



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 is the final draft of a resource intended for communities of faith in The United Church of Canada. Please do not circulate this resource. If you have feedback, as revise and make final, please send it to planning@united-church.ca. A session 2 and 3 are being developed, both of approximately 2 hours.

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- B. A Prayer for Communities of Faith in the United Church of Canada
- C. A Note About Numbers
- D. What is Toward 2035 | A One-Page Summary
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 - Is Decline the Whole Story? (10 mins)
 - Does this Mean we have Failed? (20 mins)
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- G. A New Creed

The material is A-E is intended to provide background material for facilitators. The material in F is a 2-hour session. A Power Point 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 way in the title of his weekly newsletter; *The Future Does Not Fit in the Containers of the Past*. In her workshops on Flourishing, the Moderator has drawn 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 the Song of Faith:

*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 our practices which made sense in 1925, 1960 or even 2020 but now act as a hinderance 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. 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.

C. 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-driven’ 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 through attending to multiple elements in conversation with each other (the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, 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 membership, worship attendance, number of givers, deficit, ministry personnel, and more points for our collective consideration.

These numbers come from Communities of Faith and their reflection 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-driven” know that you are being invited to bring numbers into conversation which is about much more than just numbers, but the numbers can help us ground our conversations as we seek to perceive that new thing which God is doing.

D. 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 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 have directed the General Secretary to prioritize and implement.
- That focuses the attention of the General Council and Regional Council Offices on collaborative work in supporting Communities of Faith towards a preferred 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.

In general, that strategic direction can be expressed as similar to:

In 2035, Resilient, inspired, diverse United Church communities of disciples, coast to coast to coast, urban and rural **continue the story of Jesus, by embodying Christ's presence in our time and place.**

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, 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 United Church as a whole, more closely reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada with Indigenous and Francophone presence, and includes the presence of all generations, notably children, youth, and young adult.

E. 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”.

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 and which questions will be most helpful.
- Use this as a script or a guide, whatever 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

F. Conversation Outline & Materials

Spiritual Grounding | A Church Continuing the Story of Jesus (20 min)

Open with prayer such as in section A.

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 “time and place,” and reflect on what about Jesus’ story you long to see embodied? Not necessarily in the church, but in your neighbourhood, in the lives of the people in your town/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 for 1-2 minutes each what came to you.

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 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.

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 a watershed moment 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 based on the trends observed between 1992 and 2023. These were established by data analysts working with the General Council Office.

They are not meant to be predictions; projections give us something to think about, a way to envision the possible 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.

