

The United Church aspires to become an anti-racist church, creating a new position to help that happen.

After decades of nipping around the edges of the issues of systemic racism, the Commissioners of the 43rd General Council voted to declare the denomination to become an anti-racist church on Saturday, October 24, 2020. “This doesn’t mean we have achieved this goal,” explains the Moderator, the Right Rev. Richard Bott, “but we are taking a stand and saying we are publicly committed to eliminating systemic racism from our practices and policies.”

The United Church acknowledged racism as a sin in 1960, after the destruction of the Africville neighbourhood in Halifax, NS, and has addressed it in a variety of ways since, but the final two hours of the 2018 General Council brought the issue of racism in the church into sharper focus. With the previous Moderator, the Very Rev. Jordan Cantwell, still in the chair, racialized clergy and lay members lined up, one after the other, to share their painful stories of the blatant racism they had experienced at the hands of committees, educational institutions, and in congregational settings. “I stood, there, on the eve of my installation as Moderator, horrified, humbled but also certain that the time has come in this church to face our own sin head on,” recalls the Rev. Bott, who is now part of the General Council Executive’s (a functional subset of the General Council) working group on anti-racism. “Our work is just beginning. There are several initiatives in the church, and our responsibility is to oversee their work and keep moving the church to a place where the stories we heard two years ago become things of the past. This country is a nation made up of people of many cultures, many stories. The church needs to reflect and live that reality,” he adds.

The annual meeting, drawing in more than 200 General Council Commissioners (delegates), is an innovation made possible by the expansion of electronic video meeting platforms. At the 2018 meeting, Commissioners agreed to meet annually to conduct routine business, such as approving financial statements and auditors. It also provides an opportunity to address any pressing issues that cannot wait for the next in-person General Council and its cohort of new Commissioners.

Along with the declaration of becoming an anti-racist church, the General Council directed the General Secretary to develop a strategy to engage the full church in this process. This work will fall to the new General Secretary, the Rev. Michael Blair, who was covenanted into this new role at this meeting.

One of the last actions of outgoing General Secretary Nora Sanders was to create a new Anti-Racism and Equity Officer position in the General Council Office. After an extensive search process, we are pleased to announce that the successful candidate is Adele Halliday, who has already been deeply engaged in related work within the Church in Mission Unit and has worked with the United Church since 2004.