

cruxifusion

A Special Issue of Fellowship Publications

September 2010

Atonement

What Does The Future Hold For The United Church Of Canada?

cruxifusion



kroo-seh-fyoo-zhuhn

CRUX

1.a vital, basic, decisive, or pivotal point.
2.a cross.
3.something that torments by its puzzling nature; a perplexing difficulty.

FUSION

The act or process of uniting or blending into a whole as if by melting together.

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Cruxifusion

by Rev. Dr. Diane Walker



From our own experience we know how church buildings can get in the way of following Christ. We need a place to gather but too often the building consumes time, money and energy that should go to the actual work of Christ: caring for those in need, bringing hope to places of despair, transforming the lives of ordinary people into discipleship and freedom. Following Christ has often been smothered by the furnace fund, the window preservation drive and the delicate matter of responsibility for the state of the coffee urns. Perhaps we should be more suspicious of our church buildings and the threat they pose to following Christ.

And being suspicious of the toll that our church institutions take on the following of Christ? Anyone who has attended a congregational meeting or served a denominational committee must surely have some concerns. To be part of an institution in such precipitous decline as is the United Church of Canada is to be made poignantly aware that salvaging the structure, or propping up the institution is a bottomless pit of energy with infinite capacity to divert us away from the life of Christ-following. Has this curious institution, the church, become more of a hindrance than a help in proclaiming the Gospel? Could we forget about reform and renewal and jettison the institutional church, return to simple communities of sharing that we imagine once existed?

In *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*, Margaret Visser describes an ancient Roman church. Both building and people fall short in embodying perfectly the message of faith, hope and love; but the message could not be communicated without them: "Every Christian should remain deeply suspicious of churches—both as buildings as and as institutions; it is part of following Christ. The paradox is there from the beginning. For example, when Jesus hounded the money-changers out of the temple, he wanted people to respect God's house, even as he proposed to replace it. Churches can be confining and deadening and churches may liberate and enliven. Buildings are unnecessary—but needed. Churches remain—but they remain in order to keep alive a message that is all about movement; about hope and change. In short, a Christian church seems to be—and quite consciously is—a contradiction in terms."

Perhaps God intends us to be perpetually suspicious of, dissatisfied with, the church, lest we begin to

worship the church, rather than worshipping God. Churches are flawed by definition, because they are built and populated by sinners. But the church is God's chosen, indispensable means for transmitting the Gospel message through generations. Once we let go of our anxiety about the imperfections of the church we will also be freed to hand on the task of being the church to the next generation to make their contribution.

In this special issue of *Fellowship Magazine* we invite you to hear the voices of younger leaders in the United Church as they answer the question, "What is the future of the United Church? What should it be? How will we get there?" In almost all cases they are too young to remember the 'glory days' of the United Church, the waves of building campaigns, expanding bureaucracies, bursting Sunday Schools, a church supported and affirmed by the broader culture. Curiously, this is perhaps what allows them to face the future with greater freedom. Those of us who can remember a time when political leaders consulted the churches, when the United Church youth group was the place to make friends (or meet a spouse), when ministry could be viewed as a career suitable for those with aspirations to move up a ladder, perhaps we are the ones handicapped by the knowledge of, and sometimes the yearning for, what was.

It is a great privilege to give that new generation a voice, through this special issue of *Fellowship Magazine*. We are also planning a Cruxifusion Conference (see ad on pg.25), gathering "conservationist" younger leaders to see what new direction God is leading towards in the renewal of the United Church of Canada. If you wish to make a financial contribution towards this event, you may do so through Fellowship Publications, marking your contribution Cruxifusion Conference. If you would like to nominate someone to participate in the conference, contact our office. And, as always, we would ask for your prayers. Every Christian is called to be a Timothy and "guard the good deposit that was entrusted to your care" (II Timothy 1:14). Guarding the Gospel is the task of the conservationist, a task taken up with joy, thanksgiving and celebration.

Rev. Dr. Diane Walker is minister of Pelham Community Church, a congregation of the United Church of Canada, and Senior Editor of Fellowship Magazine. She lives with her family in Fenwick, Ontario.

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We have lost sight of our founding purpose

God doesn't need the United Church to provide faithful Christian ministry to the people of Canada

By Rev. William Haughton

Back when General Motors was still a private enterprise, it used to be said that the famed automaker had become a health care provider, which happened to make cars on the side. The point of the joke, and maybe it hurt a little too much to be a good one, was that GM had tied its resources so closely to the employee benefit plan that it could no longer be a successful car company. As an organization, it was distracted from its original purpose for existence (making cars and selling them for profit) and became seriously lost along the way (with employees and share holders putting individual self-interest before the long-term viability of the company.)

In The United Church of Canada, I fear that we suffer from something like the same ailment that afflicted GM. It's my contention that, as an organization, we are no longer truly a church, but a pension plan that happens to conduct religious services on the side. We have lost sight of our founding purpose—to become an orthodox, evangelical, indigenously Canadian church that would minister uniquely to Canada as a nation—and have gone astray, promoting notions of individual self-interest and self-fulfillment while forgetting the faith and the mission that brought us together in the first place.

I cite as key evidence the fact that to become a United Church minister, one doesn't have to believe in anything at all—even in God—or practice any particular kind of lifestyle, but one must sign on to the pension plan. To belong to one of our congregations, to work for the United Church in any capacity, to hold office in the courts of the church, or even to become the Moderator, one doesn't have to be a Christian in any historically useful sense of that term. This can only mean that, as an institution, we have abandoned our fundamental purpose and even the defining characteristic, biblically speaking, of “a church.”

I was one of several people asked to submit an article on the questions: “What is the future of the United Church?” and “What should it be?” These are good questions and important ones, but I doubt that I can answer them well. What I can suggest is that any helpful speculation about the future has to be grounded in some good analysis of the present situation. When I look at the United Church, as the United Church, I am deeply troubled. We have discarded our founding purpose (both in

the content of our message and in the national vision of our ministry context) and capitulated to the worldview of the secular society around us, especially in its hyper-individualistic and even pagan aspects.

Of course, we have always had our share of saints and vibrant local ministries—and praise God for them! But, when evaluated as a whole, our denomination is failing, or has already failed, in the goals of the church union movement which brought us into being.

So what does the future hold for the United Church? I honestly don't know. I would hate to predict our further demise, only to have God prove me unfaithful. That said, it's hard to imagine that the near future will look much different from the present—except that we will continue to get smaller, perhaps much smaller. The United Church and many of its leaders will probably continue to practice and preach a message that is different from the traditional vision of Christian faithfulness. Orthodox Christians (both lay and “order or ministry,” on the other hand, will likely continue to work away quietly in particular settings, sometimes seeing small successes, occasionally receiving persecution, usually toiling in obscurity. Yet nurtured in faith within the United Church and/or called to serve here, we can continue to hope, with confidence, that God will honour our ministries.

Sometimes I like to daydream about the future of the United Church—in what ways it might be different or better than it is now. Practically speaking though, I look around at most of the communities I know and I see that there are often one or more local churches that are more successful in key ways than our own congregations: in attendance, in financial gifts, in programs, in sound biblical teaching, even in social justice initiatives.

I sometimes hear people say, or at least imply, that at some point God might rescue the United Church from the brink and revive us, as if our current difficulties as a denomination are a temporary test of our convictions. Unfortunately, I just don't see why this is likely or ought to be the case. It's not that we don't have anything unique which might be offered to Canadian society, or individual communities in particular, but that so many other churches (at least locally) are already doing what we might do. In other words, God doesn't need us, not as the United Church at least, to provide faithful Christian ministry to the people of Canada.

I'm sure there will always be some really good local ministries in the United Church, as there constantly have been and still are. It's almost certain that we can look forward to the emergence of some exciting new initiatives which haven't even been imagined yet (by us anyway). We will always have ample reason to thank and praise God for the calling and ministry opportunities we have received. But I don't see the United Church, as a whole, returning to its original purpose or being renewed

by means of a satisfactory alternative. My genuine and personal hopes for the future of the United Church, as an institution, are pretty modest: the continuing presence of some really faithful ministries (often local) and—oh yes—the pension plan to still be there when I retire.

Rev. William Haughton is minister on the Port Rowan United Church pastoral charge in southern Ontario.

The United Church: An Endangered Species?

We have a lot to learn from Africa and Asia

By Rev. Emmanuel K. Ofori



Recently I watched a television documentary about endangered species in different parts of the world. Many living organisms are now endangered for various reasons or causes. However, the good news is that the ardent efforts of some conservationists, like the World Wildlife Fund, whose mission is preserving the diversity and abundance of life on Earth and the health of ecosystems, are saving the lives of some of these endangered organisms.

If we use the definition of endangered species as "a population of organisms which is at risk of becoming extinct because it is either few in numbers, or threatened by changing environmental or predation parameters," the church in the western world, in its present state, may qualify as an endangered species. It has lost its influence in society, and has declining church membership and attendance.

According to David Barrett's "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission" (available in the quarterly *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*), the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted from the global north to the global south, with Africa (2.36 per cent growth per year) and Asia (2.64 percent growth per year) being the fastest growing areas of the

Christian world. We have a lot to learn from them.

The church in the global south is growing rapidly because it proclaims with zeal who Jesus is, his atoning death on the cross, and the Great Commission. On the contrary, there seems to be a failure of nerve on the part of the western church to preserve "the faith that was once for all entrusted to" us (Jude 3).

Centrality of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is central to our faith. The early church preserved for us and proclaimed the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world and Lord of all. They fought against all beliefs that sought to undermine *who* Jesus is.

During his time in office as Moderator of the United Church, the Rt. Rev. Peter Short discovered that a number of our clergy had a problem believing in Jesus Christ. As in times past, some contended that the Saviour from heaven could not be truly human, while others raised questions about how a perfect human being could be truly divine. Most people are comfortable with the humanity of Jesus, thus denying his deity.

Rev. Dr. Connie denBok wrote in one of the

endangered

recent issues of the *United Church Observer* about a candidate for ordination who stood before a presbytery meeting and declared that after his seminary training, he no longer believed in God. Sadly, presbytery members applauded this!

