

GROWING VITAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN CANADA: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

In September, the CUC Board distributed an announcement regarding the financial and staffing challenges facing our movement. At that time we promised an in-depth analysis would follow, to explore how we have arrived at this place and consider the way forward. Here is that analysis.

In it, we take a look at the work we set out to do in 2002 as it was outlined in the *Of Regions and RNGs* plan, questioning some of its assumptions in light of results attained to date. We describe our current situation and attempt to show that the challenges we face are interrelated. Then we discuss sustainability and our work to date in restructuring. We anticipate that, after our February board meeting, we will be able to provide more specifics about how we propose to move forward.

As we continue to work through some challenging times for this organization, we request both your thoughts and your patience. Please share your ideas and concerns with a board member. You can keep up with developments in the implementation of the short-term plan online at http://cuc.ca/strategy/short_term_plan.

CONTENTS

Some History: The <i>Of Regions and RNGs</i> Plan	2
Our Current Situation	3
Staff	3
Volunteers	3
Programming	3
Money	4
Congregations	4
Interrelated Challenges Require Integrated Solutions	4
Moving Forward	4
A Sustainable Organization	4
What do We Want?	5
Staying Focused on our Mission.....	5
We are All the CUC!.....	5
A Community of Communities	6
Our Short-Term Plan.....	6
In Conclusion	7

SOME HISTORY: THE *OF REGIONS AND RNGS* PLAN

Of Regions and RNGs (http://www.cuc.ca/governance/regions_rngs_final.htm) was a blueprint for the future that the Council adopted in 2002. Although *Of Regions and RNGs* was, in its details, primarily a service delivery plan, it incorporated the language and scope of a larger goal - calling itself “A Plan for the ‘New CUC’” and expressing “our hope that this plan will be only the beginning of our envisioning a new and dynamic way of serving our denomination and inspiring growth in our religion across the country.” The plan involved building a core of volunteers that would, with the help of a small cadre of paid staff, sustain all the operations and services we needed, and provide the base upon which we could build much, much more.

In the words of the *Of Regions and RNGs* plan, our Council’s *mission* is to provide “tangible support for religious exploration, spiritual growth and social responsibility” and to be “a strong, respected Canadian voice for a vibrant, liberal faith community, relevant to contemporary life in the twenty first century”. This mission, the plan tells us, can be summarized as *growing vital religious communities in Canada*.

The premise over the years since 2002 has been that fully implementing our Regions and RNGs plan would put us at the jumping off place for such growth across Canada. It was supposed that our own CUC programs would then be meeting our congregations’ needs, that we would have a balanced budget, and that we would be beginning to grow in numbers.

A year and a half ago, the Board commissioned a formal five-year evaluation of our organization (<http://www.cuc.ca/governance/board/CUC5YearEvaluationReport.pdf>). In general, the results suggested that the implementation of the plan had been successfully completed.¹ Despite this, our goal for membership (of being some 8,000 strong at this point) has remained illusive; we continue to hover at around 5200, as we have for decades. The reasons, we believe, are to be found in certain assumptions about how we would integrate staff, volunteers, programs, and money, and what impact that would then have on our growth—assumptions not borne out by experience.

¹ The evaluation did note some areas for concern and made some recommendations for further review, many of which were already under review before the report came out, and the rest of which have since become part of our current short-term plan.

OUR CURRENT SITUATION

Staff

In the spring of 2008, our Director of Lifespan Learning tendered her resignation to our Executive Director. In August, the Executive Director tendered her own resignation to the Board. In January, we said goodbye to our Director of Regional Services-West. That is a significant loss of program staff in a short span of time. In addition, there has been a high turnover in administrative support staff over the last two years. We are fortunate indeed that our excellent and capable full-time staff (Linda Thomson - Acting Executive Director, Phil Strapp - Financial Administrator, and Michelle Lee - Administrative Co-ordinator) as well as our part-time and contract staff continue their very valuable service with us.

In the Board's view, a highly transient staffing situation, involving both key program and administrative staff, is likely to be an indicator of an unsustainable staffing model. At the beginning of a new venture, enthusiasm runs high and staff may successfully overextend themselves in the short term. It is not possible - or reasonable - to sustain that over the long term.

Volunteers

Arriving at the end of five or more years as Service Consultants and Congregational Networkers, many stalwarts among our "first wave" of Regional Network Group (RNG) volunteers are now ready to move aside. We have been unable to identify enough volunteers who are willing to take their place within the current service framework. As well, many of our Social Responsibility Monitoring Groups are languishing for want of members. It grows increasingly difficult to find host committee members for regional gatherings and the ACM. Whatever the reasons, volunteers, like staff, are currently thin on the ground.

We must reconsider whether we can build the CUC to the extent we had hoped to with volunteers. We need to recognize that, as with staff, heavy commitment in early days may not be sustainable for the long haul. If it is not, then we must think again about how to grow our movement across Canada.

Programming

There are many good core programs and services currently being offered through the CUC. However, we have the impression that many congregations don't use the services that are available, as often CUC program budgets go under-spent. At the same time, some needs of our congregations remain unmet.

Clearly, energy spent in offering services could be better aligned with congregational needs.

Money

In the past, our budget has been balanced through healthy investment returns; without these, we would have had deficit operating budgets year after year. The current volatility in the financial market, as we communicated at the Annual Meeting in May, means that we had no investment income from the previous year to subsidize our 2008 budget. This situation is likely to worsen in 2009 and, as some analysts predict, for several years.

