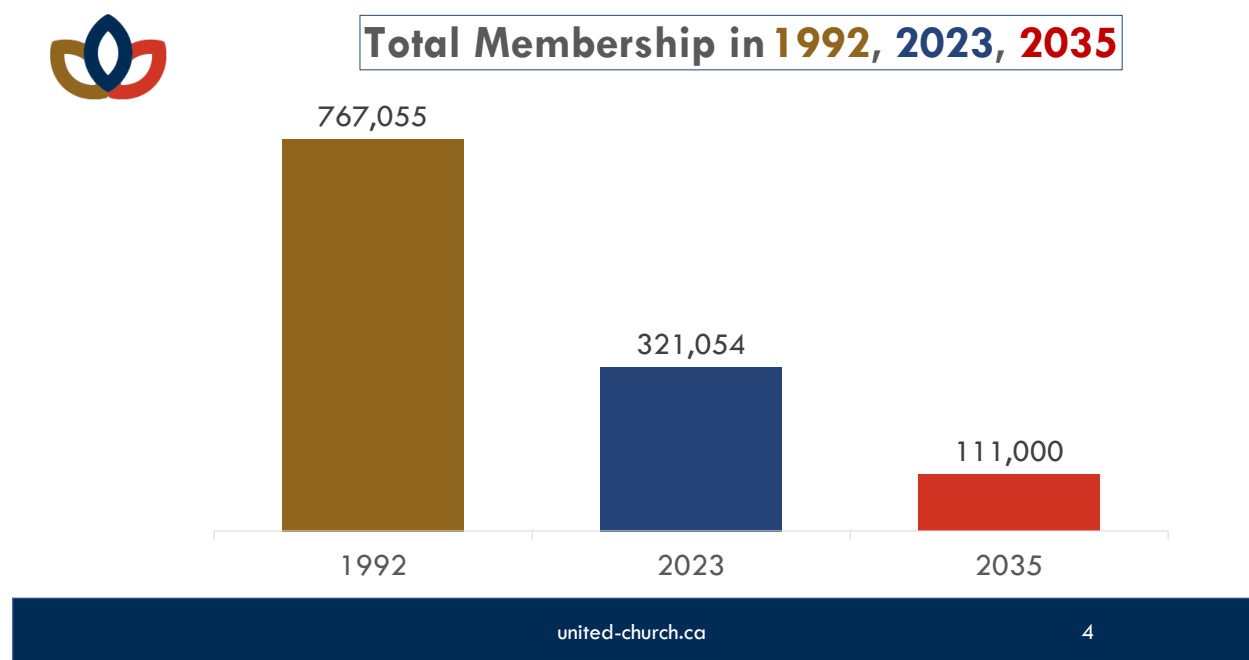


Chart #2 offers the same information about worship attendance.