Our historical faith teaches us that Christianity is Christ, and I thank God that the 40th General Council 2009 did not succumb to the pressure by some members to remove the doctrinal section from the *Manual*. In view of this, I applaud the World Council of Churches, of which the United Church of Canada is a member, which acknowledges the lordship of Jesus Christ and still admits membership on affirmation that "Jesus Christ is God and Saviour." The WCC still believes this to be "the sole, necessary affirmation for authentic Christianity."

Writing in the April 2010 issue of the *United Church Observer*, Taylor Croissant, representing "Ministers Under 30," affirmed that "Christianity without Christ" does not appeal to him. He continued that he has "chosen to be part of the church and not just a progressive advocacy group" (p. 9).

Thus, to save the church from the list of "endangered species," we need to crown Jesus Christ as Lord of every aspect of the church's life and ours.

Centrality of the Cross

Some church people describe themselves as Easter people. They feel that Good Friday should not be celebrated because, in their view, it is bloody. They contend that any attempt to project the cross of Christ as central to faith is nothing but glorification of suffering, leading to victimization and marginalization of minority and weak people, especially women. For them atonement "is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering."¹ It must be understood that Christ liberates us fundamentally by His atoning death on the cross. This means that atonement, far from being a "divine child abuse," provides liberation for both the oppressor and the oppressed. He saves us from sin and all forces of negation by His death and shed blood on the cross (Colossians 1:20).

To save the church from the list of "endangered species," we need to reclaim and affirm God's only means of salvation from sin and death through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism

In proclaiming salvation through the death of Jesus during the last two centuries, the missionary enterprise in foreign lands did not show respect for the values and cultures they met. This has given evangelism a bad name! This attitude is like throwing out the baby together with the bath water. As a student of theology of Christianity in Africa, I have observed that though the approach was flawed, the missionary work bore effective witness to the Gospel message (the result is the flourishing of the Christian church in most of those places). This is instructive for the church in the global north to be intentional in proclaiming the gospel by *word* and *deed*. Since we cannot give what we do not have, we need to equip our people through faith formation and Christian education to enable them feel comfortable to share their faith by word and deed.

To save the church from the list of "endangered species," we need to obey the marching orders of the Sovereign Head of the church, Jesus Christ, to "go ... and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Conclusion.

The Church has become a statistic—an "endangered species." This is a clarion call to the church to retrace its steps, to remember the "height from which [it has] fallen!" and to repent before the Lord comes to "remove [our] lampstand from its place" (Revelation 3:5). It is a call to mobilize the Taylor Croissants and all—both young and not so young—to become conservationists and activists to stand up and proclaim Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human, the only Saviour of the world.

Rev. Ofori is minister of Union United Church in Montreal Quebec and has had national assignments with the Task Force on Intercultural Ministries.

¹ Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World?" in Joanne C. Brown and Carole R. Bohn. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), p. 26.

Exclusive Liberalism – How Sad

By Rev. Gregory Brawn



Fifteen years ago, I was in my first year at a United Church theological college. One of my courses was a field placement with a local United Church congregation, with weekly supervision meetings with the minister. One evening, we attended a Presbytery meeting together. I can't remember what the topic of debate was that night—something theological—but the division of opinions was acute. As we drove back into the city, I predicted the United Church would not exist in 20 years.

Well, I guess prophecy is not one of my spiritual gifts. Here we are 15 years later, I've been serving congregations as an ordained minister for 12 years and the United Church of Canada is still around, basically the same as it was back then.

The term "liberal" is defined as being open and inclusive, accepting differences among people and groups. I am accepting of people with differing theologies, practices and faith experiences. I don't want everyone to believe, worship, and live out their faith exactly like me. So in that sense, I am a liberal—loving and accepting of diversity. Since the United Church of Canada was born out of diversity in 1925, we have always been a liberal denomination.

However, what has happened with our church is that many theologically liberal clergy, lay people, congregations and theological colleges have become increasingly exclusive. Hence the paradoxical term, "exclusive liberalism." These members and groups within the United Church have no love or acceptance for Christians who are not also theologically liberal. They would prefer all conservatives, all evangelicals, all orthodox United Church members and groups to leave our denomination.

How sad. How un-Christ-like. How far removed this exclusive attitude is from our United Church heritage. How many members have we lost because of this liberal exclusiveness? How many more of our people will leave because they feel unwelcome, unwanted and unsupported by their ministers, congregations

and the higher courts of the church?

And so, we now struggle, not only against a loss of faith, a loss of orthodoxy within this United Church of ours, we struggle against those who would be delighted to see us disappear.

So what is the future of our United Church? I hesitate to guess, knowing my lack of the prophetic gift.

Perhaps if our polity was changed making it easier for congregations to withdraw from the United Church, we would see a renewal denomination emerge out of the old.

Perhaps if things continue to stay as they are, the church will eventually be forced financially to make substantial structural changes—maybe to a Congregationalist model with many fewer staff positions.

Perhaps we will reconnect with our "union" heritage and amalgamate (this time successfully) with the Anglican Church of Canada.

Perhaps, just perhaps, the Holy Spirit of our risen Lord will continue to touch the hearts and minds of our exclusivist liberals, they will reject their exclusivity, and lovingly embrace all of us in this United Church.

Rev. Greg Brawn has been minister of Byron United Church in London, Ontario, since 2007, after having served churches in Bishop's Falls, Newfoundland, and the Cheltenham, Ontario, area.

exclusive

Getting smaller will help the church

Our congregations need to be breeding grounds for people who are on fire with the Holy Spirit

By Rev. Nick Phillips

A retired United Church minister once shared something with me that he learned from his wise wife. He told me of a conversation they were having where he stressed his desire that the United Church be resurrected and returned to new life in Christ. His wife responded, "Doesn't something have to die to be resurrected?"

Unfortunately it feels like the pangs of death may soon be upon us. According to United Church of Canada statistics,¹ one-half of our clergy serving in pastoral charges will reach the normal age of retirement within the next decade. That equals 1,100 ministry personnel. Seventy percent of ministry personnel have already passed their 50th birthday. Three percent are under the age of 35. (I miss out on being part of this final grouping by one year.)

While many think we are living in a leadership crisis right now, as pastoral charges struggle to find ministry leadership which also looks like a good match of skills versus desires, look ahead 10 to 20 years. In less than two decades our denomination will be living in what we might be calling a state of emergency.

Many of our pulpits will be empty, as will our pews as many of our foundational members (members who have been in the church most of their lives, and the church's largest financial supporters) will have passed away and we will be forced to close and/or amalgamate many congregations.

According to 2001 census statistics,² over a quarter of a million *fewer* Canadians identified the United Church of Canada as their religious affiliation in just 10 years. Also, one and a half million *more* Canadians identified themselves as not having a religious affiliation over the same 10-year span. My own personal observation is that we are entering the third generation of unchurched people, as my friends, their parents and their children do not attend church.

It would seem as though the writing is on the wall. An extreme shortage of clergy, a quickly declining

membership and an increasingly secular society make it hard to predict a bright future for our denomination.

But it's what we need.

Yes, I said it, getting smaller will help the church.

After Jesus ascended, the disciples returned to Jerusalem to pray. On the day of Pentecost, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach clearly in the streets about Jesus Christ. The disciples were focused on their mission: to share the love of God through Jesus Christ with others, just as Jesus had instructed them in John 13:34, 35.

The Acts 2 church is an example for us all. It is a church that preached the resurrected Christ and shared the love of God with the people in the community around them.

The result of their actions? "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

The future of the church is one of hope. The future of the church must be one of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and the love of God with those who live in our communities.

When the apostles were filled with the Spirit of God their hearts were on fire for Jesus Christ, and the fire spread amongst those who heard what they had to say.

The United Church of Canada does good work around the world. But we don't seem to be on fire for Jesus any more. Our fire comes from focusing on good things, but not the source of the Good News. We've turned it around. Our good things need to be driven by the Good News. When we return to the basics of the Gospel message, loving others as God first loved us, then we will create a passionate, Spirit-filled church that people will be lining up at the door to join.

The future of this church depends primarily on our ability to focus on God's love exemplified in Jesus Christ. Changing our candidacy, internship, ordination and settlement processes will not create Spirit-filled ministry personnel. Our challenge is not to find bodies to put in the pulpit but to create disciples who are on fire for serving our living God, disciples who have been called to serve and lead in our congregations. This is done by working with people to help them discover and develop a relationship with God, and help-

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"
— Acts 2:23

ing them discern where God is taking them in their lives.

Our congregations need to be breeding grounds for people who are on fire with the Holy Spirit, who are not afraid to take on the world in the streets, despite the challenges facing them, just as in Acts 2.

This is the hope of our future, and it lies in the hands of the church today.

Otherwise, the stats speak for themselves.

Rev. Nick Phillips joined the United Church in 2002 and was ordained by Montreal and Ottawa Conference in June of 2009. He is currently serving the Sydney Mines Pastoral Charge in Maritime Conference.

¹General Council 40 Workbook 1, http://gc40.unitedchurch.ca/files/wb1_state_of_church.pdf

²Stats Canada 1991-2001 Census data <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/rel/canada.cfm>

Jesus Did Not Soften His Message

A moving away from building-centred ministry is foreseen

By Rev. Lorraine Hill Avendano



The United Church is facing the same dilemmas as many historical Protestant churches throughout North America—declining membership, an aging volunteer base and financial struggles that threaten the church's viability, both at the congregational and the national level. I don't believe these are the heart of the Church's problem, however, as though all would be solved if we just had more bums in the pews, money in the coffers and more energetic activists. I believe that the above issues are merely symptoms of a much deeper disease.

Loss of the particularly Christian identity—that which distinguishes the Christian Church from any other social, charitable, spiritual or political organization—is the heart of the United Church's challenge. In an effort to be more “relevant”—which will supposedly attract more people to the church—the United Church of Canada has often demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice the heart of the Christian message on the altar of postmodern culture, and has allowed peripheral issues to replace the heart of the biblical message, rather than reflect on how simple biblical truths and classical Christian theology are, indeed, still extremely relevant to our time. This lack of Christian conviction, this “anything goes” attitude, has

produced the opposite of the desired effect.

