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The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



Reading: Galatians 5: selected verses

The Message: The Canadian Church

Years ago, I came up with a summer slogan: The Church for Canadians. When it appeared on our ad in the local paper, it caused quite a stir. Not in other churches, but in our own! Several members thought it was too arrogant, others didn't want to offend other churches. It was never seen again. (which is how I survived for 30 years!)

But you know, there is a good argument for that slogan. For the United Church *is* uniquely Canadian. The UCC is the first union of its kind in the world.

That's pretty special, I think. So on this Canada Day weekend, I'd like to explore my thesis that the UCC is a church for Canadians. .

To do that, we have to go right back to Pentecost, the birth of the Christian Church. At Pentecost, the Spirit empowered each individual disciple. We know that because after Pentecost, no disciple ever denied Jesus again. Each of them was infused with a power great enough to set them on their journeys, almost all of them attesting to their faith right up to the point of violent death. So Pentecost was an intensely personal experience.

Yet immediately, the disciples were thrust into relationships with others. People gathered from all over the known world, understanding them. Afterwards, they went out to all the places those people had come from.

This is a theme that persists in the United Church to this day. Personal faith and action to serve others. The UCC is a product of the Social Gospel movement of the 19th century, when Christians believed that they were called to bring the kingdom of God to earth through their actions.

Moderator Jim Mutchmoor said, "The whole world is my parish!"

This brought an urgency to the building of right relationships -- which has resulted in members who are engaged in making a difference.

1. From the beginning, the church has tried to hold these divergent views together.

In the negotiations that led to union, those who emphasized personal faith and those who were steeped in the activism of the Social Gospel boldly sacrificed to come together.

There was opposition from the beginning too. A Presbyterian missionary to New Brunswick started labelling the two camps with different names: the Fundamentalists -- those who focussed on personal faith -- and the Modernists who were seen to focus on social and economic justice. And the Modernists were not his favourite folk. His influence, UCC historian Phyllis Airhart suggests, led to 30 % of Presbyterians voting against union.

One of the fundamentalists was Lucy Maud Montgomery's husband, centred in Leaskville. He had two Presbyterian churches. One voted 'yes,' the other 'no.' Lucy's own opposition to union may have stemmed from her support of her husband, and reluctance to leave a home where their family had been relatively happy. They had to pack up and moved to Norval, ON where he finished his ministry.

Many who opposed union didn't believe that one could hold personal salvation and transformation of the community together.

But the UCC has continued to connect faith and community.

2. Divisions from the past didn't have to define the future.

Two forms of Methodists, Congregationalists and 70% of Presbyterians: pioneers moved west, the churches moved with them, and Christians found themselves building churches across the street from one another. With meagre resources, they began to ask why? Why bring the divisions of the 'old country' to the realities of the Canadian prairies?.

3. The UCC had a uniquely Canadian vision.

The vision of those who formed the United Church from the uniting denominations paralleled their vision of how Canada itself should develop. By getting the churches together they would help to create a more "Christian" nation. They would have greater influence on social and economic policy, they would have a more powerful voice, and this would make Canada a better place to live

This vision was of a *movement* that would sweep together all Protestant denominations across the country and create a strong Christian nation. But with immigration came differences that were just too great and the United Church was forced into a *denomination*.

A presenter at my recent conference looked at a parallel: the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. A kind of cocky comparison to the UCC it focussed on how well the PAC was doing because it was a movement not a denomination. Phyllis Airhart, challenged the presenter with a gentle caution: be aware that the UCC brought together diverse strands of Protestantism into a movement and the result was a denomination!

I don't think that the speaker felt it could happen to them, but according to my resident historian, the trends in the pentecostal churches are starting to hint at a downturn.

While our strengths are paralleled by our failures, the church has continually sought new vision, sometimes at great cost.

1960s Missionary Katharine Hockin asked: "Can it be that God is active in our world in ways that may not always be to our advantage?"

We have discovered what it is to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve others. In ecumenical and interfaith gatherings, we have often sacrificed our beliefs and traditions in order to show our love for others.

It was so painful when the local mosque here was in the press because their soccer team of boys halted a game because girls were playing on the opposite team.

Our church was literally within days of signing an agreement carefully worked out among Oakville's synagogue, the same ISNA mosque and Maple Grove United Church to sponsor a Syrian refugee family, one of the earliest to arrive in Canada.

The news horrified our coordinators. How can we move ahead with this kind of institution? "After all, Maple Grove called a woman minister in 1988!" "We have a reputation and principles!"

But we chose to sacrifice what was sooo important to us in order to continue to be the bridge between Muslims and Jews to save lives and transform communities.

4. Despite the challenges, the UCC continues to have vision.

"Clearly the kingdom of heaven does not operate like the kingdoms of this world.

How will we know when we see God's kingdom?

- When anger results in reconciliation rather than retaliation God must be at work.
- When enemies are overcome by love rather than violence God's reign is present." NT Professor Carla Works

And finally,

5. The United Church has made a difference to our nation

**Here are just a few:

- Child Labour Laws
- Social welfare
- The founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation which evolved into the New Democratic Party -- Canadian institutions like the Pension Plan and Universal Health Care would not exist without minority governments and prophetic voices like J.S. Woodworth, a Methodist minister and Beatrice Brigdon, UCC
- Sex education --Beatrice Brigdon -- 'many a minister's door has been left ajar while I spoke about birth control, family planning, sexually transmitted diseases.'
- The social work profession
- The rights of Japanese internees
- Rights of refugees
 - The UCC welcomed many of the families who came to Canada as a result of violence in Vietnam, Bosnia, Syria and elsewhere -- owned housing that was used for refugees
- The struggle to make women legal persons (1929)
- The ordination of women (1936) -- and gender parity
- Birth control: education and availability
- Leader in the peace movement
- Anti-apartheid movement
- First to apologize for our role in the management of residential schools
- First to remove barriers to ordination for sexual orientation

Hear this description of the United Church of Canada:

"Gospel-centered, loyal to the truth, open-minded, tolerant, comprehensive, interested in other religious groups and the whole community, offering a vital experience of religion and a clear cut message of salvation."

This could be a description of the best of the United Church today. But it was a statement made by the first Moderator George Pidgeon at the second General Council in 1927 in describing his understanding of a "New Testament Church."

The ethos of the UCC infuses us with a personal faith that can also reach out to tend the world. As we look back on 94 years, we are aware of our failures, but at its best, the UCC has sought to balance the care of souls with the care of society. Surely this is a gift of God's grace accessible to us by the Spirit. Despite our failures, on this Canada Day weekend, we have much for which to be thankful.