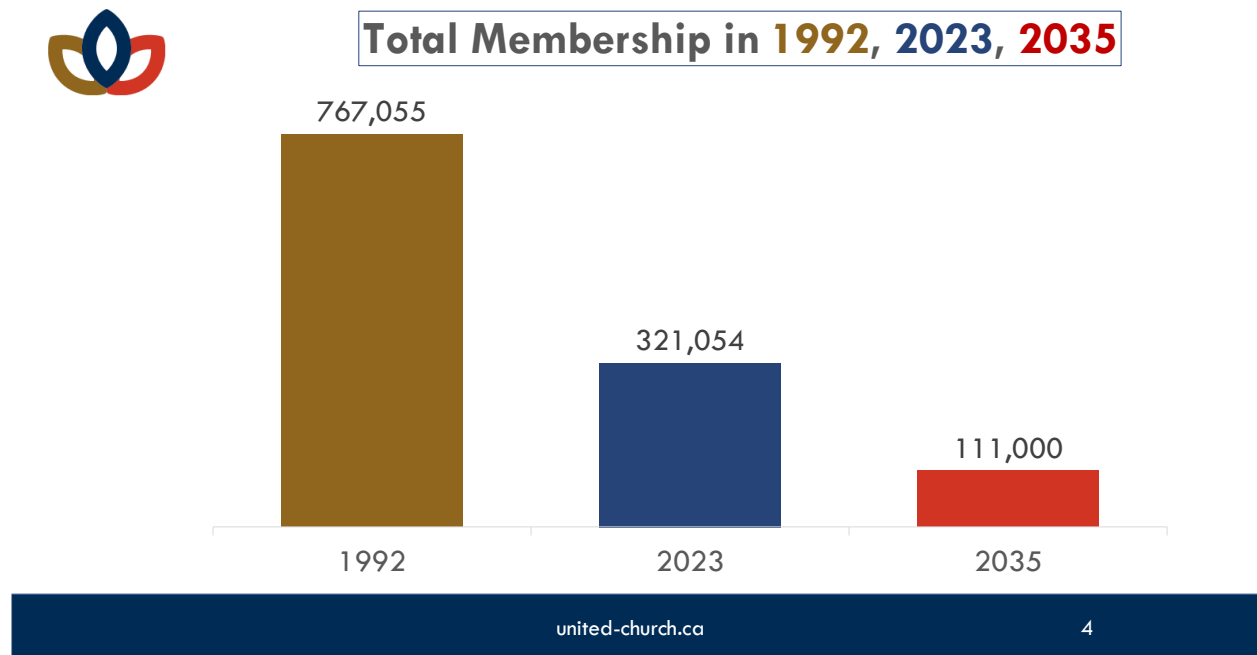


Chart #2 offers the same information about Worship Attendance.