The United Church is no longer taken seriously or respected as a Christian body, either within the wider Christian church or within the secular world. How can it be, when an alarmingly large percentage of the people who claim membership—not to mention leadership—in the United Church cannot articulate basic biblical or theological concepts? What informs their understanding of Jesus and Christian discipleship if they do not know the Bible or understand the basic principles of Christian theology: Who is Jesus and why did He die? How do we explain sin, grace and salvation? What is the human condition? How was God working through the history of Israel and in the early Christian church? Many people in our congregations—including leaders—feel frustrated because they are intimidated by such questions, and their personal feelings and experience become the ultimate authority in answering them because they are unable to give solidly biblical answers.

Now, it is clear that Jesus did not soften His message to attract more people or entertain them so that they would stay. He did not build bigger buildings or plan elaborate programs and activities. Thousands of people came to Him when He offered loaves and fish-

message

es, healings and miracles; that is to say, when there was something in it for them. And when He said, “pick up your cross and follow me,” all but the most committed of them disappeared. He didn’t beg them to come back. His central message was, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” And He gave them the Good News that there was hope of escaping judgment against sin for those who believed and followed Him. Following Him would lead to the cross, but only the cross would lead to resurrection. So why do we think that these strategies are acceptable and effective evangelism methods for us?

Throughout history, church and faith renewal has come through a radical return to our reason for existence and the source of our identity: Jesus and the Scriptures. When one group within the church has committed itself to recovering the primacy of Jesus and the Scriptures, this has invariably caused conflict and division, and I foresee the United Church passing through a time of conflict, as well as an almost inevitable schism. As Canadians, we tend to avoid conflict and division at all cost, but those who would like to see the church return to its biblical and Christ-centred roots need to have the courage to speak up, and be at least as vocal as those who are willing to sacrifice our Christian identity and discard 2,000 years of serious Christian scholarship by some of the most brilliant minds in history, claiming it is “irrelevant.”

I think that an element of the conflict and change our church will inevitably face in the near future – either as impetus or consequence – will be decentralization, that is, a moving away from building-centred ministry to relationship-centred faith development. As an example, the organic/house/simple church movement has been growing throughout North America, and is appealing to a generation of Christians who want the heart of the Christian message, without the distraction caused by the demands of maintaining a large building. People who want to focus their precious time and energy on discipleship and relationship rather than maintenance and fundraising are finding the house church model feeds their spiritual hunger.

Of course, this is a “de-institutionalized” church

model, and those from within the United Church who choose to go this way may find themselves simply leaving the institutional United Church, as this body continues down the path it has chosen for itself. This is already happening in other religious bodies of North America, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, where Protestant clergy and theologians are moving in large numbers, not just to house churches, but to Roman Catholic or Orthodox Churches, because of the increasing polarization in the Protestant Churches. Anyone who takes classical Christian theology seriously—and rejects both progressivism and fundamentalism—finds there are few options within Protestant ecclesiastical bodies anymore. On the other hand, I think that some “progressive” churches may also finally admit that their beliefs are more in line with Unitarianism than Christianity, and will simply work up the courage to show some integrity and take that step.

Either way, as someone who grew up in the United Church, it pains me to say that I don’t see a good future for the United Church of Canada as long as a vocal minority insist on leading the church away from scriptural truths, while another minority who are committed to the historical and biblical doctrines of Christianity remain silent for fear of causing conflict, and while a confused but very sincere and trusting majority get dragged along with the flow. Again, a radical return to our reason for existence and the source of our identity, Jesus and the Scriptures, is our only hope.

Lorraine Hill Avendaño has belonged to the United Church of Canada since birth, and has served in paid accountable ministry positions for nine years. Ordained in 2005, Lorraine is currently appointed by Living Waters Presbytery to the Coldwater-Eady Pastoral Charge, north of Barrie, after spending three years working in Hispanic Ministries in a Lutheran Church in Des Moines, Iowa. Her theological interests include classical Reformed theology, Calvinism and the Pauline epistles. Lorraine is married to José Luis Avendaño, a Chilean Lutheran Pastor, and they have four feline “children.”

Amazing Love . . . Amazing Atonement

By Rev. Greg Smith-Young



Atonement is about what Jesus did by dying. It claims that Jesus' execution on a Roman cross was more than the tragic outcome of his prophetic ministry. Dying, he created a new reality. He made salvation happen. Jesus' apparent defeat at the hands of empire was, in fact, his great victory over the empire of sin. That's atonement.

On the whole, we United Church folk don't seem too big on the atonement. Former moderator Very Rev. Bill Phipps speaks for many: "I do not believe that Jesus died *for* our sins. Jesus was not a sacrifice by God for the sins of the world. God is not a monster. Rather, Jesus died as a *consequence* of human sin."²

Does Bill reject the atonement, or a caricature of the atonement? Are we losing the ability to tell the difference?

A new ordinand confessed to me (and it did feel like a confession) that she had no idea what to do with Good Friday. It was evident that she was not simply rejecting the atonement. This graduate from three years of theological education knew so little about atonement theology, that she didn't know what she was rejecting.

Without a living theology of the atonement, we are cut off. Cut off from our local and global ecumenical sisters and brothers, who continue to celebrate salvation through the cross. Cut off from the theological vitality in the traditions that fed into our denomination. Cut off from core meanings of baptism (dying and rising with Christ) and the Lord's Supper (body broken and blood spilled for us). Cut off from the biblical witness to Jesus.

Most tragic of all, we are cut off from what Jesus did for us. We are forced to live as if it is up to us to save ourselves and the world, which is hopeless. Or, to suppose that salvation is not necessary, which is an eyes-closed denial of the mess we are in.

Bill Phipps might reject a caricature of the atonement, but it is not one he made up. Something like it

Amazing love,
how can it be
That Thou my
God shouldst
die for me!¹

— Charles Wesley

can be found in too much atonement talk. It goes like this: *Angry God is bent on bringing heavy and deadly punishment on sinful people. Instead, Jesus steps in and God beats him to death instead. Therefore, believe in Jesus and you'll go to heaven when you die.*

If that is the story the atonement tells, no wonder people reject it! We need a much better story. We will need good guides to help us hear and tell this better story well.

I suggest Scot McKnight as one of these guides, and his book *A Community Called Atonement*.³ McKnight is professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago. He cut his scholarly teeth doing historical Jesus research, with a particular focus on what Jesus thought about his death.⁴ McKnight has been associated with the "emerging" movement within Evangelicalism and discussions about the "missional church."

McKnight writes well. This book was a pleasure to read (and re-read). It is divided into short chapters that propel us toward his goal:

This book is dedicated to deconstructing one-sided theories of the atonement. It is also dedicated to demonstrating that the cross is inseparable from the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, Pentecost, and the ecclesiastic focus of the work of God. And this book is dedicated to deconstructing simplistic, individualistic theories of the atonement.

McKnight's understanding of the atonement does not focus solely on Jesus death. The cross is central, but it is not solitary. In particular, McKnight notes how many understandings of the atonement neglect Jesus' mission as he himself identified it, to bring the Kingdom of God. The atonement must lead to the Kingdom. In short, McKnight regards the atonement as part of a coherent understanding of the whole of Jesus' ministry.

The theme of "community" is vital to the whole biblical witness to God's work, and it is no less important for McKnight's understanding of the Trinity. A key word for McKnight is "*Eikon*" (Greek for "image"). God made us as God's Eikons to have relationship with God, with ourselves, with others and with all of creation. Sin, then, is a fundamental corruption of

atonement

these relationships, and the atonement their healing and restoration. McKnight sounds a strong note here against individualistic understandings of the atonement that focus solely on relationship with God. The atonement *"is about creating communities of faith wherein God's will is done and lived out."*

In the history of atonement theology, a variety of key metaphors have emerged to describe what Jesus' death does. Theologians have often elevated one metaphor over the others, clung to it tightly, and pushed the others away. Their chosen metaphor becomes the meaning of the atonement. One of these dominant metaphors is commonly termed "penal substitution." The story it tells is of Jesus shielding us from God's wrath against our sin and absorbing that wrath himself. For many, this is the sum of what the atonement is, and they celebrate it. Many others agree it is the sum of the atonement and recoil from it. My hunch is that most in the United Church fit into this second camp, with Bill Phipps being but one example.

While not rejecting penal substitution, McKnight does not put it at the centre. Instead, he introduces another metaphor: the golf bag. You can play a round of golf using only one club, but you won't do very well. It is much better to have a bag full of many clubs, from which you can choose a particular club depending on the need. McKnight's "atonement golf bag" contains all the key metaphors. Each is needed to bring us to the heart of the atonement, which is reconciled relationships and restored community.

McKnight's golf bag, his overarching metaphor that holds all the others together is "identification for incorporation." He builds on the early theologian Irenaeus. In Jesus, God fully identified with us and became who we are. (Note the strong note of incarnation.) Especially, God entered fully into our situation of sin and suffering. Jesus identified with us so that we can be united with him (incorporation). Incorporated into Christ, we are liberated from sin's power and set on the path of restoration. Is McKnight simply creating another dominant metaphor (identification for incorporation) that will crowd out all others? This is not his intention. Rather, identification for incorporation embraces all the models of the atonement and holds them together, so each can do its work.

The last section of the book is perhaps the most groundbreaking and most controversial. McKnight contends that there is a "praxis" to the atonement. Atonement is not just something Jesus does for us, *though it must start with that.* Jesus' atonement enables us to practice atonement ourselves, in how we live. (A key Scripture reference here is 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.)

Especially for those in the Reformed tradition, this seems perilously close to works righteousness. Is atonement something we do for ourselves? A careful reading of McKnight mitigates this concern. He addresses it directly: *"I do not believe humans atone for others, and I do not believe humans can atone for themselves."* Atonement is God's work, something God does for us.

Nonetheless, by atoning for us God creates the space for us to share in God's atoning work. We can live the restored relationships which the atonement creates. This includes the practices of forming community, working for justice, engaging in mission/evangelism, reading the Bible, and worship. McKnight devotes a chapter each to these atonement practices. Of special interest to many United Church folk will be his chapter on justice, and how a vital ministry of "seeking justice" will be rooted in the atonement.