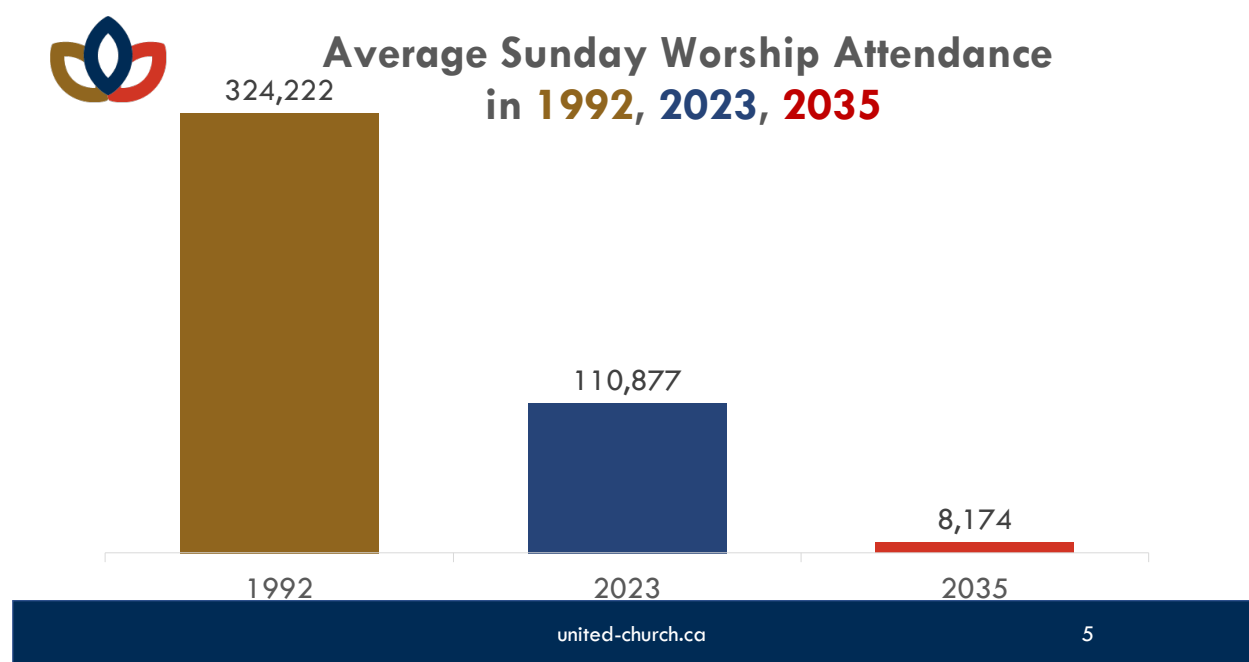
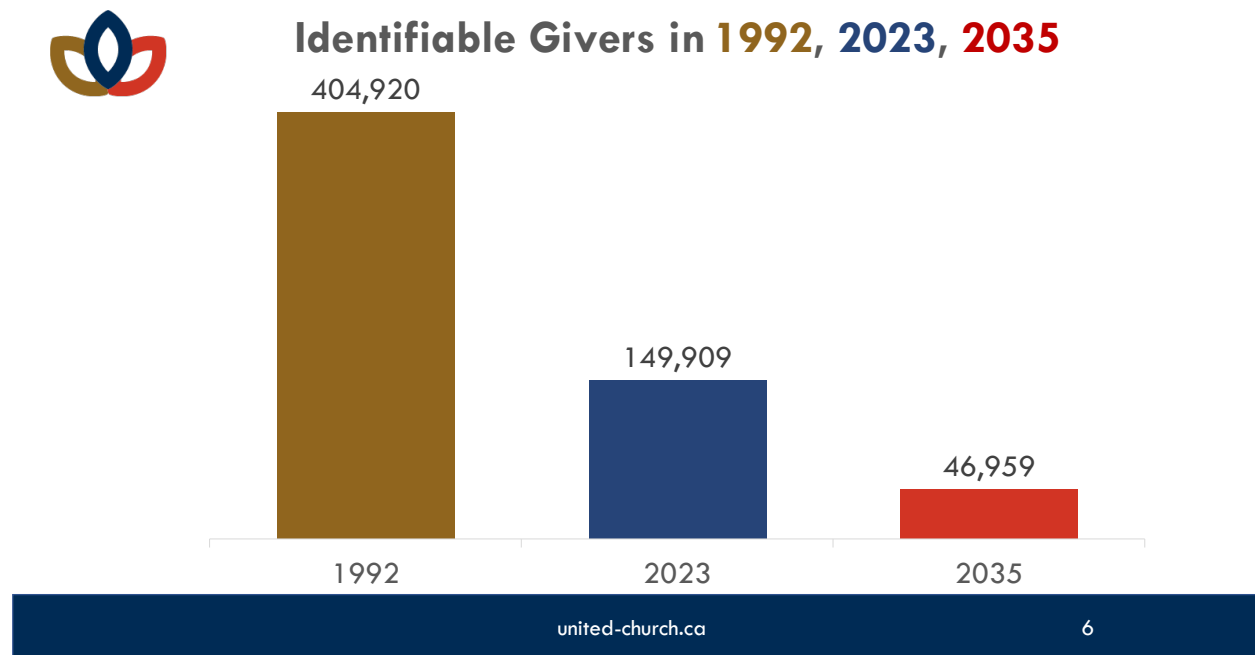


Chart #3 offers the same information, but about identifiable givers: people who donate to the ministry of their United Church community of faith.