Our goals for increasing response to the annual Friends campaign have proven thus far to be unrealistic, and we are well aware that significant increases to the Annual Program Contribution (already set at \$91 per person for 2009) are not desirable. Modest increases, on the other hand, will not be enough to offset the deficit.

We think it is absolutely essential to recognize that even the more modest growth projections based on the implementation of the Regions and RNGs plan have not been realized and that there is a direct correlation between lack of growth and our inability to produce a balanced budget.

Congregations

Six years down the road, we do not yet have the degree and quality of interaction we'd like to see among our congregations and between individual congregations and the CUC staff and board. There is a chronic lack of awareness in our congregations and communities of how to take advantage of the things that our "community of communities" currently can offer. At the same time, there is also frequently stated disappointment that our stated goal to be "a strong, respected Canadian voice for a vibrant, liberal faith community" is not being met, and that we are not, in fact, growing.

Interrelated Challenges Require Integrated Solutions

The challenges we've outlined above do not exist in isolation from each other, but rather each contributes to the others; attempts to respond to one without responding to the others are not likely to succeed.

MOVING FORWARD

A Sustainable Organization

The Board is committed to ensuring that the CUC operates with a sustainable staffing model. To that end we are formulating such a model within our current financial constraints, recognizing that priorities must be set and job descriptions targeted to those priorities.

In addition, our current short-term plan calls for, among other things, a thorough re-examination of congregational and lifespan learning programming and a review of how we “do” social responsibility at the national level. We are as well examining our own performance as a Board using a policy governance model, and considering how we can serve more effectively in terms of fundraising.

What do We Want?

Remembering that “the CUC” is an invention of its member congregations, we must decide together what and how much we want to achieve collectively, and how much we are prepared to commit in terms of hard dollars and volunteer commitment.

Working in partnership with our staff, professional and lay leadership, the Board is developing clear options of what we can do and for what cost. We will make recommendations, but in the end it will be for the members to decide which route we follow; the Board will not embark on any new plan without the clear commitment of the membership.

Staying Focused on our Mission

The Board continues to be inspired by the possibilities raised in the Mission Statement of the CUC. We are committed to a systematic overhaul of our policies to ensure that they are in line with that Statement, that we have less “red tape” as an organization, and that staff are inspired to act quickly and directly in responding to needs of our various communities.

We are All the CUC!

One critical point of clarity at the September 2008 Board meeting occurred when the Board was able to name one of the major causes of dissonance between the CUC and the member congregations, the sense that “the CUC” is some “outside” entity. We are all the CUC! We are all in service together, and “the CUC” is nothing more than the organization formed by its members to do on behalf of congregations those things it makes sense to do collectively. The portrayal of “the CUC” as an amorphous entity outside the congregational structure, insensitive to the realities of congregational life, awash with cash and other resources, is unfortunate as well as inaccurate!

The Board is committed to promoting both communication between and among congregations and to self-organizing, sustainable initiatives aligned with our principles and national vision.

We ask in turn that all Canadian UUs reflect on their relationship with fellow UUs across the country. Instead of starting a sentence with “The CUC should...”, consider “Wouldn’t it be great if we...” instead. Then consider how each of us, individually and in our local

and national communities, can work together to achieve those goals. Working collaboratively is the “price of polity” – garnering our independence by willingly demonstrating our interdependence. This is shared ministry on the big scale.

A Community of Communities

Across Canada, we create “religious communities” wherever UUs come together to be nurtured, to grow, and to act. This leads the Board to conclude that we are a “community of communities”, and our communities include our congregations, our youth, our ministers, our Lay Chaplains, our social responsibility groups, and any other group of UUs who gather for common purpose and shared values.

How are our communities to relate to one another? What are our shared goals and respective obligations to each other? By developing formal covenants between our communities we can have a clearer understanding of our relationships; those relationships become intentional – between partners who may differ in size and geographic scope, but who are nonetheless equals – being comprised of dedicated, passionate UUs.

For example, this philosophy enables us to enter into renewed relationship with Canadian Youth, many of whom are struggling to find firm ground following the reorganization of services by the UUA. In an historic move, the CUC Board formally recognized the right of Canadian Youth to name themselves as a distinct community within our midst with the rights to govern, share responsibility and enter into formal relationships with other communities [congregations and the CUC] for support and to participate in shared ministry. To this end, we (board and staff) are working with the youth community to draft a formal covenant and terms of reference describing our relationship of mutuality.

In a similar way, the Board has formalized a covenant with the professional ministers association (UUMOC) and is working with the ministers to see how best to implement its goals.

OUR SHORT-TERM PLAN

- In addition to these significant directional decisions, the Board continues to move forward with the short-term plan presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting in Ottawa. Every member’s continued input and participation is vital. Stay connected at http://cuc.ca/strategy/short_term_plan.

IN CONCLUSION

The CUC Board is committed to dealing fairly and decisively with the current challenges facing the CUC. By each of us acknowledging the covenantal relationships between the communities that make up the CUC, we see its continued success hinging clearly upon a sense of shared ministry that must pervade our movement, and invite your active participation in all the exciting work that lies ahead.

Sincerely,

The Board of Trustees
Canadian Unitarian Council