Scot McKnight's book offers us an excellent guide and conversation partner. He lays down many ideas that can help us carefully engage the traditions of Christian reflection on Jesus' death. He gives directions as we seek to live out the atoning mission of Jesus for the sake of his world today. My hope is that, with the help of people like McKnight, we will again be able to join with the likes of Charles Wesley in singing of the amazing love of God, who in Christ Jesus died for us.

Rev. Greg Smith-Young is pastor of Elora-Bethany pastoral charge in southern Ontario.

¹From the hymn "And Can It Be" by Charles Wesley (*Psalms and Hymns*, 1738). It was included in the United Church's blue Hymnary of the 1930s, but not in the red Hymn Book of the 1970s nor in *Voices United*. A pity.

²Bill Phipps, *Cause for Hope: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2007), 134. Having recently hosted Bill in our congregation for a weekend retreat, I value the passion and perspective he brings to social justice and environmental concerns. When it comes to core theology, however, I think Bill misses some very important things.

³Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007.⁴ *Jesus and His Death* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2005).

Do Not Get Off the Rock!

By Rev. Kirby Constable

"...Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it"

—Matthew 16:18b

The storm is not coming. The storm has come. This storm does more than merely "rock the boat." If Christ is not in our boat, then our ship will, in fact, be overturned and the occupants cast upon the waters. This is not "playing church"—it is a life and death situation. It is not about something as trivial as the future of a religious institution. This is the soul of God's church in the balance.

"You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16b).

Have you seen news footage of a landslide? Soil turned to liquid, flowing through towns. You know that anything and anyone caught in its path will be lost. But if you have found a rock which is broad and deep and high, a rock of refuge that no storm can overcome, then only one thing remains. Do not get off the rock! Don't put your foot in the water to check either how strong the current is or the temperature of the water. Keep both feet firmly planted on the rock and don't get too close to the edge. Someone is coming to airlift you and your loved ones out to safety. He has given his Word to us that he is coming soon and will not delay.

But this is not the end of the message. There is more.

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God . . . (Psalm 46:4a).

And again: *"And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street"* (Revelation 22:1,2a).

In Christ, the River of Life flows right down the aisles of our sanctuaries, carrying us into the immediate presence of God. In Christ, this same joyful river flows from God's sanctuary, down the aisles of (I hope) your church, out all the doors and windows bringing the life of Jesus Christ into the town, city or countryside where you live. Like the song says, "Wade in the water children."

So I tell you solemnly that to remain the Church of Christ we *must* stand upon the rock—even to the pain of death—and we equally *must* wade in, play in and swim in, baptize and be baptized in the River of Life. It is not a case of choosing one or the other, or saying "We are a rock congregation, we do not do river dancing." Or vice versa.

Both storm and drought have come—and at the same time. Yes, these are hard times. And this is our time, the Church's time—God's time. Be confident. Be faithful. Stand on the rock and wade in the water.

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David . . ." (2 Timothy 2:8a).

Rev. Kirby Constable is pastor of Knox United Church in Durham, Ontario.

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rock



Quick to Confront, Slow to Bless

By Rev. Robin Jacobson

I have discovered both an inclusivity and an unity within the United Church of Canada very different from what I have known in the past. This has both blessed and challenged me.

I have been blessed by an attitude that seeks instinctively to include everyone! This smacks to me of God's grace. That too many may ultimately be found to have been included seems far preferable to the opposite error, that of discovering too many have been left out. Our unity seems much more familial than organizational: covenantal than doctrinal. We choose to be together—with our pretty marked differences—as opposed to being together simply on the basis of some enforced doctrinal agreement.

I am challenged, however, by denominational statements that assume doctrinal unity, feeling unhelpfully pressurized to defend theologies not my own.

We are perceived as being reactionary, constantly against things. Instead of using every possible opportunity for finding creative ways of being a blessing to others, celebrating what we stand for, we constantly ask our members to show their faith by blocking, protesting, resisting. We are quick to confront, slow to bless. Our denomination (and our world) needs to be blessed by Gospel truth far more than it needs to be scolded. Accurate or not, these perceptions exist and need intentionally to be addressed and corrected.

For too long our evangelical (or otherwise) status has been somehow associated with what we believe about God and homosexuality. While many evangelical Christians believe scripture to be clear in its denunciation of all aspects of homosexual behaviour, there are others who disagree. I am one of those. I find myself unconvinced by the traditional arguments and increasingly siding with evangelical scholars such as Prof Lewis B. Smedes (professor of Theology and Integration, Fuller) and others. They argue that when it comes to faithful, long-term, monogamous, homosexual relationships, the Bible is silent.

I would love there to be huge and demonstrable liberty of opinion about all things that we discern do not form the substance of our faith—that we be intentionally free to disagree on certain issues. I would see homosexuality as being a major part of that. I see the

“homosexual-issue” as a God-given opportunity for us to re-launch/re-define ourselves. It seems that while so much opposition to evangelical faith in Canada (and around the world) has been associated with the positions taken around homosexuality, the very opposite can also be true—no more a red-herring. By being deliberately free to agree/disagree on this issue, we would disarm so much of the attack on our basic evangelical identity and are left uniquely positioned for all sorts of fresh missional activity.

I am not sure that ‘conservationist’ is the word that I would want primarily to describe this initiative! I don’t respond well to the implication of backward-looking guardianship that it evokes, as if we are curators needing to preserve/guard something; ‘bury it in the ground’ to keep it safe. Do we actually believe that God’s Gospel will fade away unless we do whatever it is that we decide to do in order to conserve it?

It seems to me that, of course, while standing firmly on what we discern to be the basics of our evangelical faith, we need to be open, risk-takers, fearlessly trying new ways of being God’s gift as we work to apply the ancient Gospel with exciting and life-giving innovation!

I love Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. In Christ, God has acted to create and then to redeem all of the cosmos. God has filled the Church with the Holy Spirit. God sends the Church as gift to the cosmos to make known God’s character and purpose: healing, reconciling, life! God is revealed within creation but has revealed all we need to know about life in its fullest sense in Scripture. It is as we engage with scripture, wrestling, learning, so we are able to grow in our appreciation of and participation in that revelation.

Robin Jacobson, ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, was called to be minister of the North Lonsdale United Church in North Vancouver in February 2001.

bless

Dive headlong into Jesus' Way

Jesus calls us with a vision completely different from any we have had the courage to imagine

By Rev. Aaron Miller



These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him (Matthew 10:2-4).

I've long loved the story of the call of Matthew (Matt 9:9)—that single verse presentation of the gospel in nuce. I love it because of the radical abruptness with which it's told. I love it because it is full of kingdom of heaven urgency—Come! Follow! Now! And I love it because I want to feel like I'm right there, ready to follow when Jesus walks into the everydayness of life and says, "Let's go do something different." It's a story that resonates with the kind of reckless devotion that discipleship to Jesus demands. And that's exciting.

But flip a couple of pages and I discover the devastating reality of what Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to, the rather less romantic and passionate truth of discipleship. There, in the next chapter of the gospel, is the list of Jesus' chosen twelve, the frontline carriers of the gospel. It seems that there is more involved than the initial excitement of being chosen, more to it than simply leaving behind the drudgery of the tax booth for a life of thrilling dissidence, or whatever possessed Matt to leave his ledgers and his probably comfortable lifestyle to follow this stranger off into the sunset.

Because there's Simon the Zealot. Even if this was an affectionate nickname, even if Simon's association with the radical Zealot party is speculative, that his theo-political leanings are worth mentioning at all is reasonable assurance that he saw the world in a staggeringly different way than Matthew, the Roman lackey and traitor to his people. Yet, we can imagine that Jesus walked up to him in the middle of whatever it is that a Zealot does, and said "Come. Follow. Now. Let's do something different."

And two men, who couldn't possibly have been more different, are unified for the sake of the gospel; the first-century equivalent of an Iraqi working with the U.S. military, and an al-Qaeda insurgent, thrown

together to spread the Good News, God's kingdom vision. There's no reason to assume that Jesus agreed more with one than the other. In all probability, he didn't much agree with either. Instead, he calls them to something new, something unexpected, something gospel. The third way of Jesus.

This story is almost platitudinous, its criticism and call to end division is so familiar—at least to those of us who have attended church for our whole lives. Yet, being recently ordained to ministry in the denomination that I love, the idea of a United Church seems, well, ironic. But, if we see a future, if we want our denomination to be a gospel beacon in years to come, it can't remain that way. (Maybe we don't want that, but I think the articles in this magazine say otherwise.)

It may be that we need "get beyond issues," as John Douglas Hall presciently insisted leaders in the church do. Indeed, he suggested the possibility that our issues—whether we're tax collectors or Zealots—function primarily as a way to avoid the griminess, the messiness, the inconvenience of discipleship. I have a hard time seeing that things have gotten better than they were when he wrote that.

This is not to suggest that discipleship has been lost in our denomination, or that the prophetic voice that is often associated with us ought to be silenced. Nor is it reflective of the sort of "radical inclusivism" that turns out to be based more on clubhouse squabbles and self-righteousness, than serious pursuit of Christ. But I do think we need to be constantly reflecting on the possibility that Jesus doesn't much agree with any of us, and has called us anyways—not in support of what we have done, but with a vision completely different than we have had the courage to imagine. We need to always be decreasing so that he can increase.

Even as I write this I think of the things that complicate this idealistic vision of discipleship: jobs to do, congregations to please, bills to pay—whatever number of excuses we have. And, of course, the truth is that Jesus doesn't expect us to be perfect, just to follow him, imperfections and all. Still, when I begin to make excuses—which I do all the time—or suggest to Jesus that we do it my way for a change—which I'm

headlong

as prone to as anyone—I'm reminded of G. K. Chesterton's penetrating assertion: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

That's got to be a biting criticism for anyone who wants to take discipleship seriously. So, I believe that Jesus calls us to dive headlong and imaginatively into his Way, wherever we find ourselves, and to anticipate that the experience will be unexpected. He challenges us to get out from the comfort of our desks or the passion of our politics and try doing things the way he would have them done. I think we're at a point in history when that is both possible and inte-

gral. And it will mean a joy-filled future of hard gospel work for us all, for The United Church of Canada, for years to come, by the grace of Christ.