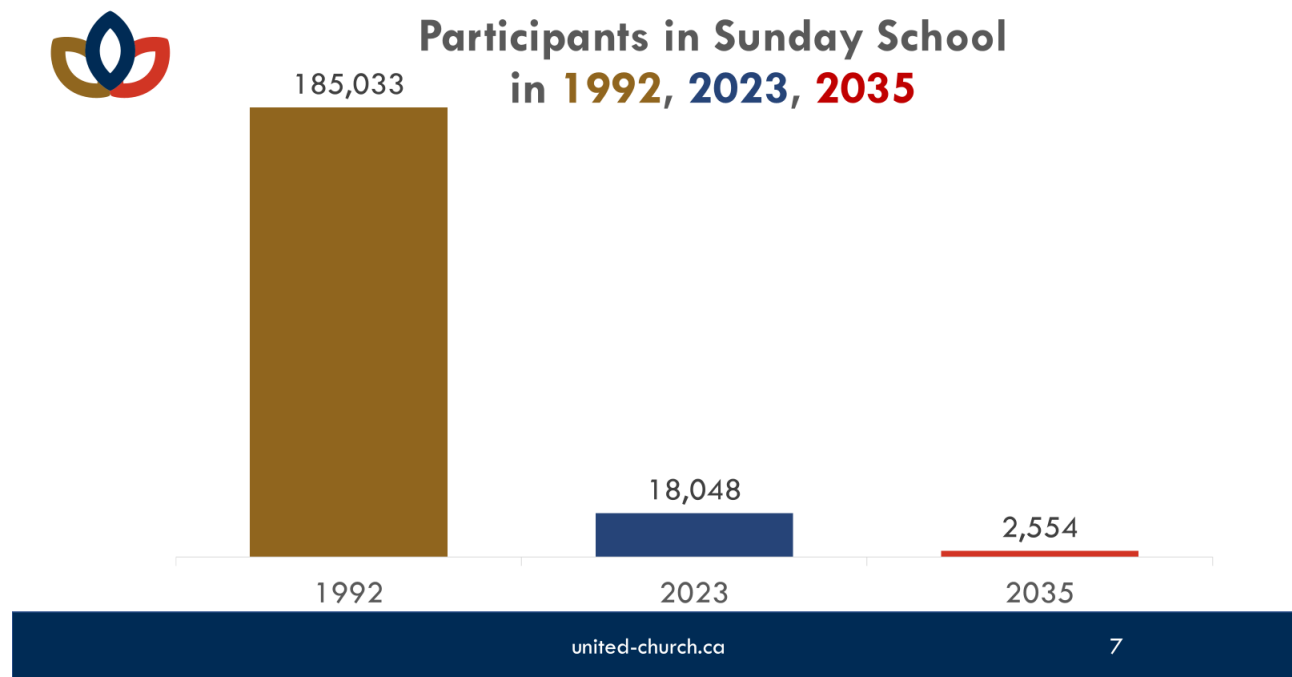


While the numbers are different, all three of these have a very similar trajectory. Members, attendees, and givers have been chosen because they are numbers pastoral charges track and submit. We know that if we used other numbers, like volunteers for instance, we would see something similar.

Questions for Consideration

- **These are national numbers, but do they reflect the situation of your community of faith as you experience it?**
- **Do they surprise you?**

Chart #4 represents the number of participants in Sunday school, which shows a similar but more significant trajectory from 1992 to 2023 and projection into 2035. We know that Sunday school isn't the only way to track children and youth within the church, but it is the most consistent number we have across the church, if we are to look for a trend.