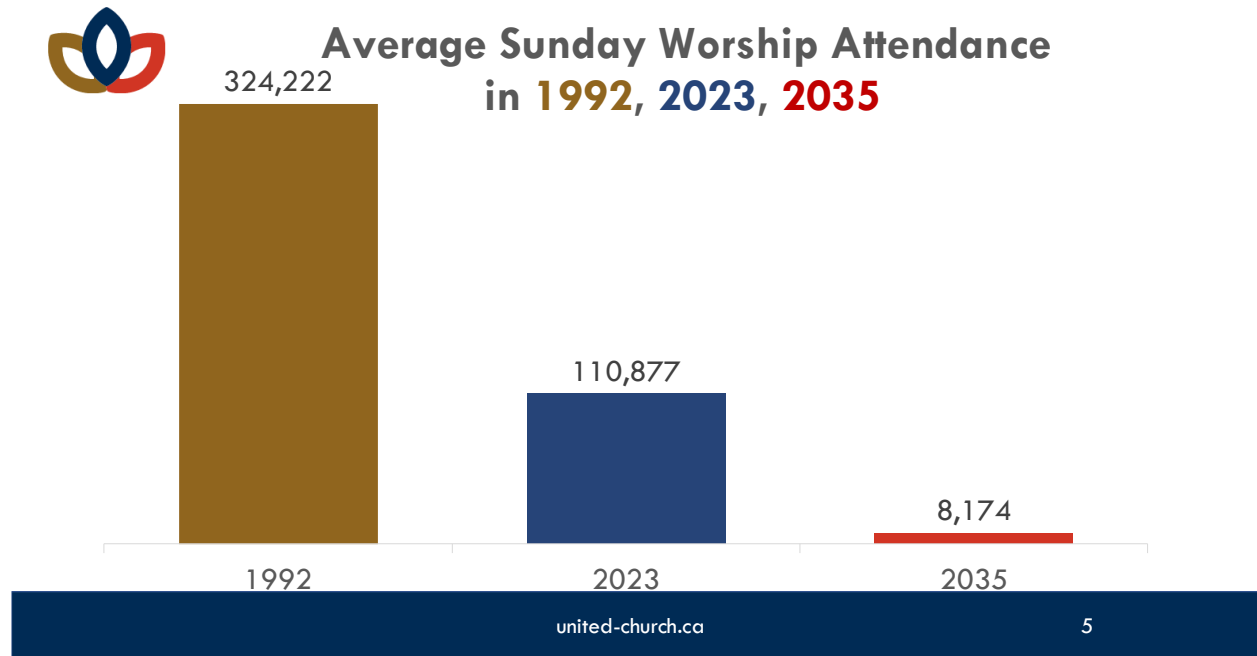
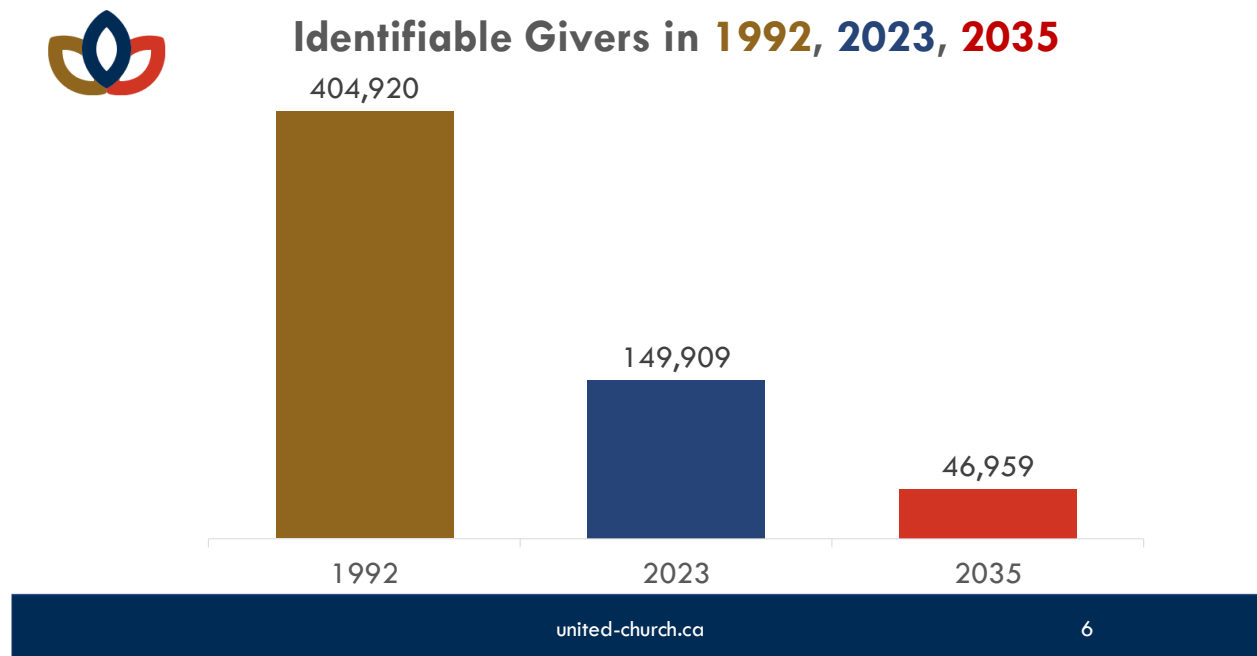


