



**Lawrence Park
Community Church**

United • Unorthodox • Unlimited

United, Unorthodox, Unlimited 1: United

Texts:

John 17: 1 -20

1 Corinthians 1:4 -10

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In the early 1900's, a lonely Doukobor, just arrived from Russia, stood at the cross-roads of a small, western Canadian town. A little prairie wooden church squatted at each of the four corners. He looked at them in surprise, and asked "Are they all Jesus' churches?" When told they were, he asked "Why do you need four?" According to A. C. Forrest, the former editor of *The United Church Observer*, "to answer the implications of that Doukhobor's question is to tell the story of Church Union in Canada".

Canada is a very young country, and so it happened that, during the 19th century, less than 200 years ago, the railway pushed across the prairies, binding us together in an iron band from sea to shining sea. As the railway moved across the country, of course, so did the churches, and soon the picture described in Al Forrest's little story would be the reality in thousands of Northern Ontario, British Columbia and especially prairie towns. And it wasn't just four churches; by the start of the 20th century, it was not uncommon for towns of four and five hundred people to have a Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist church, to say nothing of regional variations that followed distinctive ethnic communities and social groups. In some places, the spirit between these various churches was very competitive; right here in Ontario, for example, Roman Catholics were in some places restricted to one side of a river while protestants scrambled with each other for prime building sites on the other side. In other communities, however, church leaders began to openly state what would have been obvious to any outsider with half a brain: that this was patently ridiculous. In cities, towns and villages across the country, and again particularly in the prairies, local clergy and congregations began to seek out unions with kindred spirits, and by the 1920's, more than 3000 local Union congregations had sprung up across the country, each involving its own particular combination of the great protestant and, in a few cases, Anglican churches of the day.

In the early 1900's this spirit of unity was beginning to spread from local endeavours to national denominations, and various conversations, both formal and informal, were taking place amongst the Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans and Baptists. It was an exciting time, and a great energy was building that would have seen all these churches unite into one great protestant church in Canada. Unfortunately, as you know, war broke out in 1914, church union was put on the back burner and, as so often happens in times like that, men with hard hearts and soft brains went to work trying to stop the movement. And so it was that by the time Church Union formally happened in 1925, the Anglicans and Baptists were nowhere to be seen, and about 1/3 of the Presbyterian Church had voted to stand their denominationalist ground come hell or high water. Nonetheless, it was a great day when, on June 10 1925, in the Mutual Street Arena about 5 blocks from where I now live in downtown Toronto, The United Church of Canada was born. The Methodist Church, the Congregationalist Church, 2/3 of the Presbyterian Church, and almost all of those 3000 local Union Congregations came together to form the 9000 congregations of The United Church of Canada, and thus began one of the great social experiments of Canadian history, an experiment that has been studied and copied around the world in places as far flung as the United States, Australia and Zambia.

Here at LPCC, the first word of our new motto is “United”. In a very narrow sense, that word is intended to be a reminder that we *are* a member congregation of The United Church of Canada. While the particular history of how this congregation became a United Church is a somewhat convoluted one that evolved only after we were jilted by the first lover we pursued, the Anglican Church of Canada, and while its true that many of our people think of our relationship to the denomination as more like that of an “affiliate” than that of a true member, it is nonetheless the case that we are a United Church. This congregation’s longest serving, and in most senses founding minister, Rev. Dr. Douglas Bradford, was not just a member of the United Church clergy, but he was very active in The United Church nationally, as has been virtually every other minister to serve this church since. And while my own relationship to The United Church is now pretty tenuous, the fact is that I’ve ministered to United Church congregations for over 40 years, chaired four presbyteries, been president of Toronto Conference, and been twice nominated for the office of Moderator – so my own history in the United Church of Canada is very long and very deep. Like it or not, and we sometimes do both, we are a United Church, and so it’s right that the first word of our motto should reflect that.

When our Church Council chose the words United – Unorthodox – Unlimited, however, their intention with the first word was to express something much more important than denominational loyalty. They wanted to express several core convictions that would define our congregation, both as it is today, and as we would like it to become in the future. The word “United” is open and evocative, and is certainly intended, like the entire logo, to be read different ways by different people. Nonetheless, let me now suggest four core convictions that I think define a “united” church, convictions that are reflected in the history of the denomination, but which, we hope, are also lived out in this particular congregation.

Conviction #1: What unites us is more important than what divides us.

In principle, one might think this would be self-evident; we’re Christians, after all, and as the old hymn says “we are one in the spirit and one in the Lord”; so you would assume that our faith and commitment to living the Gospel would far outstrip any little things that might divide us. In practice, however, this has hardly ever been the case in the history of the Christian Church.