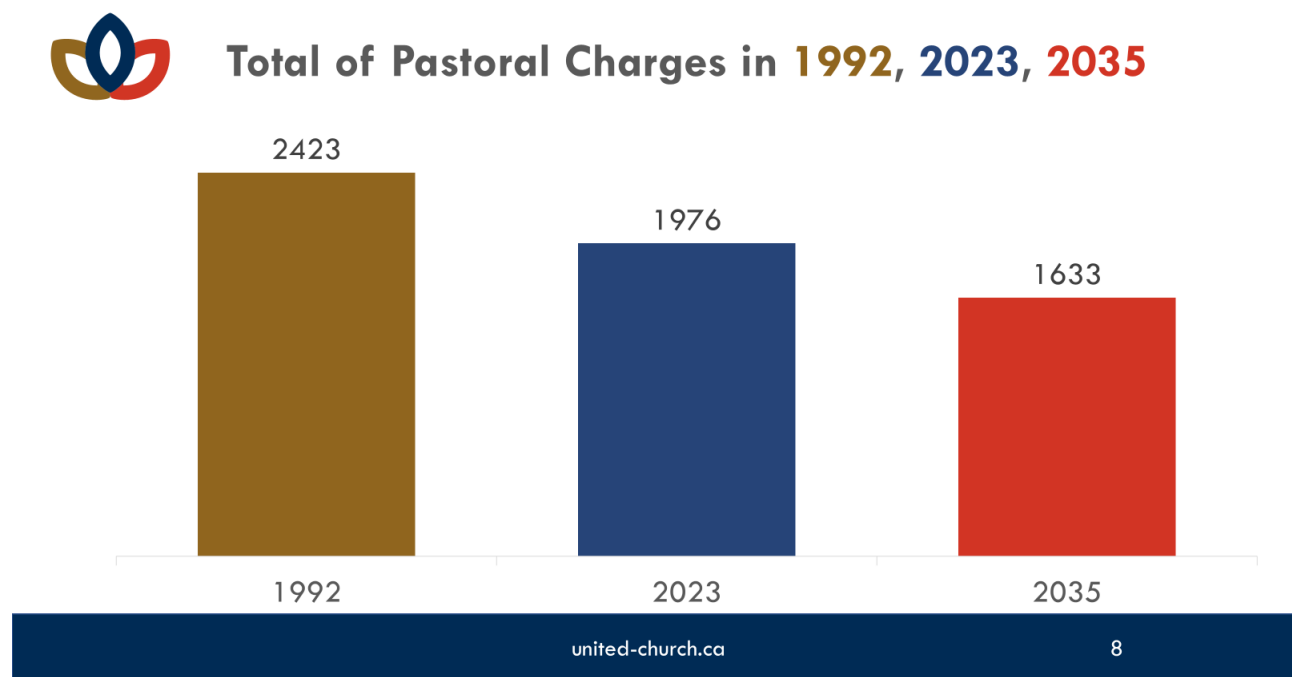
These numbers about Sunday School tend to land particularly hard. We hear throughout the church a deep lament about the lack of children and youth. In a future session, we will return to this lament and explore how the United Church still is present in the lives of young people through First Third ministry expressions that don't always get reflected in the numbers we currently record.

Questions for Consideration

- **When you think of the presence of young people in the United Church, what comes to your mind?**
- **Who are the young people in your life? As you recall your responses to the opening reflection on continuing the story of Jesus, what about this story would you long for in the lives of the young people who are part of your life?**

The previous charts show the picture of participation over the whole of The United Church of Canada. It is usually reflected when we look at any metric at the pastoral charge level. Even those who maintain high numbers have less than they did 40, or even 10, years ago.

Chart #5 shows the total number of pastoral charges. We often hear that United Churches are closing, and this is true, but the numbers show that this is not as significant as that narrative might suggest. The decline is not as sharp as in the numbers above.



We know one thing happening is that for the past 20 years, many pastoral charges who were part of multi-point agreements have been deciding to withdraw and return to independent ministry, often reliant on pulpit supply. This means that regions need to find a person to act as a pastoral charge supervisor.

We know that there are incredible individuals who are faithfully doing the work of pastoral charge supervision across the country, particularly in rural areas. However, this is placing incredible demands on the pastoral charge supervision system, regional commissions, and volunteers, which is becoming harder and harder to maintain. Innovative approaches are being developed to find new ways to undertake these tasks.

We propose that we can think of the dramatic decrease in individual participation coupled with only a moderate decrease in the number of pastoral charges as a hollowing, or thinning, experienced across the church. Far fewer participants, givers, and volunteers across almost as many ministries. This is experienced as an incredible challenge in most congregations. As we think of the call to be a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus in loving service to neighbour and community, many are feeling overwhelmed by just keeping the doors open.

