

THE DARING EXPERIMENT

How will the United Church of Canada fare in the new millennium?

Few things are more essential to the presentation of the Christian gospel today than that the church should critically re-assess not only its techniques, but also its basic assumptions, its spiritual aim, and its ministry to humankind.

We live in a time of contradictions, easily seen but difficult to explain. Church attendance decreases throughout the country and so does crime. Church buildings are appearing with for sale signs on them and so also are saloons. Politicians and media editors tell us the problems of life are economic and controlled by the intangible marketplace and show careless disregard for the promotion of spiritual values and tend to support evils which undermine the best in our culture. We live in a land of plenty as far as available food is concerned and have far more food banks than McDonald outlets.

The tragedy of our time is the failure of the church to quickly and effectively respond to the challenges faced. There are those who have predicted its soon demise yet here and there are signs within it of renewal and new life.

The United Church is not a static institution with its ethics set and its morality neatly codified. Morals and ethics in our world are in a fluid state. The church must learn how to best move with life; it cannot remain static.

As our country, part of a world facing problems of unprecedented proportions, moves into the future, will the churches continue their significant role of the past? In a globalized civilization an united church may likely have the greatest opportunity for survival and importance.

The wells of inspiration and grace that have sustained the Canadian people through a changing century are sorely infested today by disinterest, disenchantment, and secularism. But the churches' significant role in the developing of our country and society must not be underestimated or forgotten.

Few countries, if any, are in a better position to actively produce neighbourliness and unity than Canada. Our whole history is a chronicle of co-operation, compromise, and common effort. A hostile environment demanded mutual response in the interests of sheer survival. Among the churches paucity of members and clergy encouraged sharing and joint worship. As the century of Confederation progressed so did a spirit of passive toleration grow up among Canadian Christians. Co-operative relationships multiplied. Canadians value good

interpersonal life.

However, today there are also indications that the decline in religious participation is having some important consequences for Canadian life. Religious groups historically have given much emphasis to interpersonal values, such as civility and compassion. Declining participation has meant such values have been losing a key proponent. It's not clear who's picking up the slack.

The Church Union of 1925

National, economic, and religious conditions in Canada at the turn of the century brought to the fore the issue of consolidating the Protestant forces concerned. A growing feeling of nationalism, a sound economy, and sanctified common sense demanded that unseemly religious rivalry and the wasteful overlapping of church work in the sparsely settled communities cease, and the surplus energy be translated into more useful types of Christian service.

The great Canadian church union enterprise was formally launched in 1902 when the Methodist General Conference, held at Winnipeg that year, made overtures to the Presbyterian and Congregational communions with a view to organic church union. These two churches received the invitation favourably, and a committee was appointed to study the matter. This Joint Committee resolved that organic union was both "desirable and practical." A joint meeting was then called at Knox Church, Toronto, on December 21, 1904, for the purpose of preparing a basis of union.

Invitations were sent out to Baptists and Anglicans to attend the conferences of the Joint Committee. Both of these churches declined. In the end the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Methodist Church of Canada, and the Canadian Congregational Churches united to form the United Church of Canada.

After several years of legal debate the United Church received enabling acts from each of the provinces and the federal parliament passed the final enabling act, and it came in force on June 10, 1925.

In 1968 the 10,000 members of The Evangelical United Brethren Church joined with the United Church.

The daring experiment had worked and the United Church of Canada has become the largest, strongest and most influential Canadian protestant church.

"Continuing" Presbyterians

It must be noted that not all of the Presbyterians took part in the union. About a quarter of the Presbyterian membership voted to remain as an independent church and to continue as before. After some legal debate over the church's name with regard to property and holdings, in 1937 a decision was reached that the former name, "The Presbyterian Church in Canada," be allowed without prejudice to the case of The United Church of Canada. This settled the last controversial point of union.

An "Uniting" Church

Church union in Canada was more than a method of procedure, it was a goal. The United Church has always sought to work towards a national church, to encourage unity, and openly accepts responsibility for groups of people in the country not already served by some other church. It is the United Church's wish to be an "uniting" church. Today the trend is more toward shared ministries, and the Church works closely with others.