Our scripture reading this morning was taken from Paul’s first letter to the little church in Corinth – a letter that was written a mere 25 or 30 years after Jesus died. Paul’s reason for writing the letter is obvious from the first chapter: all hell had broken out in the Corinthian congregation over a variety of issues, and he is writing to calm them down and try to drag them back together. Listen to a few quotes from this letter:

- I appeal to all of you to be of one mind so there might be no more divisions amongst you (1:10)
- There are many quarrels amongst you, with each one telling a different story (1:12)
- I thank God that I didn’t baptize any of you, so that none of you can claim to be my followers (1:14)
- How dare you settle your disputes before civil judges (yes, 25 years after Jesus died, they were already suing each other!) (6:1)
- I believe there are opposing groups in your meetings, and your worship actually does more harm than good (11:17)

This fractiousness in the body of Christ may have begun 25 years after the resurrection, but it sure didn’t end there. Recent findings suggest that by the end of the first century, a whole wing of the church, including followers of Mary Magdalene amongst others, had been driven into exile to protect themselves against threats of violence. Certainly, by the third century orthodoxy had been rigidly defined, and those who refused to tow the line were punished, sometimes with death. As the story of the church has unfolded in the intervening centuries between then and now, the Orthodox Church based in Constantinople split off in 1054 from the western church based in Rome, the church in Rome divided into Protestant and Catholic wings, the Anglicans

went their own way somewhere up the middle, the Protestant wing divided into Methodism, Presbyterianism and the rest, the Presbyterian Church in Canada split into those who would enter the United Church and those who would not, and, as anyone who reads the paper these days can tell, the Anglican Church in Canada and worldwide continues to be rent by schism as we speak. It may well be true, as Paul says to the Corinthians, that “God does not want us to be in disorder but in harmony and peace” – but this is not a matter upon which God has had his way very often.

When The United Church of Canada came into being in 1925, it was making a remarkable statement to Canada and the world. It was saying that, although we may disagree with each other on many things, our commitment to the ministry of Christ would take precedence over those disagreements. And when we here at LPCC claim, today, that we want to be first and foremost a united congregation, we are affirming that message. This is a congregation made up of strong willed people (a lesser man would say “pig-headed” people), and therefore a fractious history. We are not denying that history, nor pretending that we are any less strong willed than those who went before us. We are simply saying that our commitment to Christ, and the ministry of Christ in this community, is even more important than the things we love to argue about.

Conviction #2: Unity is the first-born child of generosity.

Arguably the greatest single driving force behind the birth of The United Church in 1925 was a man named Rev. Dr. Samuel Dwight Chown. Chown was the Superintendent of Missions for the Methodist Church in Canada, and as such he travelled widely across the country, tirelessly proclaiming the virtues of uniting with the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to create a new church. So effective was his work that, within the Methodist Church, the final vote to abolish their beloved Methodist nametag and enter the new denomination was over 6:1 in favour – an incredible accomplishment given that in most church circles it’s hard to get a 51% vote to change the paint colour. Now, the Methodist Church was by far the largest single player in the union process, so it was widely assumed that Chown would be the Moderator of the new church – by many people that was simply taken for granted. Meanwhile, the Union process in the Presbyterian Church had been much more difficult; there had been much organized opposition, and if church people in general are slow to change, church people with a Scottish background are best described as glacial. So the vote in the Presbyterian Church had been much closer, with a full third deciding to stay out of the new denomination. Chown watched the anguish of the Presbyterians with much sadness, and decided that something must be done. So, on the eve of the founding convention and the first General Council of the United Church of Canada, Chown withdrew as a candidate for Moderator, and threw his support behind the Presbyterian leader, Dr George Pidgeon. Pidgeon was unanimously elected, and because of Chown’s great generosity the new denomination set off with a spirit of unity that might very well have otherwise eluded it.

There can be no unity in the church when everyone is simply looking after themselves, trying to get their own needs met, pursuing their own agendas. It really is as simple as that. A unified church is a place where people look after each other – not ignoring their own needs, but always understanding those needs in the larger context of the community and the world. By naming ourselves, in our logo, to be “united”, we are reminding ourselves that this is the kind of place we want to be, and inviting those who are looking for that kind of church, to join us.

Conviction #3: Unity is a much nicer quality when it is open, than when it is closed.