This is not a new situation. Ten years ago, a report noted the same dynamic at work:

Fewer people are attending worship services. Fewer young adults, children, and youth are participating in our faith communities. Financial and demographic pressures mean some faith communities are getting smaller, amalgamating, or closing, while overstretched volunteers are spending more time on bureaucracy than ministry. And diminishing resources—both financial and human—are affecting our ability as local communities of faith, regional bodies, and a denomination to make a difference in God's world.

(Fishing on the Other Side, 2014)

Questions for Consideration

- **How is this experienced in your community of faith?**

One of the things we hear repeated across the church are words along these lines:

"We're doing OK for now; we've got challenges, but we're making do. If nothing happens, we think we can hold on."

But things do happen.

Major things like the COVID-19 pandemic have had dramatic effects on individual communities of faith, but that's not necessarily what people mean here.

People mean things that are run-of-the-mill, not once in a generation.

The departure of a minister. The death of a significant giver. One key volunteer moving to be closer to their grandchildren. A major (or even minor) repair to an aging building.

We hear from many communities of faith that they are unsure they could go on if one or two things like this happen to them.

Questions for Consideration

- **Does vulnerability ring true as a felt reality within The United Church of Canada, as you experience the church locally and beyond? What is the one (or two) thing(s) that looms in your imagination? What is it like to hold that?**

Chart #6 looks at the number of pastoral charges with a deficit or surplus. As we compare 1992 to 2023 and project to 2035, we see the number in deficit growing significantly.