Rev. Aaron Miller serves at Faith Centennial UC in Selkirk, Ontario, where he lives with his wife Kate and sons Levi and Jude.

See, Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where are We Headed?* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), 65-66.

Our Church Tilted Toward the White

Racism is alive and well in Canada – even in the church

By Rev. Adam Kilner



"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18)

The church is an event, a movement, an action. The church exists where God has summoned his people. The church is that place where human existence is caught between prosperity and poverty; that place where oppressor and oppressed meet; it is the gathering place where the heavens and Hades collide.

Jesus had begun his ministry in Galilee proclaiming the same message that John the Baptizer had, crying out to the people of Israel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 4:17).

Taken literally, such a statement fits into the plane of reality that shaped first-century Mediterranean exis-

tence—the heavens above, the earth below, and Hades underneath the earth. Jesus, by proclaiming John's message, is proclaiming that heaven—the place that God reigned from—was falling out of the sky and onto the earth below. Jesus isn't Chicken Little, but the message is the same. The difference in the message, however, is that in the case of Jesus, this is good news; for Chicken Little, it appears that terror is the motivator behind the message.

It seems, then, at least textually, that by the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel the first-century world of Jesus and his disciples is a place of struggle—where the good news of God enters our existential plane of reality to stand firm against Hades—death itself.

What we're getting at, then, is that as the church it is our high calling to go toe-to-toe with what Cornel West calls "the catastrophic, and the monstrous, the

white

scandalous, the traumatic that are often hidden and concealed in the deodorized and manicured discourses of the mainstream.” This includes conversation about race, especially as it pertains to Canadian and United Church of Canada history.

Race relations in Canada have been troublesome at best, at least historically-speaking. There are many Canadians who seem to think that racism is an American problem because it was that nation that was confronted with a Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s and on into the 1980s. But, let me tell you folks, racism is alive and well in Canada—even in the church.

Whereas liberation theologians have often claimed that God is tilted toward the poor, our culture and our church is tilted toward the White. People often think of Canada, in the context of African-American history, as the successor to the Bible’s Promised Land, but Jason H. Silverman contests such a notion of Black history in Canada. As he thinks about the Canadian context of African-American slaves in Canada, he dialogues with the work of abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe who had written *Refugees from Slavery in Canada West* in the 1860s. He says:

“Howe continued by noting the difference between white Canadian reaction to a few fugitive slaves in the early years and to the thousands of black immigrants in Canada after 1850. At first, Blacks were a novelty and as such received friendly treatment. After the influx of many more black runaway slaves, and the consequent competition in labour and social standing, Howe detected that blacks ceased to be ‘interesting negroes’ to white Canadians and became ‘niggers.’” (*The American Fugitive Slave in Canada: Myths and Realities* by Jason H. Silverman).

In the United Church of Canada, the first Black person to graduate from Emmanuel College (a United Church theological college), be ordained a United Church minister and become moderator was actually denied entry into pastoral ministry from his ordination in 1941 until 1963 when he joined the pastoral team at Dominion-Chalmers United Church in Ottawa with

white preacher Rev. Douglas Lapp. That person was Wilbur Howard, who would go on to serve as moderator (1974-1977) while also preaching at Emmanuel United Church in Ottawa, where he would remain for the rest of his life in ministry.

On another note, each moderator ends up taking at least one international trip, and of all places to be sent, Howard—the only Black person to become moderator—winds up in the thick of apartheid South Africa. *The United Church Observer* later said about Howard’s trip: “A funny thing happened to United Church Moderator Wilbur Howard. He went to a worship service in Africa, and everyone expected him to be white” (*The United Church Observer*, 1975).

But what does this have to do with the United Church of Canada, you ask? This has a lot to do with the United Church of Canada in that we speak often of welcome and inclusion. A brother of the Christian Reformed faith—a brother for whom I have a great deal of respect—has led me in this conversation back to the cross. As I shared with him my message one night over MSN Messenger, he wrote back saying, “We remember that the cross is central to our being. Christ’s death is the absolute mediation and therefore redemption of race and racism” (Nate Smit via MSN Messenger).

I sat back after reading that line and cried out, “Lord have mercy, that’s good!” And then I remembered one of my favourite lines from Colossians: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

This seems to affirm what Nate Smit had stated earlier—that God will bring back into harmony God’s people, despite the stumbling plans humankind might have. God will get back everything that belongs to God, even if it means dying for it. Amen.

Rev. Adam Kilner graduated from Emmanuel College in May of this year and was ordained in Lambton Presbytery. He is now serving the Bentley-Blackfalds Pastoral Charge in Alberta



The Future of Our Church is Diversity

by Andrew Hyde

My dad entered into ministry in the United Church of Canada back in the late 1960's. There are a few pictures of him floating around, with big bushy sideburns, out on his settlement charge, roughly the age I am now. The pictures from those days show him smiling, working with First Nations communities and obviously imbued with a sense of passion and energy for the ministry of the church. When he would speak of those days, he'd tell me how the United Church was "the place to be" back then, an exciting opportunity for young leaders seeking purpose and adventure and a cause worth giving your life to.

My experience of the United Church has not been the same. As I embark on a career in ministry, I take a place in a church that is grieving, that is frightened, that is cynical, shrinking and fumbling for a purpose. There is not a lot of energy or optimism ushering young leaders into ministry today—more so the firm resolve of a hospice worker and a stubborn faith in the one who can bring life out of death. As a colleague of mine once said, "The Jesus Movement is alive and strong." It's just the church we need to worry about.

So what might the future of the United Church be, and how might we align ourselves with the movement of the Spirit for these new times? As I look around, I see glimmers of hope and possibility interwoven into our story as the United Church. I also see pitfalls and shortcomings and opportunities for us to botch it all up. These next few years will be key, but part of the way forward is to share our hopes and visions of a brighter future. So let me share with you a bit of what I see.

In 1925 a miraculous thing happened. Church folks put aside their hang-ups and differences to create something new. Put aside, but didn't disown—for this new thing was an ecumenical creature. Union didn't require assimilation, but was a partnership built on trust for better mission, better proclamation and better service to the poor and marginalized. Presbyterian,

Methodist, Congregationalist—many different roots, traditions and modes of belief were maintained by United Church communities for whom those identities had great value.

As a child of postmodernism, I get excited when I think about church union. I love that, as the United Church, we affirm that what holds us together is more important than what keeps us apart. I dig the idea that we exist so that all may be one, but also that in our oneness there is room for all.

Part of what I believe will be key to a prosperous future for the United Church is a reclaiming of our ecumenical nature, not only beyond, but within our church as well. Whether it's in the area of theology or liturgy or governance or ethnicity, we ought to realize that the future of our church is diversity—small boutique communities that respond missionally to their particular realities. Currently, the United Church is far too monolithic (in practice and belief) and there is a definite sense (incompatible with church union) that some people are more "United Church" than others.

If we truly embrace diversity as the distinguishing characteristic of the United Church, does that weaken our ability to speak with one voice? Does diversity weaken the United Church brand? Possibly, if your understanding of a denomination is that it offers a consistent product to a consuming society. But the church is not Toyota, and people of faith are more than just consumers of pre-packaged religion. Denominations are at their best when they support relationships and safeguard the creative tension that arises when you gather diverse people and beliefs.

Diversity allows the church to be shaped from within. Diversity allows the cream to rise as those with integrity and passion and ideas are freed to pursue their calling and giftedness—or fall flat on their face. The mistrust and fear inherent in our current structures sees too much polity and restriction being cast down upon people who long for the freedom to serve and

remake the church. If diversity is to really take hold, the United Church will have less polity; it will simply be impossible to standardize so many different, evolving, organic communities and creative people.

As people of the church, we find a communal and an individual element to our expressions of faith. Generally speaking, postmodern culture emphasizes the individual and is suspicious of the communal—sometimes with good reason, sometimes not. The United Church has, of late, emphasized the communal over the individual.

Discernment committees, our court structure, even our worship and liturgy is all shaped to be communal expressions of our faith—group think and group speak. Spiritual practices and decision-making that gets played out on an individual level are seen

as marginal to our life as the church or held in suspicion. Worse yet, communal bodies in our church often get hijacked by individual agendas, and the whole structure of our church loses integrity.

If diversity is to really grab hold in our Church, we must reclaim a balanced and appropriate place for the role of the individual in the life of faith. Wondercafe works because people can engage as individuals. New books and literature shape our church because they're written by individuals. Emerging worship practices like prayer stations and worship installations and even personal devotions and meditation work because they make space for individuals. If we are to be relevant to an increasingly mobile, hard to pin down and postmodern generation, the United Church simply must make space for individualized as well as communal faith. We are not only diverse as communities, but as individuals as well.

A miraculous thing happened. Church folks put aside their hang-ups and differences to create something new

The United Church of Canada gives lots of lip service to diversity, but we have a harder time living it out. Diversity, as it plays out in the biblical narrative, brings life and abundance. Think of the diversity in creation, in the nation of Israel, in the Early Church and its mission to all peoples, in the New Testament visions of heavenly worship. If we are to live into our calling as “the place to be” for holy adventures in these postmodern days, we simply must embrace diversity and actually see it through. If we can reclaim our ecumenical beginnings and find a space for individualized participation, a diverse United Church might actually create something new—something worthy of our beginnings and our lives.

Andrew Hyde is minister of youth and young families at Norval United Church in Norval, Ontario.

diversity



By Nicholas Coates

Remembering Our Story

The United Church is suffering from amnesia

Moses stood on the banks of the Jordan River and looked out over the Israelites who were about to step into the land promised to them by God. Their exodus was now over. An exodus, which had seen deserts wandered, bread falling from the sky, armies avoided and seas crossed; an exodus, which had displayed God's faithfulness and love again and again. Yet, despite the journey, Moses stood before them and said: "Take care that you do not forget who you are, where you come from and how you got here." Moses knew the power of story and memory. He knew that if the Israelites did not remember the story of the exodus they would have nothing, because story is everything.