When that first General Council met in 1925 under the leadership of George Pidgeon, the very first action it took was to approve, by motion, the inclusion of a congregation from Montreal that had been a member of the Presbyterian Church USA, and therefore outside of the fellowship of the Canadian church. From that day to

this, The United Church has never really wavered from its expressed desire to continue the process of uniting with other Christians in common causes. It was hoped, in 1925, that there would be further organic unions as the years unfolded, and on that front we've had only moderate success. One such union, with the Evangelical United Brethren, did take place in 1968, but after almost 30 years of conversation we were formally dumped by the Anglicans in 1975, and other tentative attempts at organic union have never gotten even to first base. Nonetheless, when it comes to ecumenical endeavours, inter-church and inter-faith conversations, I think it's fair to say that religious people of every stripe know that no Christian community in Canada is more open, hospitable to, and supportive of, such activities than is The United Church. For eight years I hosted the United Church's television ministry called *Spirit Connection*, and I remember well that whenever there was danger of that program going off the air or being somehow compromised, there was always a groundswell of support from Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on, who felt that in The United Church there was a Christian community where they would be respected, listened to, and loved.

Communities that are united are not always open and welcoming – in fact they can be just the opposite. In the worst case, we see organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or the Aryan Nation who are very united – but united by their exclusivism and hatred. More commonly, we see groups like fraternities, country clubs, alumni associations, and so on, who are certainly united in one sense, but find the energy for their unity as much in whom they exclude as whom they include. Here at LPCC we want to be a united church, but united in the way of the denomination to which we belong – deliberately seeking to widen the circle, intentionally reaching out not only to those like ourselves, but also to those unlike ourselves, living in a building made primarily of glass, not of stone.

Conviction #4: Unity is not a goal – but is the natural by-product of being faithful.

During the period between 1964 and 1988, The United Church of Canada positioned itself to be a Biblically literate, contemporary and dynamic force in helping to shape the Canada that was emerging in the late 20th century. In 1964, we published the New Curriculum, a study program that involved the whole church, women, men and children, in reading scripture in an exciting new way; mythologically, contextually, critically. In the ensuing years, the church published ground-breaking studies on the place of women and children in the community of faith, position papers on the environment, the economy and role of taxation in Canadian society. We opened conversations, and reflected in ways that no other church had done before, on our relationship to Judaism, Islam and the other faiths of the world. We studied human sexuality, and proclaimed a sexual ethic that was profoundly relevant to the changing culture of the 60's, 70's and 80's. We affirmed the place of gays and lesbians in the church and in the world. And so, by 1988, when we finally reaffirmed the place of gays and lesbians in the professional leadership of our church, we were poised to be a significant and important player in leading this country into its new shape as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic community where people of every gender, sexual orientation, age and inclination were valued and respected. We were ready.

And then we got scared. The conservative, reactionary and at times frankly frightening right wing of the church, following a pattern that has defined and defiled church history for 2000 years, dug in its heels, withdrew its givings, tried to take their congregations out of the denomination, and threatened the leadership of the church in language that was not merely intemperate but hateful. It was an incredible time. And ordinary moderate Christian people reacted with fear, with flight, or with outright revulsion. And the church got scared. Instead of standing for all those things we had proclaimed between 1964 and 1988, unwilling to endure any more anger, any more losses, we circled our wagons, drew in our swords, and worried that if we said one more controversial thing, people would leave and the church would die. Our primary form of proclamation as a church became the apology and as a church we couldn't even open our mouths anymore without apologizing to somebody about something. Because we were afraid as a denomination, we put unity before faithfulness, clinging to each other

instead of to God. And the result was that a church which could and should have been a major force in the shaping of the Canada which was and is emerging in our time became largely silent and irrelevant, fussing constantly, saying as little as we could get away with about anything. There have been a few heroic exceptions, most notably moderator Bill Phipps' musings about the nature of Jesus and the church's outspoken opposition to Canadian involvement in the Iraq adventure (long before it was fashionable to be so opposed). But the exceptions have been too few, too far between, and the reaction of the church generally to Phipps' musings was to distance themselves and declare we were certainly never going to elect anyone like that again. Because, as a denomination, we have not wanted to offend, because we have placed unity above faithfulness, we have not been true to the course which our forebears set in those critical years between 1964 and 1988, and as a result, the unity we sought to protect has become a unity born more of disinterested nostalgia than of prophetic passion. And a once-great church is now a mere shadow of its former self – the 9000 congregations of 1925 now shrunk to barely 3000, the majority of which are on some form of life support.

I am convinced that real unity in the church is not won by pandering to those who bring out the worst in us ... the racists, the bigots, the homophobes, the exploiters of the poor, who use the gospel as a blunt weapon to justify their prejudices and their hatred. Real unity is won by being faithful to the call of Jesus Christ. Real unity is won when we stand up on our hind legs, and proclaim that the way of Jesus is a way of justice, equality, compassion and peace. Real unity is won by coming together in the fight against evil, against hatred, against smallness of vision. Real unity is won in the church when we declare, without apology or equivocation, that we are Christ's people, and as such, we affirm the love of God for the outcast, the poor, the broken, the exiled, the lonely – that we affirm the love God for every man, woman, teenager and child in whom God's image comes to life.

Amen.