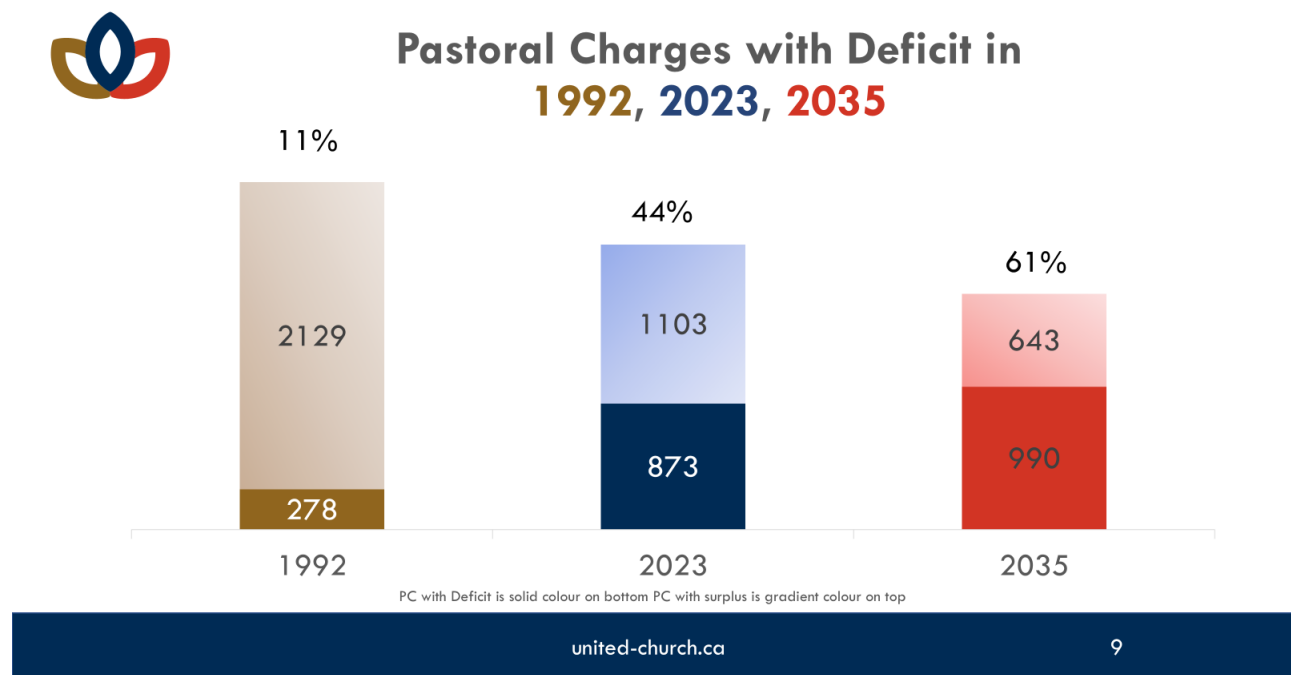
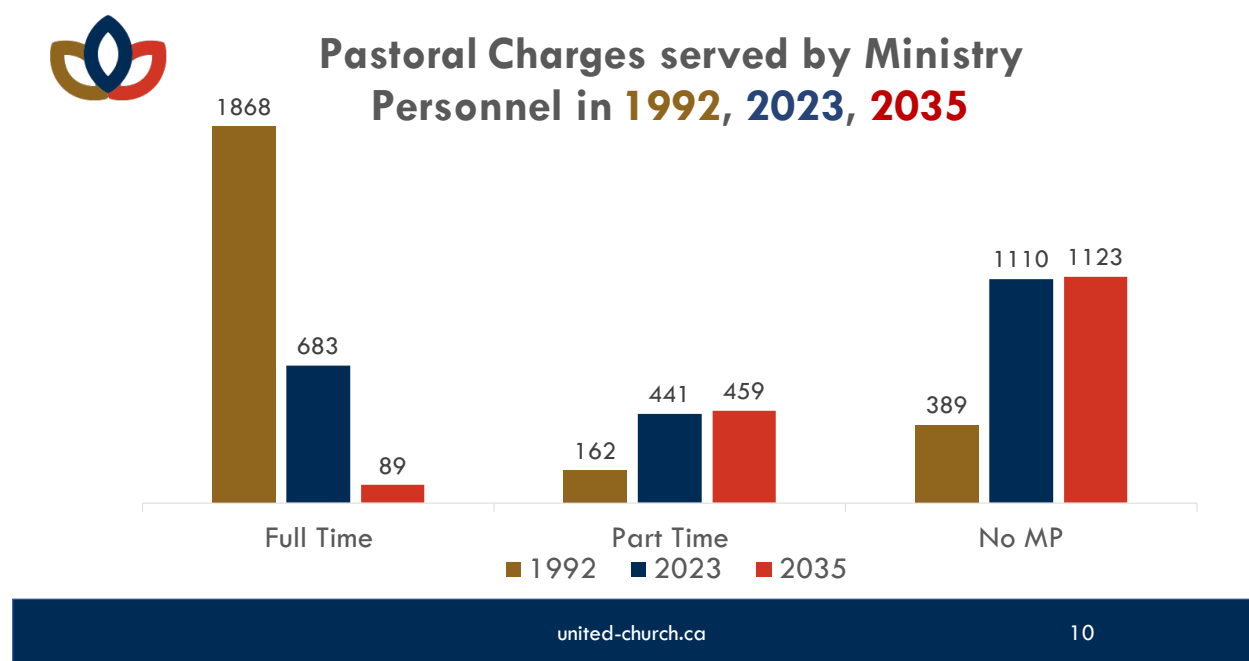


Chart #7 looks at the number of pastoral charges served by ministry personnel. Comparing 1992 (gold) and 2023 (blue) and projecting into 2035 (red), we see fewer communities served by full-time ministry personnel, and more by part-time or no ministry personnel.



The United Church of Canada has for decades celebrated the ministry of the Whole People of God—this is core to who we are. We also know that many communities who cannot afford to pay a minister, or who can afford to do so but cannot find a minister, are discouraged and disappointed. Both of these things are true.

A Trend Towards Vulnerability in Communities of Faith

Bringing together a number of these points, we see an increasing **trend towards vulnerability** among communities of faith.

We might define vulnerability as a situation marked by a feeling of scarcity within the community and the possibility that one or two unexpected events could cause the community to consider closure.

When we look at the intersection between worship attendance, deficit, and ministry leadership as potential signs of vulnerability, we see a concerning increase of congregations who might be at risk of a sudden need to close.