Chart #3 offers the same information but about Identifiable Givers, people who donate to the ministry of their United Church Community of Faith.

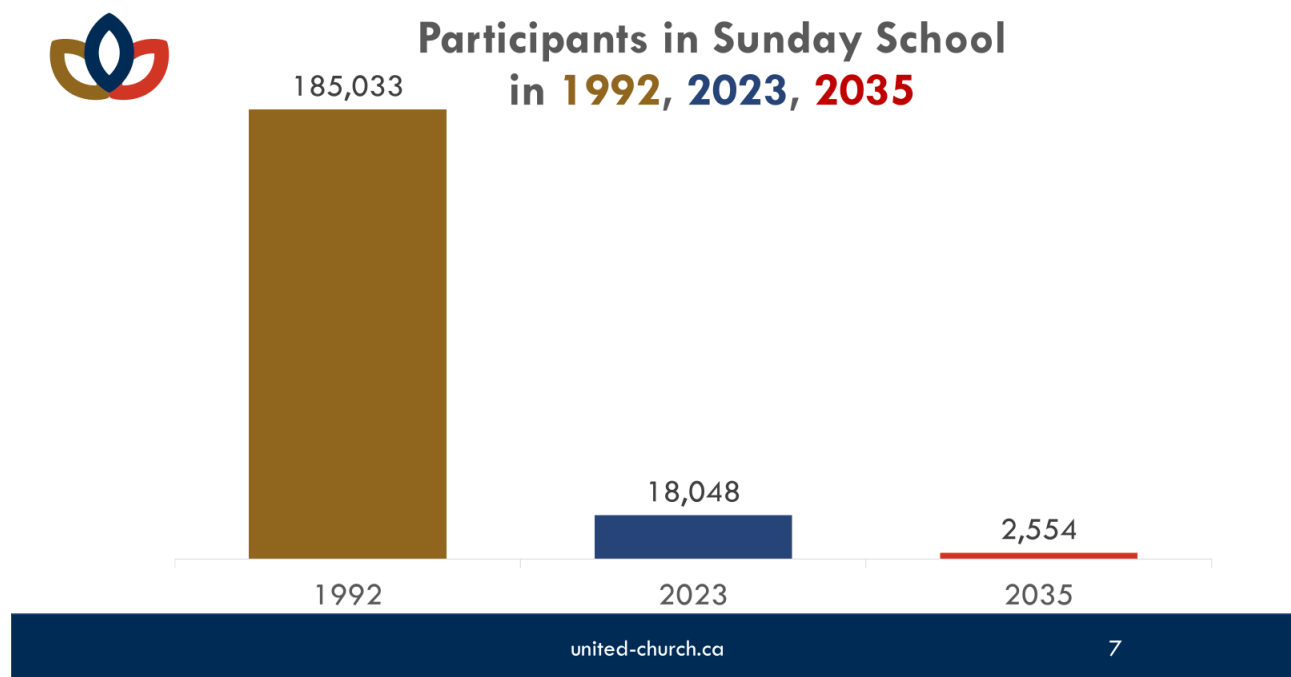


While the numbers are different, all three of these have a very similar trajectory. Members, attendees, and givers have been chosen because they are numbers Pastoral Charges track and submit. We know that if we used other numbers, like volunteers for instance that we would see something similar.

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.



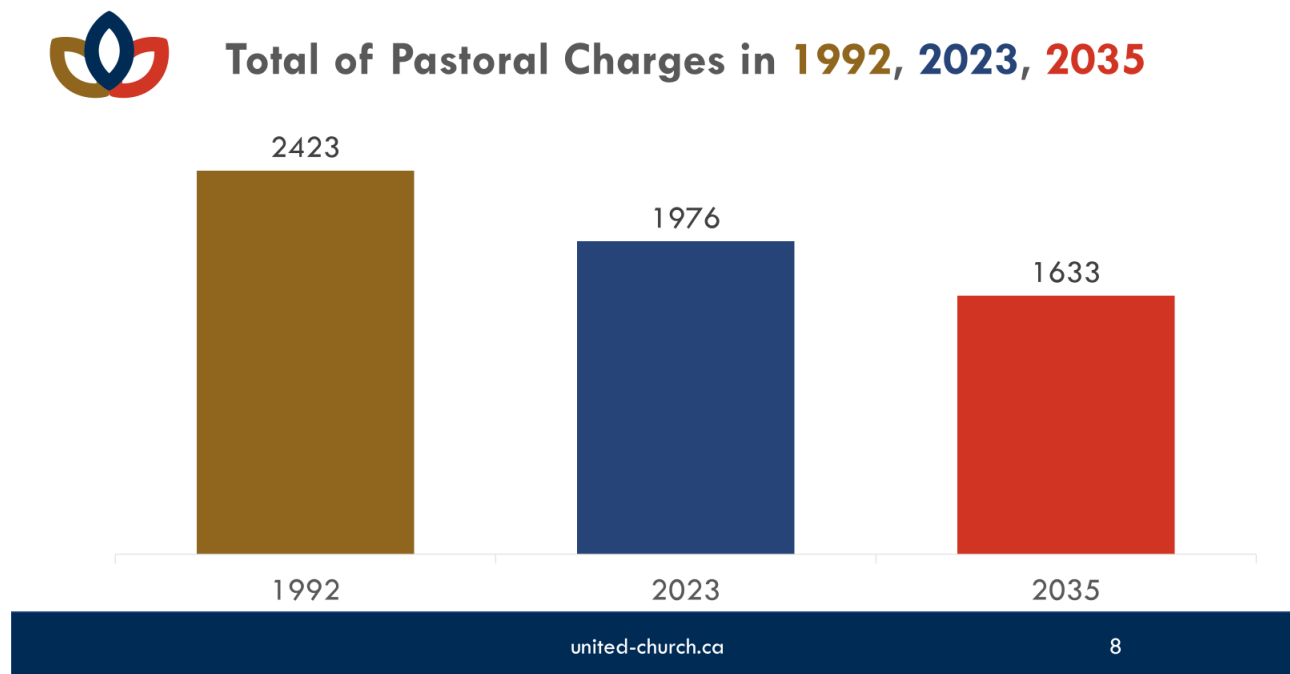
These numbers about Sunday School tend to land particularly hard. We hear throughout the church a deep lament about the lack of children and youth. In a future session, we will return to this lament and explore how the United Church still is present in the lives of young people through first third ministry 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 and 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 the numbers above.



We know that one thing that is happening is that for the past 20 years, many pastoral charges who were part of a multi-point agreement have been making the decision 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 – but that this is placing

incredible demands on the pastoral charge supervision system and Regional Commissions and volunteers which is becoming harder and harder to maintain.