Doctrine

The Basis of Union was the attempt, not to formulate a new creed, but to find a sufficient number of doctrinal points on which the churches concerned could agree and unite. It outlined some of the basic principles of its organization. The doctrines outlined were seen as guidelines for belief at the time. It was agreed that the living church had a right to re-interpret the Gospel and to adjust its doctrines in relation to the modern world. In this general attitude of mind, the church accepted twenty articles on doctrine, so formulated that the distinctive doctrinal emphases of the uniting bodies would be recognized.

Polity

The organizational structure of the United Church - sometimes called the *polity* - is basically a conciliar system. It consists of several levels, which generally meet in councils or courts: the pastoral charge, the presbytery, the Conference and the General Council.

The United Church of Canada has more than 4000 congregations, more than 2300 pastoral charges, 97 presbyteries, 13 Conferences, and the General Council which sets church policy.

THE POST-MODERN CHURCH

Today the Canadian churches are reeling from lack of attendance and public disinterest. Congregations are shrinking in size, amalgamating, and in some cases discontinuing. This malaise has affected the United Church as well, though to a lesser degree.

The daring experiment started with the United Church continues as many of its congregations seek alternative forms of worship, evangelism, and outreach. The general

diversity, openness, and liberalness of the United Church allows for this to more easily happen.

An example of this was the acceptance of homosexual persons for ordination in the United Church. Though controversial at the time, and though it lost some members, the United Church led the way among the churches of the world and the community organizations in recognizing the rights of all persons despite their sexual orientation.

Dr. Reginald Bibby, professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge and who gets his research findings out to Canadians notes that in the last census 3.1 million Canadians identified themselves with the United Church. Brantford, for example, had 25,500 identify themselves United Church. Bibby points out the tremendous opportunity the United Church has to minister to the spiritual needs of these citizens who are staying away from church yet identifying themselves with it. They are not leaving, or against the church, yet, just not interested in the present organization and programmes.

Douglas Flanders, director of education and information of the United Church, states that one of the reasons Canadians don't attend church "may be that they don't find an organized church an effective means of expressing spirituality."

Church membership today is seen by many as more relationships with others than religious commitments. The emerging post-modern denomination works more through coalitions and networks, assumes a skilled constituency, and responds to a diverse membership. The goal of the

(Disciples, not an Audience)

church must be to make disciples, not build an audience.

Canadians now are more at ease in admitting they no longer attend church. They are being brought together by the mobility of people and the struggle for human freedom and justice. Unity is the fruit of Christian discipleship. As Christians accept their missionary obligations the whole church may become teamed together in the Christian ministry to others as commissioned by the Gospel.

PARABLE OF THE GREAT SURPRISE

The parable of judgment found in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew astounds the reader. The key to the surprise lies in the words of Jesus: "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me,"

The key here is in giving help to others in their needs. This is the heart of Christianity and the true mandate of the church.

As followers of Jesus we must speak to our own age, about concrete conditions, responding to the stirrings of the life that surges about us. We must take the situation and material furnished us by the past and mould that into a fuller approximation of the vision of the divine within us. We must embody the prophetic stream of faith and hope and give life to the reality that the realm of God is within us. We must believe in the organic growth of the new society and patiently foster its growth, cell by cell. Every human life brought under control of the new spirit which

Jesus and the early

Christians clothed, and the succession of those true to it since, is an advance of the realm of God.

The church must continue to commit itself to working for the transformation of the national, social and religious life about us. All human goodness must be social goodness. We are moral when we are social; we are immoral when we are anti-social. The social-making quality in the Christian ethic is the virtue love. The church must live love and in loving build up the realm of God.

The United Church has shown that there is unity in diversity and at its best is a unitive experience of compassion.

The inclusiveness of the United Church is shown also in its sharing of beliefs with those of its members organized and calling themselves The Community of Concern, and The National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations.

Our contemporary society is suffering the destructive confrontations of governments, corporate bodies, and the dissolution of the welfare state. This selfish spirit affects churches as well. The United Church is no less spared.

Faith finds its realization in love.

"For a competitive Christendom his question is still pertinent: 'Has Christ been parcelled out?'"
(1 Cor.1:10, 13, Moffatt.)

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