In 1992, 10–25 percent of United Church pastoral charges met these criteria of vulnerability. By 2023, that number was between 45 and 60 percent; modelling indicates it could become 60–70 percent in 2035.

It is beginning to feel as if just as many communities of faith are teetering on the edge as are doing well.

Given the number of pastoral charges in vulnerable positions, the rate of decrease in pastoral charges suggested by the numbers is unlikely. Sometime within the next 10 years we are likely to hit a tipping point and see a significant number of closures.

The concern is that this sudden increase in closures could leave large parts of the country, particularly in rural areas, without a United Church presence. If The United Church of Canada has been called by God to offer our witness from coast to coast, then in both rural and urban areas, this reality could significantly hamper our capacity to live into our calling.

Questions for Consideration

- **When you think about the United Church in your area, are you confident that it will be present 10 years from now? Try to think more broadly than your specific congregation.**
- **What about the work of witness of the United Church have you experienced in your life that you fear would be lost to your community should there no longer be a United Church presence in your area?**

iii. Is Decline the Whole Story? (10 mins.)

We have shared some very difficult statistics that centre on decline. But it is important to say that this is not the whole story. While this may be explored more fully in future conversations, we can report that some United Churches are growing. Chart #8 summarizes how among existing congregations in the United Church, there is growth. These congregations are not all of one model, but do demonstrate a certain commitment to turn themselves “inside out” toward the needs of potential new members.



And also Growth...

In 2023, out of @1976 Pastoral Charges,

- **205** increased membership
- **604** increased worship attendance
- **189** baptized adults (12 years or older)
- **316** welcomed people by profession of faith;
24% of those welcomed 5 or more.

To complement this, connected with Growth initiatives in both Pacific Mountain region and at the General Council, there are almost 40 emerging communities of faith (and this number is increasing). Most of these support newcomers to Canada, such as from Hong Kong, Korea, or Africa. Projections based on the census suggest that by 2035 approximately 30 percent of persons in Canada will be visible minorities*.

*census term.

iv. How Will We Think About the Future Now? (20 mins.)

When people speak of The United Church of Canada, despite ourselves, we often speak of size—that we are the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, or the second-largest Christian denomination.

This looms large in our imagination. Even when we are realistic about our present (we are smaller than we were) and our future (we will be smaller than we once were).

We wonder if this brings with us a feeling of failure. Are we failing to be The United Church of Canada? To continue the legacy we have been given?

There is not one simple answer to the question of how we got to this place. Changes in the world around us, and also decisions we made, possibilities we chose not to pursue.

It is worth considering what the effect is on us collectively and individually if we feel like we have no future. Human beings have a negativity bias. Our brains evolved to identify threats—they had to, for our survival.

Moving forward will require a willingness to experiment within an environment of imagination, learning as we go. We must faithfully and courageously try different things and learn from our experiences and each other. Vision gives us something to look for in the world that *we want to see happen*. We need visions and dreams because we are designed to watch for the things we do not want to see; that we want to avoid.

We quote again from the Hebrew scriptures in the book of Isaiah:

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

Questions for Consideration

- **What has been hard to hear so far?**
- **Have you seen any positive signs, such as new shoots of growth?**
- **Who within your community of faith has been shouldering the burden of the current reality?**

- Consider offering a prayer for the volunteers or staff who are holding the United Church in such a time as this.
- Are there other scriptures that help you look forward?

v. A Vision Rooted in Call (20 mins.)

“A vision gives our brains something to look for in the world that we want to happen.”

—Marie McDonald, *Bloom Your Mind* podcast

Toward 2035 is being offered to the whole of The United Church of Canada as something that we would hold together, considering our call to be the church and our present reality, a commitment to imagining and articulating a preferred future

The broad strokes of *Toward 2035* can be described as a ten-year commitment to this vision...

In 2035, in The United Church of Canada, resilient, inspired, diverse contextual United Church communities of disciples seek to continue the story of Jesus, by embodying Christ's presence in the world.

In diverse expressions across the country, **contextual** to their neighbourhoods, **inspired** communities embody all aspects of the denominational Call—Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, Daring Justice.

Resilient communities have sufficient stability and sustainability to prevent them from being just one or two crises away from closure. There is a sense of having and being “enough.”