The United Church of Canada needs to hear the words of Moses. We are suffering from amnesia. We have forgotten our story. We have forgotten who we are and where we come from and because we have forgotten who we are, we have no idea where we are going. Without a story to ground us, to guide us, to assure us, the world can be a scary place. Our amnesia has brought confusion and anxiety into our church as we wander around our post-modern world, clinging desperately to anything that triggers a memory or resembles spirituality in an attempt to bring some sort of identity and purpose to our community. But just any story will not do. There is only one story that will bring back our memory of who we are, where we have been and how we got here. There is only one story that is truly ours; because we are the church, our story is God's Story.

We are the United Church of Canada and it's that second word, and not the first, that we need to realize to cure our amnesia and bring back a sense of identity and purpose. We are the Body of Christ. We are the new humanity. We are the people of the God who created the heavens and the earth. The God who walks with his creation; the God who came down to earth in Jesus, who experienced what it is like to be human in all its joys and all its sorrows, who showed us the meaning of being human; the God who broke down death's doors in order to bring us back to him; the God who died and rose

again so we will never have to be alone. Our story is the story of a God who will come again and put this world back to rights and make it like the one he created. Because we are that God's people, that is our story. It is our story because of Jesus Christ. He has made the Church. He has brought us into God's story. He has made it our own.

We must remember our story. We must remember we are Church. It is there that we find our identity and it is there that we find our purpose and direction. We cannot be the Church without it. We cease to be without it. It is all we have because our story, God's story, is everything. It is what brings people through our doors. It is what gives people hope. It is what tells the person on their knees that they are not alone but God is with them. It tells the person who has lost everything that God is still by their side. Our story is everything. It is who we are. Without it, we're simply nothing.

We, the United Church, cannot forget who we are, where we came from and how we got here. All those answers are found in God's story; the story we hear every Sunday, the story we hear when we break bread, the story of love, grace and hope that when heard strikes a chord in our hearts.

When we remember our story we will rediscover who we are, where we came from, how we got here and we will find out where we are going. We are the Church, regardless of our amnesia and of our struggles. We are still a place of love and hope. We are still a voice calling out to the lost and the weary and when they come into our doors they will want to hear what we have to say. We need to tell them our story, God's story, for it is a story that can change the world.

Nicholas Coates is a graduate student at Emmanuel College and works at a church in Toronto.

remembering

We Must Think Missionally

The church has to look beyond how much, how many and how often

by Rev. Jesse Bown



One of the more loyal and committed members of the United Church that I know is my mother. She served alongside my father in pastoral ministry for more than 30 years. In matters of the United Church, she is one of the first people that I consult.

So, I posed the question to her: "Mom, what do you think the future of the United Church is?"

After a long pause, she said, "The future of the United Church of Canada is bleak. Attendance and givings are down and churches are closing,"

"But why?" I asked. "What is at the heart of the decline in our church?"

Her opinion? It's because "We don't know what to believe anymore."

The United Church of Canada has done a wonderful job of raising generations of people who, like my mother, pledge loyalty and service to the institution, but that day is over. In the post-Christian era, her generation is left wondering why people just aren't coming anymore, and what will happen to the church.

Like other churches, we have operated from the attractional mode. We put on programs in the hope people will come to our buildings and connect to who we are. Our success has been measured by "How much, how many and how often." But that isn't working anymore, and we don't know what to do.

The United Church's leadership in the area of social justice and its concern for environmental issues put it on the forefront of where any church needs to be today. The United Church of Canada is a leader in these areas, and I believe this is a major part of the way forward. But something is missing. While the environment and social justice issues are near to the hearts of post-moderns, people are not flocking to our churches. Why not?

When my mother said, "We don't know what to believe anymore," she was referring to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. I believe it's our understanding of who Jesus is within the United Church of Canada that is the missing piece. We have not been good at passing on a lived faith that expresses who God is through Jesus Christ. But we can.

Sometimes I get a little frustrated when I mention Jesus and the United Church in the same sentence. I chatted with a colleague a few days ago, and things were fine until I brought up Jesus. Right away he drifted into a rant about fundamentalism and intolerance and there being no place for that kind of thing in the church. It closed down our conversation. But, if this United Church of Canada is to move forward, and I believe it can, we must engage in new conversations as to who Jesus is.

Author Leonard Sweet says it's time to put away the liberal/conservative and other labels and it's time for the church to think missionally. The missional church is an incarnational, outward-focused church, not an attractional church. Our culture is open to experiencing who Jesus is, not so much through the traditional church, but through encountering him wherever his followers are found.

I am not talking about door-to-door evangelism but relationships of trust where one day someone may ask, "What is different about you? You handle situations with love and reconciliation. You are forgiving. How can I be like that?" It is then one is able to engage in conversations about Jesus, not the church, and how he still changes lives.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating that we forget the church. During these conversations it may be that someone may be moved to give the faith a try. It's up to us to ensure when they come, the time they spend with us is not only the best we can offer, but there are opportunities throughout the week for them to connect to places of faith formation.

In order for those conversations to take place, however, the church has to look beyond how much, how many and how often. Our preoccupation with buildings and budgets has to be replaced with a passion for transformational change to take place in the hearts of those we are called to serve. It means moving beyond areas of comfort to go and bear witness to the presence of the incarnate Christ who lives within us, and not being afraid or ashamed to talk about him if we are called to do so.

The missional church has an apostolic rather than hierarchical mode of leadership. It is a community based on drawing upon the gifts of its people.

missionally

We are burdened with bureaucracy in the United Church of Canada. We are also ordained clergy-dependant. We have been taught that if it does not come from the clergy it either cannot work or it cannot be done.

Early Methodism in Newfoundland, as suggested by Calvin Hollett in his new book, *Shouting, Embracing, and Dancing With Ecstasy: The Growth of Methodism in Newfoundland 1774-1874*, was a movement led by common ordinary people. It was a faith that was passed from house to house, from boat to boat, from community to community by people who had a transformational encounter with Jesus Christ. Quite often, Hollett suggests, it was the ordained clergy, along with the desire for structure and decorum of the organized church, that were impediments to the spread of the faith.

Go to the people,
Live with them,
Learn from them,
Love them.
Start with what
they know,
Build with what
they have,
But with the
best leaders,
when the work
is done, the task
Accomplished,
The people will say,
We have done it
ourselves.

-Lao Tsu

Winston Churchill said, "The farther backward you look, the further forward you are likely to see." Maybe, as a United Church, we need to look back far enough to see a group of people, empowered by the Holy Spirit after encountering the resurrected Christ, who were unleashed on the world with nothing more than a passion that his gospel might be proclaimed.

A mentor of mine, The Rev. Cyril Chaulk, recently spoke at our church. Since his retirement, Cyril has raised thousands of dollars for those living with cerebral palsy and leprosy. Cyril said that if he had to do ministry all over again, he would spend more time involved in practical projects that make a difference in the day-to-day lives of others. That is the heart of the missional church: giving ourselves to others in the name of Jesus Christ. In the process, the kingdom of God is revealed and lives are changed. It's something we all can be empowered to do. As a church and as leaders, I believe our greatest strength is found in those who sit in the pews each week. It's time we got off the field and let them into the game.

Rev. Jesse Bown is minister of Victoria United Church in Newfoundland and Labrador Conference.

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A Denomination in Exile

by Rev. Jim Breen



I am one of those third generation United Church people whose family history goes back to church union. Growing up in rural Ontario at Putnam United Church outside of London, just about everybody in my family and in my elementary school was United Church. Or so it seemed!

But now 35 years later, much has changed and continues to change. I like the idea of being a conservationist because this United Church of ours that taught me *the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3b)* doesn't seem as universally convinced of its truth as it once did. The request to write this article seems to me to be divinely appointed.

I have been preaching through the Old Testament stories of the rebelliousness of Judah as they were defeated and carried off into Babylonian captivity and how the people of God had to learn how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. As I worked through these stories, God helped me to clarify my own thinking on where we are and what God seems to be doing in and through this United Church of ours. What stands out for me was that the Lord used the exile to save Judah from themselves and bring them back to faith in the Lord God. I believe God may be at work, doing this in our United Church of Canada even now. Let me explain.

A friend of mine sent me an article about six months ago entitled, "A Call to the Religious Life Worldwide" by Sister Jose Maria Vigil, CME. This Roman Catholic nun's research observes that in every religion around the world there is a direct co-relation between the decline of people signing up to be monks, nuns, missionaries or other highly committed religious leaders and the rise of technology. The theory seems to be that as we humans develop new technologies, like the light bulb or the car, for instance, we begin to gain a false sense of control over our lives and even our universe through the use of these machines. Think about how much more we feel in control of information with the internet and blackberries.

It is suggested that as we gain what appears and feels like more control, we look more and more to ourselves as the primary active agents in the world. As we are more and more amazed at our new technologies, we get so focused on this that we quietly stop looking for God and Christ's actions in this world. Why worship a God who doesn't apparently do anything....

So as we live out the 85th anniversary of this United Church of ours, it seems that just maybe being the largest Protestant denomination has in some ways made us arrogant; kind of like in the days of Jeremiah, as the people of Judah were willing to worship the Lord along with Baal and other gods. They were guilty of being both unfaithful to the Lord and confident that the Lord would save them from being destroyed by Babylon.

I really think this is where we are in our current situation. There seems to be a faithfulness problem as we try to be all things to all people in such a way that we have inadvertently compromised the historic Christian faith. This, I think, explains the so-called Progressive Christians who, from John Spong to Gretta Vosper, don't seem that interested in Jesus because they think they will save the church from extinction by being progressive. To be clear, I do not attribute malice to such folk. I believe they are sincerely trying to help Christ's church and I think we need to treat such fellow Church leaders with more respect than we conservationists often do. Whenever our passion for Jesus and our frustrations get the best of us, we tend to behave sinfully. As such we need to be more gracious.

