

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE NETWORK OF ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCILS (SJNORC)**

The Social Justice Network of Ontario Regional Councils was created to provide a shared voice and a collective presence for the United Church of Canada concerning socio-economic issues impacting the people of Ontario. The Network supports the work of the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) with which one of its members, the Rev. Susan Eagle, has long been involved. The Network had long met in person at Church House twice a year. COVID forced the Network to meet by ZOOM in 2020, and meetings continued to be held that way through the summer of 2024.

Members of the Network met by ZOOM on January 24, 2024, to plan the work for the year. The Canadian Shield Regional Council was represented by Dr. Ernie Epp, who served again as Recorder. There was discussion about having the fall meeting take place in person at Church House. There was also discussion about the Fishbowl style of discussion, which the Rev. Thérèse Samuel suggested. The most important matter of business was to establish the amount of levy on the Regional Councils to support the work of the Network and to make the annual grant to ISARC. The assessment was set at the traditional \$1,000 for each Regional Council, and the annual grant of \$5,000 was made to ISARC.

Members of the Network met again by ZOOM on June 12, 2024, and surveyed the social justice work in each of the Regions. The reports showed that a great deal of work was taking place and that novel means were being used, including microgrants by the Shining Waters Regional Council to draw young people into social justice work. The southern Regional Councils—Horseshoe Falls, Western Ontario Waterways, and Antler River Watershed—used the Fishbowl style of discussion of a couple of questions quite successfully at their joint meeting. His report for the Canadian Shield Regional Council gave Dr. Epp an opportunity to mention the Guaranteed Livable Income Network, inspired by the Very Rev. Lois Wilson some years ago, which has been meeting monthly by ZOOM from coast to coast.

The ISARC Religious Leaders Forum took place on November 20, 2024, at Queen's Park. The leading speakers were senior barrister Jeff Schlemmer, who manages the Community Legal Clinic of York Region; Alexi White, Director of Systems Change at the Maytree Foundation; and Dr. Joe Mihevc, Adjunct Professor of Ethics at the University of Toronto and a long-time Toronto City Councillor. The speakers focused on the plight of marginalized communities in Ontario, in the aftermath of COVID-19. The pandemic had exposed and worsened the challenges of homelessness, precarious housing, and Inadequate social assistance. The Ford Government's response to the crisis has been little more than minimal increases in support, leaving hundreds of thousands of Ontarians without stable housing or hope for the future. Dr. Epp and Mr. Stephen Calverly, in Toronto to attend the meeting of the Social Justice Network the next day, found these powerful presentations.

The Social Justice Network held its second main meeting of the year in person at Church House on November 21, 2024, for the first time since 2019. And it was a fine gathering from the various Regional Councils, with no fewer than thirteen representatives gathered in person or by ZOOM. The representatives from the Canadian Shield Regional Council were Dr. Epp, Mr. Stephen Calverly, and the Rev. David LeGrand, who better represented Canadian Shield Regional Council. In the absence of Chair Charles Barrett, Dr. Epp was asked to preside over the discussion. Mr.

Calverley spoke to the challenges of the vast region, which were once part of three Conferences and whose Council has limited staff. He recognized the appointment of the Rev. Dr. Shawn Redden to serve both Shining Waters and Canadian Shield Regional Councils. Planning for the new year included Living into Right Relations activities. Dr. Epp mentioned the Manitou Intentional Learning Community (MILC). The Rev. Mr. LeGrand expanded on the Right Relations work from his experience in Sudbury, including the work of MILC, which brings some fifty people together. He recognized the challenges of geography and the importance of Regional Council staff on Right Relations and Affirming Ministry work.

The Rev. Dr. Redden looked ahead to a town hall meeting about the end of January to address the importance of rural churches being able to fly the Affirm United flag and accept clergy who are 2SLGBTQ. There would be a listening opportunity in December on Affirming Ministries. A petition from the Nuclear Free North group, opposing storage of nuclear waste in Northern Ontario, had come to the Regional Council Executive and would need to be addressed in the New Year. Dr. Epp added some comments on community groups in Thunder Bay, including the Injured Workers Support Group which is launching a book, *Who Killed Sir William?* co-authored by Thunder Bay resident and injured worker Steve Mantis. The book challenges administration of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, which has degraded the system established back in 1914 as the Workmen's Compensation Board.

There was a good deal of discussion of the reorganization of the United Church of Canada in 2019, which led to the loss of program staff at Church House and the creation of Regional Councils which rarely resemble the former Conferences. Canadian Shield Regional Council may well represent the greatest change, incorporating as it does Manitou Conference and its presbyteries with Algoma Presbytery of London Conference and the eastern end of Cambrian Presbytery of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Conference. Vast distances and sparse population are the inevitable result. And the geographical challenges were exacerbated by COVID in 2020-21, which kept people apart and from which the Regional Council is only gradually recovering.

Respectfully submitted,  
Ernie Epp