The church is present and deeply connected coast-to-coast-to-coast in rural and urban settings, and in ecumenical and global relationships.

Guided by hope-filled, adaptive, and effective ministry leaders, the denomination is increasingly multigenerational, multiracial, and intercultural.

Being The United Church of Canada means better reflecting the increasing diversity of Canada.

Overall, embracing this vision will require looking intentionally for the new things God is doing, and magnifying or amplifying those initiatives as well as experimenting with other new ways of being together.

Questions for Consideration

- **What stands out to you in this description?**
- **What do you notice the description not specifying?**

vi. Initial Thoughts for Communities of Faith

General Secretary, The Rev. Michael Blair explains *Toward 2035* like this:

Toward 2035 is the evolution of the 2023–2025 operational plan approved by the Executive of the General Council for the work of the General Council office. The initial plan was mandatory for the General Council Office, and invitational to the work of regional councils. *Toward 2035*, now becomes the work of the whole church—all of its councils. It invites a reimagining and reorientation of our ministries to ensure the sustainability of a robust, vibrant, and relevant progressive Christian presence in the communities that make up Canada. In essence it is an act of faith, to partner with God's action in our world, our neighbourhoods and neighbours, enabling them to experience the wholeness and fullness of life for all. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." (58:12)

The General Secretary imagines a denominational strategic plan, linked to regional strategies, linked to congregational ministry plans. As we begin to think about what this might mean congregationally, here are some initial thoughts harvested from research and experience:

- **Be clear about your "why":** Why does your community of faith exist? We need to be very specific and confident about our call, and the strengths and gifts (the charism) we offer on the basis of that discipleship call.
- **Be curious about your neighbours:** We need to be very aware of the neighbourhoods or areas in which our church resides. Some churches are

great at this; some have considered themselves as destination churches, so not super-connected to the neighbourhood, and some may have old conceptions of the neighbourhood that has rapidly changed around them. Data, listening, and even field trips beyond the walls can help connect us to the needs of our neighbourhoods.

- **Invite, invite, invite:** We need to develop our spiritual muscle of invitation, including through intentional invitation plans connected to our “why” and what we have learned about our neighbourhood. Invites can be to many things—not just worship, but also to justice and outreach activities, volunteering, and more.
- **Be connexional:** This is a Methodist concept that reminds us that a singular congregation is not the church alone. It is an important time to connect with and collaborate with churches around you. Connections can be for mutual support and encouragement—pray for each other at board meetings, or during worship. Share challenges and joys. There may be possibilities **for practical support or sharing ministry**. For example, one or two young people may be too small to plan a program around, but perhaps in a cluster of churches, there is a critical mass of younger folks. One church alone might not have adequate capacity to sponsor a refugee, but a cluster might.
- **Reflect on your time:** Audit the amount of time on your meeting agendas for different kinds of work. Is there a way to lighten up governance and administration for more focus on ministry and outreach?
- **Prioritize migrant/newcomer communities and young people:** We need to be super attentive to where newcomers to Canada and young people are showing up—not necessarily inside the walls of the church, but in the community. Where are there opportunities for listening and accompaniment?
- **Pray and listen:** This moment in which we find ourselves calls for wisdom, perseverance, and courage. The Christian church has known many such moments. The United Church of Canada has known many such moments. So

we pray and listen, trusting that God meets us as we do. Perhaps this is a muscle we need to develop anew for that which lays before us now.

These are initial ideas, and we will be working to harvest more and to share all practices—spiritual practices—that can help us move toward the overall vision.

Questions for Consideration (as you prepare to close this conversation)

- **What of these are you already doing? Is your community of faith willing to experiment with any new ideas along these lines? Do you have ideas you could share with the region or the denomination?**
- **What part of the potential future might God be calling your community to explore at this time? Is there one of these areas you might take on even as you continue to explore *Toward 2035*?**
- **What has been hard to hear so far? Have you seen any positive signs, such as new shoots of growth?**
- **When you think of the United Church in 10 years, how much do you believe that your decisions today can make a difference to how the future will unfold?**

G. A New Creed

Suggest closing Session 1 with a profession of our shared faith:

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