Yet, from the biblical witness, I believe that there is in God a reason for hope. I think we as a denomination are in exile or will find ourselves in exile very soon. We will be carried off to Babylon as our numbers and resources decline; we will find ourselves in a "strange land." As we enter into this strange land, I pray that we will be driven back to our God and to *the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*. A faith that really does give hope to the powerless as Jesus saves us.

exile

It was the during the Jews' time in Babylon that Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednigo, along with Esther and Mordecai, remembered and relearned to trust the Lord through a fiery furnace, a lion's den and through the attempted cultural genocide of the Jews by Haman. So I suggest that we will learn to trust in the Lord while our buildings empty out and churches close and the rest of us find ourselves arguing over the resources and people that are left.

The image that I like to use is the sinking of the Titanic, "the ship that God himself couldn't sink." I believe that the United Church, like many who have gone before us, has become somewhat arrogant, even thinking we know better than the Bible what God's will is. As such we are kind of like the Titanic, the ship that we believed to be unsinkable. After colliding with the iceberg, the crew could have used old-fashioned technology and put canvas out over the hull with ropes covering over the leaks. Then the water pressure would have held the canvas in place and kept the ship afloat while the pumps kept up to the slowed leaks. But the captain and crew had given up faith in such old-time technology, and so the ship sank. Similarly, many in our church have given up on that old-time faith or religion, and our church attendance and membership numbers have declined quickly.

Rather than trying to save the church, I would suggest that we need to be getting as many people into the lifeboats as best we can. The congregations are the lifeboats that need to be well-equipped to withstand the storm. Once we no longer have wealth or technology or other false gods to trust in ... hopefully like Daniel and Esther, we will relearn and remember through the experiences of the next 25 years to trust in Jesus to save us again.

After the big ship is sunk and people who no longer trust in *the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints* have become absorbed into the "Babylonian/secular culture," we will hopefully be able to start lashing lifeboats together and like Ezra and Nehemiah rebuild the temple of the Lord,

even if it is much smaller than before. So let us unashamedly seek to be the conservationists who try to share *the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints* and in God's timing and strength we will not only survive like Ether & Daniel but rebuild God's centre of worship like Ezra and Nehemiah.

This is my humble assessment of the United Church's future, and how we can prepare our congregations for long-term survival amidst the challenges ahead.

Rev. Jim Breen is minister on the Alvinston United Church Pastoral Charge in South Ontario.

cruxifusion



kroo-seh-fyoo-zhuhn

CRUX

1. a vital, basic, decisive, or pivotal point.
2. a cross.
3. something that torments by its puzzling nature; a perplexing difficulty.

FUSION

1. The act or process of uniting or blending into a whole as if by melting together.

Spring of 2011

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By Rev. David Bruce

Let's be honest: all indicators point to The United Church having about a fifth of its current numbers in 20 years' time.

It probably won't be a smooth, steady decline, because as congregations lose their critical mass and close their doors, up to two-thirds of their members disappear, some to other churches, some just dropping out of church life altogether. There will come a "tipping point," when our stock plummets faster than British Petroleum after the Gulf oil spill.

Some will blame the demythologization of our message. Others will blame the emphasis our denomination has put on doing social justice. I blame the media.

To be more precise, I blame our failure to reflect on the meaning and the impact of the advent of modern media.

As it is structured, mainline Protestantism depends, financially and organizationally, on people attending worship services. And what do we promise people if they come out? A *message*. Oh, there's fellowship—and that's very important—but classic Protestant worship is focussed on the message that's delivered in word and song.

This used to work just fine. People would come out to hear what Reverend So-and-So had to say each week, because few people had the time (or the ability) to read the books the preacher read and to know the things the preacher knew. Or, they might have come out to hear the choir and the thundering organ: church was, in many places, the best show in town.

However, along came radio, and suddenly, you could hear a preacher as good as or better than your local clergy, and music by top performers from exotic places. Small wonder that when television fully arrived in the late 1960s, church attendance began to decline in every major Protestant denomination, and hasn't stopped declining since! After all, we could now receive the messages we wanted—and pick and choose among them—right in the conven-

Media and the Message

ience of our own homes! With the development of the internet, the messages have become virtually infinite in number, and are available around the clock.

In recent decades, the churches attempted to respond.

One response was to become more culturally attuned, so our message got more "relevant," as we tried to mirror our ever-changing culture more completely. In some quarters, contemporary music and big screens became fashionable—and to a certain extent, these proved to be useful ways of making worship more entertaining, but it hasn't exactly ushered in a big-time era of revival.

Another response was to become more counter-cultural, with many churches reviving older, more sophisticated liturgical forms, and to a certain extent this appealed to those wanting to identify themselves as "cultured." Taize, Celtic spirituality, increased emphasis on liturgical seasons and decorations have all upped the ante, but haven't done anything to stem the larger tide of numerical decline.

If neither high-church nor low-church seems to be the answer, what have we got left?

Some say that lifting up the Twenty Articles of Faith again would cure what ails us, but I'm not so sure. Oh, I'm a card-carrying conservationist, orthodox to the core, and I lament the loss of fidelity to basic Christian doctrine in our denomination. I've got three books published—soon to be four—to prove it. I think we're crazy to pitch out basic Christian teaching just because some of our people are getting intellectually fidgety.

But what all of these responses can easily miss is that faith itself—and therefore worship, as a central act of faith—is not a game played with the head but with the heart. Most people will attend worship only if they expect to *experience* something that can only be had by physically showing up.

It's interesting to note that the two Western Christian traditions *least* affected by the seculariza-

tion of our society are charismatic/Pentecostal groups and the Roman Catholic Church. Whatever our opinions about these traditions might be, they promise the worshipper an experience of blessing that can't be had over the radio, television, internet, or even in print. If you stay home from a charismatic/Pentecostal praise service, you will not experience the manifestation of the Spirit that sweeps through a gathered congregation; if you stay home from mass, you will not physically receive the sacrament, the body and blood of Christ.

In The United Church, we don't have to go so far afield to find this emphasis on experience. It's in our DNA. While our Presbyterian forbears were Calvinist in their understanding of the sacraments, they still thought there was something so holy about the Eucharist that they celebrated it only four times a year, and would come to special "preparatory" services to be right with God so they did not receive the loaf and cup unworthily. And while our Methodist forbears were Anglican, their most intense religious experiences, it could be argued, came in their mid-week classes, as members recounted their joys and struggles in their walk of faith, to confess their sins, and experience the grace of God in intentional, supportive community.

If United Church congregations are going to reinvent themselves, we may need to take a sabbatical from the technical questions for a while and instead revisit our understanding of the sacraments, of the holy, and of Christian discipleship itself. This may take a lot of preparation for those attending, but our gathering together will have to become an opportunity for people to experience nothing less than the very presence of God.

My hunch—and you heard it here first—is that the remnant of the Protestant churches in Canada (churches that survive into the 22nd Century) will be comprised of those that recognize that the central purpose of Christian existence isn't conveying ideas or refining positions but *encountering God*. And that

will involve patient instruction on things like religious devotions, spiritual practices, and yes, worship in which the Medium *is* the Message.

David Bruce was born in Hamilton, Ontario, and joined The United Church of Canada in 1985, while earning his B.A. in Philosophy at the University of Toronto. He went on to complete his Master of Divinity at Emmanuel College, and was ordained in 1990, serving congregations in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In 1999 he returned to Toronto, and earned his doctorate in ministry through Fuller Seminary in California. David is currently serving at Heritage United Church, and engaged at all levels of denominational work. He is the author of several books, and is currently writing his thesis for a doctorate in systematic theology. In his spare time, David coaches baseball, helps to produce Touchstone Journal, and serves on the board of the Good Neighbours Club in downtown Toronto. David and his wife Janet, a public school teacher, are happily raising three teenagers in Don Mills, Ontario.

media



by Josephine Braun

Reflections from the Outside-In

Entering the United Church of Canada
is a bit like falling down a rabbit hole

A United Church person once told me that choosing to enter ordained ministry in the United Church of Canada is like standing with one foot in the grave and stepping on a banana peel with the other. I took the comment as commendation of my bravery and joined the denomination in membership one year ago.

I grew up in an evangelical tradition that emphasized personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the way of salvation. My grandparents were Anabaptists—marginalized members of society who were routinely persecuted by the state of their day on the basis of their cultural and faith background. Yet although I respected my ancestors, the theology of the conservative evangelical congregation in which I was raised failed to satisfy me.

Entering the United Church of Canada is a bit like falling down a rabbit hole. On the one hand, it is a welcome adventure into a fantastic new world of new ideas and new ways of looking at things. On the other hand, there is something utterly foreign about this new world—the further down the rabbit hole I fall, the more curious and strange this world becomes.

I fell in love with the United Church in the fall of 2007 for two principal reasons. First was the openness towards theological diversity and exploration. Second was the preponderance of many remarkable people, for whom heaven was an earthly, and not simply a spiritual, reality. These people gave their lives for the pursuit of justice, creation care and the radical inclusion of others.

But like any relationship over time, those things which so endeared me at the start have become sources of mild exasperation. We are so adept at ‘doing’ deeds of justice and good works for the church, but what about the justice of inner transformation? Why are we so reticent to share our spirituality and to seek the holistic wellbeing of our neighbours? Why do we continue to act as state-sponsored chaplains in a society that no longer recognizes the authority of the church?

My foray into the United Church now includes a course on United Church history and theology. I have been exposed for the first time to the factors leading to the union of the original Congregationalist,

Methodist and Presbyterian congregations in Canada. I have been made aware of the optimism of the time and of union zeal for the “Christianization of the social order.” On the one hand, I find the desire to bring the gospel to bear on the culture at large in concrete and practical ways, laudable. On the other, I question the legitimization and sustaining of Christendom—that long era of history in which the church was the religious establishment of the culture—and which the United Church pre-supposed in its founding vision.

Jesus clearly did not have Christendom in mind. Likewise, the early Christian community, as an oppressed minority, certainly had no political clout. And there are many that would be quick to condemn the heritage and influence of Christendom, even to rejoice at its demise, on this biblical ground. But let us not be so hasty. Christendom was an adaptation of the church to the situation of its day—a situation that differed in important respects from first-century Palestine. As Dr. John Young points out, the Canadian situation of much of the 20th century was one whereby a vast majority of society professed to be Christian. The church in Canada simply could not be a vocal minority. It represented the majority opinion and thus its voice was often indistinguishable from that of the broader culture.