We propose that we can think of the dramatic decrease in individual participation coupled with only a moderate decrease in 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 “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.

“Were 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.

Big 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 deficit or surplus and as we compare 1992 to 2023 and project to 2035, we see the number in deficit growing significantly.

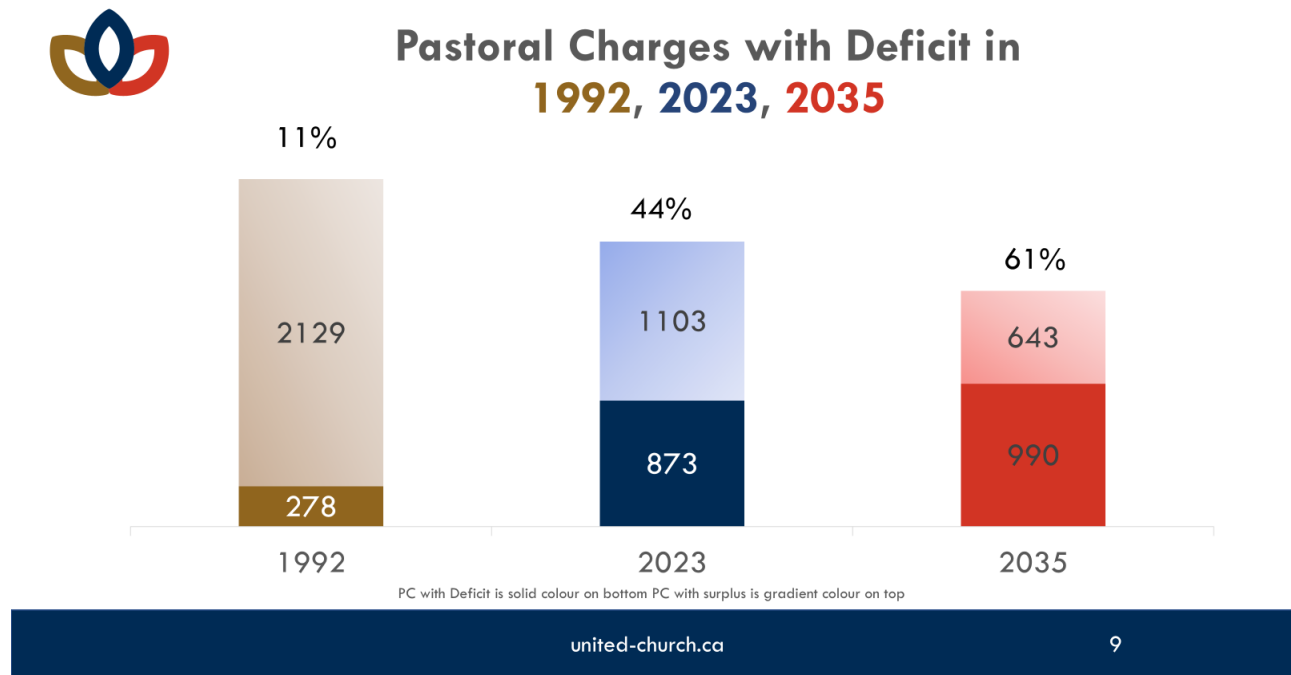
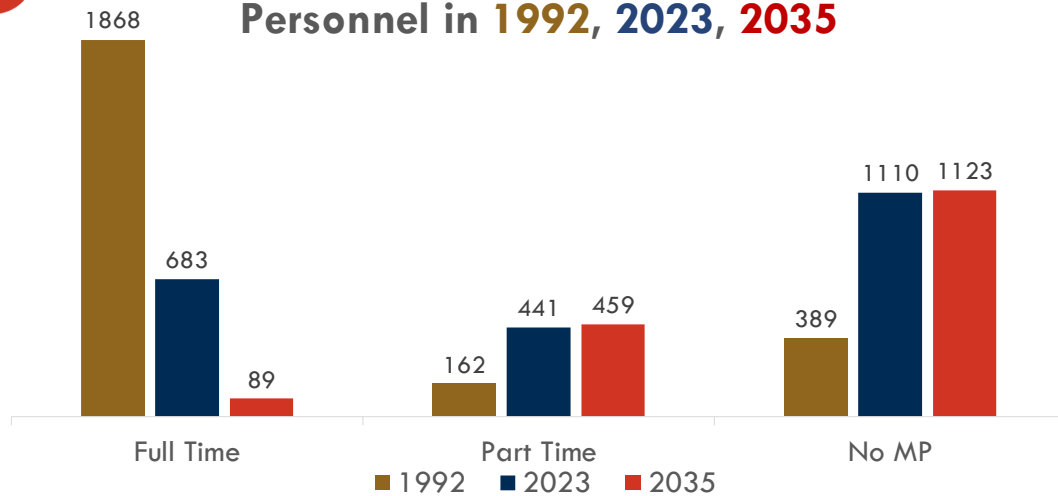


