

85 – not so old – not so young

Rev. Jim Cullen – June 6, 2010

This morning we celebrate the 85th anniversary of The United Church of Canada. We are not a people who think much about how we got to where we are. Perhaps this reflection/history may help.

85 years – not so old – not so young. When we think about that age of a person, we have an idea about what that means. Many people do not live to be 85. Others live with infirmities, struggling to keep mind and body functioning. There are others, who at 85 live full, independent, productive and enjoyable lives.

Perhaps, if we do not push it too far, our church is the similar. There are those who have ceased to be – closed or amalgamated. There are many others who are struggling and the end is not too far off. There are some who are celebrating achievement and anticipating the future with confidence.

June 10th is the 85th anniversary of The United Church of Canada. Last week marked the 43rd year since my own ordination. This means that I have been part of half of the history of our church.

For many of us The United Church has been our home as long as we can remember. Others have joined our family along the way. I think it is worth a little time to recall how we got here. Perhaps knowing where we have been with help us to understand our future.

As our country was being settled by new immigrants they brought with them their history and traditions from their homeland. They brought their own labels – Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican and many others. In the late 1800's it seemed that some sort of union of churches would be a good thing. In 1875 there was union of 4 sections of the Presbyterians into The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In 1884 the same thing happened with the Methodists, forming The Methodist Church in Canada.

Formal union talks among the Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist church started in 1902. During the next number of years there were a lot of “local unions”, particularly in western Canada. It was just not practical to have every denomination represented in every prairie town.

It took until June 10, 1925 for The United Church to be born.

Wesley and Friendship were Methodist congregations, each with some distinct roots. There were a lot of struggles, a lot of frustration and significant division within some congregations and some families.

It was assumed that the first Moderator for the new church would be from the Methodist Church. Dr. Chown (Chown hall at Queens) had carefully brought his whole denomination with him. He knew the struggle the Presbyterians were having so at the meeting on June 17th he stood up and said, “I have also felt that a Presbyterian had better be selected as Moderator. I move that one ballot be cast by the secretary for the election of George Pidgeon as Moderator.” Reporters there called it “one of the noblest acts of self-renunciation in the history of Canadian Christianity”. Dr. Chown knew it was wise and buoyed the spirits of the Presbyterians who were heartsick over the previous bitterness...”

The union brought in all the Congregational and Methodist congregations but only 2/3rds of the Presbyterians. There is the story from Nova Scotia where a Presbyterians Congregation was voting on church union. Their minister declined to encourage them in one direction or the other. They voted 100% to remain Presbyterian. After the vote was read he announced that he would be leaving because he wanted to be part of the union. The congregation had another vote, 100% in favour of union and I assume the minister remained. Only in the Maritimes could their be such a story.

My own family was part of Knox Presbyterian Church in Owen Sound. They were part of the congregation that broke away from the new Knox United Church and formed St. Andrews Presbyterian Church. When my great Aunt Mary died her will indicated that she had left some money to Knox Presbyterian Church – now United. She had not changed her will after church union. That would not have gone over well with those determined Scottish people.

Further unions took place. In 1930 The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Bermuda became part of the United Church and a presbytery of the Maritime Conference. In 1968 The Evangelical United Brethren became part of The United Church. Over the years there have been conversations with The Anglican Church, but all attempts have stalled at some point.

The early years of The United Church included very significant growth. At one time in the 1960's there was a new congregation created every week. At our peak we reached 1 million members.

Our church has always had the reputation for living on the edge of controversy. Some of that has caused the loss of members. In the period 1955-56 a program was launched for Sunday School and Adult learning. It was called the New Curriculum. For some it was too much to be challenged to understand the scriptures in ways other than literal interpretation.

In 1968 we elected the first lay Moderator, Dr. Robert McClure, a medical doctor, a missionary who served in China, India and the Middle East. It was during his tenure that we began saying the New Creed

In the late 1980's we there was much controversy when our church declared "all persons regardless of sexual orientation who profess their faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to be or become members of The United Church" and that "all members of The United church are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry". This was too much of a challenge for some. Some left our church others struggled with it and still do. At the time I was minister of a church in east end Toronto. One of the members, Mary, had a very hard time with all of this. Then one day she found out that her favourite nephew, Terry, was not only gay but dying from aids. Her approach changed. She said that she did not understand all this but she loved him and that was what mattered. That is the spirit that keeps us going in changing times.

Our church has championed women in ministry, inclusive language, open theological dialogue and social justice. We have had leaders who placed their mark on our church: Moderators like Dr. Bob McClure, Bruce McLeod, Wilbur Howard, Lois Wilson, Clarke MacDonald, Sang Chul Lee, Walter Farquharson and others.

This all goes back to the prayer that Jesus had with his followers. *"..that they may all be one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them..."* (John 17:23) Today we can think about this call to unity in three ways. There is the unity of the past that created The United Church of today. There is the unity that will surely come as various protestant denominations will come together, acknowledging that there is more that unites us than divides us. The third sense of unity will come for dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Such conversations are of tremendous importance in the politics of the world today. The call to unity is about being a credible witness to our loving God.

We are a church that tries to live out our faith in the world, to care for each other, support the vulnerable and honour the world that God has given us. David Wilson, editor of The Observer, in the current issue writes, "The United Church exists because people of faith were not afraid to let old ways die and embrace new ideas together." This will be our challenge in the years ahead.