

As project coordinator of the Remit Reach Out process, I (Cathy Hird) with Sula Kosacky and Richard Auckland offer this report as a companion to the staff report of Thérèse Samuel and John Egger. Their report focusses on the wider implications of the remit process and on the work they did. We will not repeat their work, though I will quote from it. We are submitting this report to pave the way for future remits, to inform the work of the regional councils, and to reflection on the on-going work of building right relations. The focus here is on the practicalities of the process in the three regions. This report is prepared before the results of the remit have been made public.

In early March 2023, the Discipleship and Justice Commission (D&J) of WOWRC heard Thérèse's initial report on Remit 1, Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization within The United Church of Canada. I reacted with deep concern, as did other members of all three commissions, because getting a category three remit passed is hard work. Many have failed. At the time I felt that it was essential that we get this remit through. (Later, while I still hoped it would pass, I understood that communities of faith had engaged in the conversation about right relations in a way that would in and of itself make a difference.)

There is a history of right relations work in our church. Most people are aware of the two apologies and the fact that there was an indigenous conference, the ANCC and the existence of the Healing Fund. Many communities of faith and especially UCWs made raising money for that fund a focus. Other aspects of this journey—from the “native consultations” in the 80's to the *Caretakers Calls to the Church*—are not as well known. It was important to provide pastoral charges with background that could inform their conversation and their vote. Some of this was prepared by our tri-region staff—see the report of Thérèse and John—some was prepared by national staff, and other video resources were offered by indigenous individuals and groups within the church.

Recognizing that many pastoral charges are without a settled minister and that many do not have a regional council representative, we knew that some pastoral charges would not hear about the remit and others would not know where to find resources. The idea of having volunteers contact every pastoral charge surfaced. While this would be a major task, it felt essential.

Volunteers were recruited by the chairs of the D&J commissions in ARWRC and HFRC and by Cathy Hird for WOWRC. Some of these were members of the commission. Others were people that the recruiters felt would care enough to engage in this work for eight months. Recruitment happened in August and September. More than thirty people stepped forward and made this commitment.

An online orientation to the work was offered in September. This was held on Zoom and recorded. Volunteers were not given contact information until they had attended or viewed the orientation. While background information was included, there were two specific points: 1, the role was to encourage pastoral charges to engage in the conversation and to vote, not to press for a specific vote and 2, the contact information for people in the pastoral charge was confidential, to be used only for this process.

Thanks to the work of John Neff, we received four lists with contact information: pastoral charges, pastoral charge roles (i.e., regional council reps, board chairs, board secretaries), ministers, and pastoral charge supervisors. While some of this information was up to date, much was not. This required volunteers to use ingenuity and time to reach these pastoral charges. (The fact that national lists are not up to date is an issue which needs to be considered—the shift to online processes requires congregational initiative and computer skills not everyone has.)

Each of the team leads (Sula, Richard, and Cathy) then divided the list between their volunteers providing all the contact information. A letter was drafted for the volunteers to use providing background on the remit and links to the regional council websites for educational information. The letter requested a reply and gave notice that if there was no reply, a phone call would follow. The volunteers were encouraged to pass questions on to John, Thérèse, and Cathy. This was to help keep the volunteers focused on process and to ensure that questions that surfaced racism and settler colonialism were addressed carefully and appropriately. To quote the report from Thérèse and John, “We also found that while the remit was about a specific set of changes to *The Manual*, it was also about the breadth of our relationships as Indigenous and Non-Indigenous in The United Church of Canada. These complexities often made it challenging to discern the concerns embedded in questions and to respond to them meaningfully.”

Through the fall, the volunteers emailed, followed up by email, followed up with phone calls and/or personal contacts to make sure that the remit remained on the agenda of pastoral charges. A few had voted in the late spring. A few voted in the fall. Many did not vote until February and March.

Once we received lists of who had not yet voted, the team leads distributed this information to the volunteers. Volunteers then knew who to contact again. The way the lists came to us, we again required the assistance of staff devoted to congregational support to identify which “First United” or “Trinity United” had not yet voted. On the other hand, we could now provide pastoral charges with the numbers they needed to put on their remit vote reporting form.

Once we received lists of who had not yet voted, our volunteers also discovered that some pastoral charges that had voted were still on the list. After consultation with Alison Jordan at the national office, pastoral charges were strongly encouraged to take a photo of the ballot once filled out and email it. The process of resubmitting ballots was frustrating. For future remits, the process of receiving ballots needs to be better managed. As far as we know, however, all votes from our three regions were eventually registered. Volunteers who had started this work in September had to keep alert right through March and Holy Week. While the final stats of how many pastoral charges voted have not yet come out, as a whole, our three regions were well over the national average.

In the evaluation of the regional councils, recommendation 11 suggested that we “determine how the Discipleship and Justice Commission(s) might support the discipleship and justice work in communities of faith and the commitments of the regional council.” While the commissions need to figure out ways to do this going forward, during late 2023 and early 2024, the commissions and additional volunteers helped engage communities of faith in the work of right relations.

A virtual follow-up and feedback meeting is planned for late April. This is an opportunity to thank our volunteers, to learn from them what we could have done better, and to check that folks are okay. Some of the conversations were difficult, and it is important to give people space to debrief.

Additional Concerns

Noted above was the challenge of contact information that was out of date. This is not the place to speculate on why that is so only to note that if regional councils are to engage more closely with communities of faith, this information is crucial.

There were pastoral charges that we were unable to reach. Consultation with the congregational support ministers helped reach some. The Remit Reach-out team will share with those staff who remained unreachable.

Cathy met virtually with a community of faith that is not a pastoral charge. This is a funded and accountable outreach ministry. They wondered why they did not get a vote. This is a good question. As we learn about the remit process (again John and Thérèse raise these questions), is there an underlying assumption that needs to be examined about the place of communities of faith that are not pastoral charges.

There were many good conversations within pastoral charges reported to us by the volunteers. There were complicated conversations with racist and colonial settler overtones. These were difficult at times.

This was a complicated process. A lot of issues were surfaced. I would like to quote Thérèse and John's report again to make sure that our shared concerns are not missed. They wrote:

We discovered very early on that there is much more to this than was at first apparent. Questions were complex. Some were simply seeking understanding about the remit and its implications, but stirring in the background there were numerous other dynamics, including:

- *Troubled relationships with the wider church, polity and past remits, and dissatisfaction with the remit process itself*
- *Settler colonialism and racism that are embedded in our church and society and were the basis of what was historically known as "missions to the Indians"*
- *Concerns about the viability (financial and otherwise) of local congregations and the broader United Church*
- *Layers of grief and uncertainty as the church comes to terms with the harmful impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities, and as many congregations deal with losses in their own contexts.*

It is important to recognize that while this past twelve months was an important step in building right relations, the conversation and the work are not finished. The dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous people in our church must continue whether the remit passes or fails.

Submitted by Cathy Hird with Richard Auckland and Sula Kosacky