Chart #7 looks at the number of pastoral charges served by Ministry Personnel. Comparing 1992 (gold) and 2023 (blue) and projecting into 2035 (red) we see fewer communities served by full-time Ministry Personnel and more being served by part-time or no ministry personnel.



Pastoral Charges served by Ministry Personnel in 1992, 2023, 2035



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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 by this. Both of these things are true.

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.

These are not exceptional crises such as Global Pandemics or major disasters but events that are very common – the departure of a minister, the death of a significant giver, the need for a significant repair to an aging building. These are events that are part and parcel of congregational life, but which at this point feel as if they could spell disaster for many congregations.

When we look at the intersection between worship attendance, deficit, 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.

Such modelling indicates that in 1992 10-25% met these criteria of vulnerability but that by 2023 that number was between 45-60% of United Church Pastoral Charges and could become 60-70% in 2035.

It is beginning to feel that as many Communities of Faith are teetering on the edge as are doing well.

With the number of Pastoral Charges in a vulnerable position, 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, and in rural and urban areas this reality could significantly hamper our capacity to live into this 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?**

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 might 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 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 approximately 37 emerging Communities of Faith. Most of these support newcomers to Canada, such as from Hong Kong, Korea, or the Africa continent. Projections based on the census suggest that by 2035 approximately 30% of persons in Canada will be visible minorities.* *census term.

Does this Mean we have Failed? (20 min)

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 feeling of failure. Are we failing to be The United Church of Canada?

It is worth considering what is the effect on us collectively and individually if we feel like we have failed, and like we have no future.

Human beings have a negativity bias.

Our brains evolved to identify threats – they had to for our survival.

Given this we understand that vision gives our brains something to look for in the world that we want to see happen because we are designed to watch for the things we do not want to see, that we want to avoid.

Questions for Consideration (maybe a good point for a break and check-in)

- **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.**

A Vision Rooted in Call and Responsive to Reality (40 min)

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.

The broad strokes of Toward 2035 can be described as...

In 2035, Resilient, inspired, diverse United Church communities of disciples, coast to coast to coast, urban and rural **continue the story of Jesus, by embodying Christ's presence in our time and place.**

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, 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 United Church as a whole, more closely reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada with Indigenous and Francophone presence, and includes the presence of all generations, notably children, youth, and young adults.

It 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 would it feel like in your community to experience a sense of having and being enough? Think about the conversations at your Board/Council or Annual meetings; how many have to do with scarcity? What would you speak about if you had “enough”? How would you be seeking to continue the story of Jesus in your place?**
- **What do you notice the description not specifying?**

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 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 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 fulness 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 that to pursue Toward 2035 the United Church will need:

- a strengthening of the *strategic partnership* and collaboration between Regional Councils, Communities of Faith, the Indigenous church and the General Council. We will draw from the deep wells of our Methodist heritage by reengaging the charism of **connexionalism**.

Putting the emphasis on connexionalism, appreciates the fact that the gift of congregationalism in our heritage is a challenge for our current reality. No one part of the church can address these challenges; we need a whole church strategy.

- a reclaiming and reframing of the *episcopal role* of Regional Councils;
- a prioritizing and investment in first third (or children and youth) ministries and migrant and newcomer Canadian outreach and involvement;
- embracing of new and emerging contextual models of communities of faith and forms of ministry leadership;
- investments in training and support for ministry leadership (ordered and lay), and;
- intentional engagement beyond the walls of our buildings.

The work of implementation will have these characteristic as their goal. The General Council will work with Regional Councils, seeking to ensure there are adequate resources and staff available to make this a reality.

Questions for Consideration as you prepare close this conversation:

- **What part of the potential future might God be calling your community to explore at this time?**
- **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.