Now Christendom is fading. Whether we grieve or rejoice at its passing, we face it as an uncertain future. The demise of Christendom and its subsequent decline in church membership mean for the United Church a radical rethinking of itself—in its identity, mission and organizational life. The time for “Christianizing the social order” has passed.

In an oft-quoted passage, Jesus instructs his disciples that, “unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). In the General Secretary’s advice to the Executive of the General Council, “Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action,” Lewis Coffman and Thom Davies urge that the United Church let go of what it once was. Only in dying to our former grandeur, can we embrace a future of optimism and new opportunity.

The United Church of Canada has fallen from a

majority to a minority position. As the power and prestige of the denomination shrinks and its statements of faith become less entwined with those of culture, it reflects more closely the early church whose mission was enacted from a place of marginalization. Perhaps from the margins, the United Church will be able to re-find its voice as a counter-cultural movement.

If one year ago I stepped naively with one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel, I now do so with purpose. God has a plan and a purpose for this denomination. Like gold that is refined in the fire, I see the Spirit breathing new life into new forms of faith and community, forms that integrate a time-honoured

social gospel with inner transformation, and that are grounded anew in the death and resurrection of our Lord. The United Church of the future may look nothing like the church of the past. But I believe that we have reason to await its coming with new humility and hopeful anticipation as God does his good work of bringing all things together for the good of those who love him.

Josephine Braun is a graduate of the Master of Divinity Program, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario and is the Coordinator of Volunteer Ministries of St. James United Church, Waterdown, Ontario

Family Worship

By Rev. Robert Widdowson



A Setting aside 20 minutes per day to worship God is a wonderful way to begin or end every 24-hour cycle. You may wish to do so alone, with your spouse, a friend, neighbour or family. Be prepared, however, for the cost of such an enterprise—daily family worship will require extra time and effort on your part as the worship leader.

The idea of family worship may be very new (and unusual) to you. It certainly was to my wife, Terri, and I before we had children. After Annie and Charlotte were born, though, we began to experiment with the idea. We had been hearing stories of parents who were leading regular worship services with their families at home and we were intrigued. Could we do something like that ourselves? we wondered. It sounded a bit exotic or “out there.”

We grew more confident after I purchased *The Family Worship Book* edited by Terry Johnson

(Christian Focus Publications). It gave us a whole new outlook on home devotions. Now we begin the day (after breakfast) and end it (after evening baths) with home devotions.

The format isn’t carved in stone, although a typical morning worship service looks something like this: we begin with a short verse from the Bible that speaks of God’s amazing character. This helps us focus on the Lord’s glory, not our own. Then we sing a few Christian songs, often mixing styles up intentionally. A good old standard like Holy, Holy, Holy may follow a simple kid’s song like The B-I-B-L-E. This helps us appreciate a variety of styles of worship.

Occasionally, Terri or I read one of the ecumenical creeds (The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, or a selection from the Westminster Shorter Catechism). Next, the Bible is read. Like many new parents who are Christian, we received several child-friendly Bibles

family

from our friends at church once our first baby was born. At the moment, we're reading from *Bible Stories for Our Little Ones* by W. G. Van de Hulst (Inheritance Publications). It retells the major biblical stories in a child-friendly manner. Sometimes I modify the language so that our two-and-a-half year-old can get it (I hope!). Then we say a short prayer (in a way that the children can understand—nothing complicated and all points relate to their experience of life (for example, we may pray about loving each other, confessing when tempers flare up, asking for patience, etc). Finally, we close with a simple doxology (giving God glory) and blessing.

The whole thing lasts about 20 minutes. A note about dramatizing the biblical story: we don't always do drama but if we do, then it's always after family worship has ended, not during it. Also, we only do drama in the morning, never in the evening (hey, by 6:30 p.m., Terri and I want the house to settle down—putting on a play, even with a biblical basis, would inject way too much energy into our little darlings).

Why would you do family devotions when it sometimes requires so much effort on your part? From least to greatest, here are the top five reasons for family devotions:

#5- It brings our family closer together. There's something about worshipping as a family that has knit the bonds we already share even closer. The little ones love to sing familiar songs and hear stories read by us—it certainly beats watching TV with them! These are memories that will last a lifetime. But before you get all starry-eyed, remember: family devotions are not always a beautiful experience. There will be plenty of times when you won't want to worship—boredom or frustration will set in, or your children will be in the middle of a fight, or, worse, you and your spouse may be squabbling! Knitting your family together cannot be the foundational reason for doing family devotions. That's why it's fifth on this list.

#4- It fulfills God's command to parents to raise their children to worship the Lord. When God was preparing his people, the Israelites, to enter

the Promised Land after they had been wandering in the wilderness for decades, he instructed them on how to live in their new homeland in a way that would please him. He commanded the leaders of the nation—including parents—to teach their children the great truths of God (Deuteronomy 6.4-9). However, if the only reason you lead family devotions is "because God commanded it," then you would be doing it from a wrong motive. It would be the law motivating you, not grace. Yes, God commands our worship, but our worship must be freely given and joyous. Otherwise, it is a second-best gift. If Cain's second-best offering was unworthy of God, then so will ours. Like every good work, the family devotion you render to God must spring from a newly made heart and be saturated with the amazing grace of the triune God. Even our very best gifts will need our Father's grace to render them acceptable.

#3- It provides our children with a solid foundation. Ask yourself, "What will be the main influences on our children?" God tells us it should be a daily infusion of His word (Joshua 1.8).

#2- It feeds our own need for close communion with the living God. "Draw near to God, and he will draw close to you" (James 4.8). Terri and I have found that home devotion satisfies our own deep need to continually draw close and remain close to our Redeemer. It has its own rewards.

#1- God redeemed us to serve him and enjoy him forever. By his grace we are made new so that we may find our maximum delight in him (1 Corinthians 10.31). Family worship is one way we delight in God.

Rev. Robert Widdowson is a minister on the Port Elgin, Ontario, pastoral charge.

A New Call

There was recently an oil well in the Gulf of Mexico spewing black poison into ocean waters and onto shorelines whose unspoiled wetlands host precious bird and animal life and whose pristine beaches are the play land for work-weary locals and tourists. Livelihoods were at stake, and a food chain threatened, leaving animals and humans suffering with consequences as yet unforeseen.

Our United Church creed calls us “to live with respect in creation.” That respect has been thrown by the wayside as reckless drilling with shoddy controls and careless supervision are now giving us the bitter payoff.

Those who care about creation and being respectful for all that God has given us are known as “conservationists.” They remind us of the precious gift God has given us for our life and welfare. By guarding the environment, they act not only to benefit us today, but even more importantly, coming generations as well.

There is another urgent call for respect. This call is to live with respect for our historic Christian faith and our historic biblical and theological heritage.

When teachers in our denomination advocate for a faith “...with or without God...,” and are defended for it, it displays a kind of theological recklessness whose disastrous outcome can be anticipated but as yet not fully measured. Some have predicted and have already rung the “death knell” for our denomination.

The call for respect is a call to be “conservationists” in appreciation of the historic Christian faith within the United Church of Canada.

The Apostle Paul writes to his son in the faith and a budding pastor: “What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” (2 Timothy 1:13, 14 NIV)

Conservationists are not “reactionaries.” They are visionaries. They see in Jesus Christ the hope for the world. They see a future full of promise, “grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love.” They believe that no church can endure and prosper unless it is built on

By Rev. Ralph Garbe



the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, respect for the Scriptures that give witness to him and the confession of faith made of him by the historic universal church. They understand that unless the next generation is won to Christ there will be no church. They see the heartbeat of Christ beyond denominations and the need to join our brothers and sisters in Christ across denominational lines to be the “salt” and “light” Christ calls us to be. They embrace the refreshing newness of the Holy Spirit in a revitalized faith.

“.....A church with or without God...,” or a church firmly grounded, “...with faith and love in Christ Jesus.”

What is my choice?

Count me in as a “conservationist.”

Rev. Ralph Garbe is a United Church minister and a member of the Fellowship Publications Board of Directors.

call

Christ The Way

11th Annual Renewal Conference

at Wellington Square United Church
2121 Caroline St. in Burlington, Ontario

Sponsored by
Renewal Movements
in the Presbyterian,
Anglican and United
Church of Canada

**9 am - 4 pm on Saturday,
November 6th, 2010**

Speaker:
Bruxy Cavey



WORKSHOPS

Rosemary Elstone—	Christ The Way Out (A.M.); Christ The Way of Restoration (P.M.)
Rev. Andy Leroux—	The Holy Spirit Points to The Way
Ted & Carol Ward—	Listening to & Experiencing Jesus, the Only Way
Belma Vardy—	Dancing In The Way
Rev. Dr. Frank Lockhart—	Parables Along The Way
Heather Mackey—	Children's Ministry that encourages Faith at Home
Rev. Dr. Connie denBok—	Christ The Way To God's Mission
Rev. Dr. Diane Walker—	Christ The Way: Helping Folks Find The Way To Him
Debra Blackman—	Showing The Way: Making a Difference in Your Community

Theme:
***Getting & Giving
the Gospel Today***

Bruxy Cavey is Teaching Pastor
of The Meeting House, a
church for people who aren't
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Displays, Speaker's Book Table, Prayer Ministry Teams, and Communion

Registration is \$40 if notification is received by October 25. After that date the cost increases to \$50. The registration fee includes lunch and arrival/morning snacks. Register online (by Master Card or Visa) at <http://renewalfellowship.presbyterian.ca/renewalnetworkconf.html>. Alternately, mail or fax a registration form to the Renewal Network Registrar (forms available on request from the Registrar). Payment at the conference is made by cheque or cash. Make cheques payable to The Renewal Network and mail to: Conference Registrar - The Renewal Network, 3819 Bloor St. W., Etobicoke ON M9B 1K7. Office Fax: 416-233-1743 Office Phone: 416-233-6581.

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